

Doon Watch Nature Series for Dehradun Live Hindustan Times by Sanjay Sondhi

Published on 2 October 2009

The Black-winged Kite-Dressed to Kill

Despite the late monsoons this year, and an occasional September shower bringing some relief to the city, by and large, it's been hot and sunny for the last few weeks. Walking home in the midday sun, I could readily testify to this fact! The shimmering heat waves of the midday sun flickered magically on the surface of road and I was chiding myself for deciding to walk to the market, instead of taking the car. All for the sake of reducing my carbon footprint, I muttered to myself.

My reverie was broken when a shadow passed over me. I looked up, and saw the silhouette of a small bird in the sky. Surprisingly, the bird and its shadow, were stationary, as though frozen against the skyline. Pulling out my omnipresent binoculars, I peered at the bird with my assisted eyes. A pretty black and grey bird came into focus. The bird *was* stationary, hovering in the sky, as though pinned to one place by an invisible force. A few seconds later, the bird stopped hovering, and elegantly flew for twenty meters or so, before it began hovering again.

I was observing the Black-winged Kite (*Elanus caeruleus*), an elegant bird of prey. Even as I watched, the bird settled down on the bare branch of the tree above me. Smaller than a pigeon, the kite is grey coloured above, with a black patch on its shoulders. Small black patches around the eye give it the appearance of wearing small sunglasses. Pure white underneath, as though wearing an apron, the kite looks dressed to kill. Suave, debonair, dashing were just some of the adjectives that came to mind as I watched it. To round off its personality, it has a pair of intense red eyes, that seemed to penetrate right through me, as it looked down from its perch. Am I glad that I wasn't prey!

The bird's preferred hunting mechanism is to hover in the sky, almost stationary, and look below it for prey. Being a small raptor (bird of prey), hovering allows the bird to remain relatively invisible to its prey, seeming like just a spec in the sky. When the bird sees a tasty morsel on the ground below, the bird parachutes down elegantly, to a lower height, where it continues to hover. Aligning itself with its prey, it swoops down and in a

flash, catches its helpless “food” in its razor sharp talons. Rodents, small birds, lizards are very much on its menu.



The Black-winged Kite is an occasional visitor to Dehradun. If seen in your area, its likely that the bird will be seen on the same perch, day after day, making its way to and fro in a marked out territory, which it claims for its own. Of course, dressing to kill, is the kite's very own privilege!

Sanjay Sondhi is a Dehradun based naturalist. Feedback on this column is welcome at sanjay.sondhi1@gmail.com

© Sanjay Sondhi

Making a difference: Reduce your own carbon footprint by walking, instead of taking your vehicle at least once a week (even if its hot!). Time is running out for planet earth.

Photograph caption: The Elegant Black-winged Kite