

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

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The Rhinoceros Beetle

A few weeks ago, I was sitting at my desk trying to get some ideas flowing for an article, when I was distracted by loud hisses and screeches in the garden. I looked out of the window and saw that Tiger, our pet cat, was desperately attempting to paw at something on the lawn. With my creative juices anyway at a dead end, and the article making little progress, I sighed and decided to check what Tiger was up to.

On the lawn was a huge black beetle! Tiger, who was desperately trying to harass the beetle was making no progress at all. Each time she touched the beetle, it would let out a loud wheezing sound, which in turn frightened Tiger who jumped back in alarm. Intrigued by this game of cat and beetle, I watched Tiger's futile attempts at intimidation, before shooing her away to do some of my own observation. Or as my wife, Anchal would say, it was my turn to harass the beetle!

The Rhinoceros Beetle is a scarab beetle belonging to the subfamily Dynastinae. They are amongst the largest beetles in the world. The beetle in front of me was two inches in size, large, black and intimidating. It had two pairs of horns, a down-curved pair on its head, and an up-curved pair just above its mouthparts. The males use the horns in mating battles, during courtship, locking horns in a fierce battle to win the female.

The beetle had a lumbering walk, much like its larger mammalian relative in Assam-the One-horned Rhinoceros. Bullheaded, once it started walking in a particular direction, it did so relentlessly, disregarding any obstacles in its path. Even as I watched it, the beetle clambered over grass blades, plant stems, a stone and finally came up against the wall of the house. For the next few minutes, the beetle stoically, yet comically attempted to climb up the wall, refusing to concede defeat till I picked it up.

When I picked up the beetle, it waved its spiky legs at me, as though saying-I am gonna get you. However, it was easy to handle, causing no harm at all, but once it clutched a leaf or a twig in its spiny claws, it was impossible to

get the beetle to release it. The beetle made the same wheezing noise when I picked it up, leaving me wondering how it actually made this loud sound. In addition, it let out a foul smelling odour.



Photograph caption: The Rhinoceros Beetle

The Rhinoceros Beetle's life cycle is long, sometimes lasting a few years. Its larva, which feeds on wood, is eaten in some South East Asian countries. In other countries, the battling male beetles are used in gambling fights. The Rhinoceros Beetle is considered amongst the strongest animals on the planet relative to its size. It, supposedly, can lift 850 times its own weight!

Even as I let the beetle down onto the grass, and watched it ponderously, yet determinedly make its way as far away from me as possible, Tiger stood by my side, smirking, as though saying-you couldn't defeat it either, could you!

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Making a difference: In the year or so that I have lived in Dehradun, the continued use of plastic bags in the city is a cause for dismay. Why cannot we use paper or cloth bags, and turn down plastic bags that shopkeepers offer us? Can YOU start today?