

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

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DGBCs get my goat!

For the last few weeks, my morning walks have begun hesitantly. The winter chill has descended, and the nip in the air has resulted a markedly, diminished enthusiasm for striding around Dehradun's roads. Of course, the hesitancy lasts only a few minutes, because the moment I actually step out for a walk, nature greets me with open arms, and I immerse myself in its sights and sounds.

From the bushes beside the road, I heard the “*e-tick, tick, tick*” call of the Slaty Blue Flycatcher. From a grove of trees, the Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher's song, a fluty series of whistles entranced me. Keeping the flycatcher company in the lower canopy of the tree, was the more sedate, undulating “*see-see-see-see*” call notes of the Grey-hooded Warbler. A little further along the road, I was accosted by Dark Grey Bush Chats. (or as some birder friends will remind me, now re-named as the Grey Bushchat.)

All these birds had one thing in common-they had just descended from the higher altitudes of the Himalayas. They are altitudinal migrants, spending the warm summers in the Himalayas, nesting and raising their broods, and then as winter approaches, they descend down to the Indian plains. The primary reason for this annual migration, is food availability. With the onset of winter in the Himalayas, food for the birds becomes scarce. So they pack their bags, and wing their way down to the warmer climes of peninsular India.

Of the birds that I saw, the Dark Grey Bush Chat (*Saxicola ferrea*) was the most numerous. On a short half kilometer stretch outside my house, I counted eight birds-both male and female. The male bird is grey above, with darker wing tips. It has a short, white eyebrow and black around the eyes. Underneath, it is dirty white on the belly, with a pure white throat. In the female, the grey on the back is replaced by brown.

Even as I watched the birds, the male Dark Grey Bush Chat (or DGBC's-my acronym for these birds) sat on the electric wires, haranguing me with its harsh bi-syllabled call note, which can probably be best described as an “*t-rrrrrrr, sweee*”. Looking down at me accusingly, the bird jerked its tail as it called, accompanied by a flicking of its wings. Each time it called, its throat puffed up, and it got increasingly agitated as I watched it. After a few minutes, the female joined the male. She, too, scolded me, with exactly the same call as the male. I looked inquiringly back at the birds-I was not even carrying my binoculars, so the birds could not even be accusing me of “privacy intrusion”. Normally, I communicate well with birds, but a harsh “*t-rrrrrrr*;

sweee”, meant nothing to me. We had a serious communication issue here! The tirade of the birds continued, and got my goat. The cheek of the birds-they arrive in my home, after spending months in the cool climes of the Himalayas, and then they accuse me, a well wisher, of a fictitious crime that I had no idea about. In infantile fashion, I stuck my tongue out at the birds. They had definitely got my goat!



Photograph caption: The male Dark Grey Bush Chat

Almost instantly, the birds flew a little distance away. The male sat smugly, and wiped his beak on a wire, as though he had finished with me. The female sat close by, looking on proudly at the male. Ah-I got it now. Hassled by the DGBC acronym and to display his annoyance, the male (must be a teenager, whatever that means in bird terms!) was putting on a display of machoism to impress his girlfriend!

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Making a difference: Simple things can make a difference. Conserve water by washing your vehicle with water in a bucket, instead of using a hose.