

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

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Happy “herping”

The vagaries of Mother Nature never cease to surprise me. A few days ago, I decided to go “herping” at night with some some young friends from Dehradun. For the uninitiated, “herping” is slang for the search of herpetofauna, namely amphibians and reptiles. When I left my house at 5 pm, it was raining cats and dogs. We had decided to go the Tons river near the FRI campus, and the wet weather had raised my hopes of seeing some exciting creepy-crawlies during our night walk. Imagine, to my surprise, that as I drove southwards down Rajpur Road, and into the city, I realised that despite the torrential rain close to the hills, it had not rained at all in the city. We spent the better part of three hours trawling along the Tons river, but returned disappointed, as we did not see too many interesting “herps”.

The very next day, I stepped out for a night walk outside my house. I had ambled along only a few hundred meters when I heard an unfamiliar chirping call emanating from the dense foliage in an abandoned plot beside the road. I was quite sure that the call wasn't that of a bird. Could the call be that of an insect, I wondered? I hoisted myself over the wall, and climbed into the cluster of bushes. Shining my torch into the dense foliage, I realised that the bushes covered a small pond, no more than a few feet across.

Crawling under the bushes, a spider's web wrapped itself around my face, clearly letting me know that I was an unwelcome intruder. Some of the web entered my mouth, and I got my first taste of spider web. Yuuck! Despite nature's best attempts to dissuade me, I persisted in my search. Shining my torch, I spotted a shiny yellowish creature sitting on what looked like foam.

Wow! I was looking at an unusual frog-the Dudhwa Reed Frog (*Chiromantis dudhwaensis*). This frog is a species that is relatively new to science having been discovered in the Dudhwa National Park in the 1990's. While known to occur in Dehradun, it is not commonly seen anywhere. A tiny frog, only an inch in size, it is normally seen near stagnant pools of water, cutely clutching at stems.



Looking even more closely, I realized that the foam-like substance was actually the frog's nest, in which it lays its eggs. These nests are built on stems or leaves, and are always found over the water's surface, so that when the eggs hatch, the tadpoles fall directly into the water.

In most frog species, fertilisation of the eggs is done externally. The male, which clasps the female from above, fertilizes the eggs even as the female frog lays them. Imagine my excitement when I actually observed a male frog (normally smaller than the female), clasping a female on a foam nest, fertilizing the eggs as she laid them!

That night, I counted at least fifteen Dudhwa Reed Frogs on the bushes, at the same spot. Amazed to find these intriguing creatures so close to

habitation left me wondering. Are there other, yet undiscovered creatures that are hiding themselves in the nooks and corners of the forests of Dehradun and surrounds? We'll never know till we look!

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

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Making a difference: Despite many species facing extinction primarily on account of habitat destruction, we continue to find new animal species in India. If only we look. Make your contribution by “looking” at nature, and encourage your children to do the same.

Photograph caption: Dudhwa Reed Frogs on a foam nest