

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

Published on 11 December 2009

Himalayan Rock Skink-The Limchi

I have an old jungle saying-seeing and identifying an animal for the first time is the always most difficult. Once you have done this, the animal keeps popping up, everywhere, and you often wonder how you missed seeing it in the first place. In fact, with some creatures, they pop up so often after the first sighting that I often believe that they are deliberately playing mind games just to rile you!

One such creature is the Himalayan Rock Skink (*Asymblepharus himalayanum*). The very first time I saw and identified this lizard was a few years ago. My son, Yash and I played hide-and-seek with the lizard amidst boulders at the banks of a stream in the Himalayan foothills near Dehradun. The skink eluded us for at least half an hour and we expended a great deal of energy, before we could actually catch it under a boulder. Since then, I have seen this lizard on dozens of occasions including a recent sighting in a garden in Dehradun!



Skinks are harmless lizards covered with shiny scales which make them look superficially like snakes with limbs. The Himalayan Rock Skink is a small lizard, about four inches long, with shiny bronze-brown scales, a pointed snout and a slender, tapering tail. It has a row of spots on the back, which

may look like a black stripe. Some skinks have red color on their flanks. The skink is diurnal, and feeds on insects.

It occurs from the Himalayan foothills up to altitudes of 10,000 feet and possibly even higher. Its wide altitudinal range is unusual for reptiles. It is found in gardens amidst the leaf litter, along forest paths, amongst rocks near streams and even high altitude lakes.

A few months ago, I was in the Uttar Kashi area of Uttarakhand in a village at an altitude of 8000 feet. I was involved in a discussion with the locals centered around the changing climate and its impacts. Knowing my interest in lizards, the villagers told me that recently, skinks (which are called “*limchi*” by the locals) had started eating grains in their fields, post the harvest. According to the locals, the number of *limchis* had increased drastically in number on account of a warmer climate. While a warmer climate could actually cause populations of animals to be found at higher altitudes, and increase their numbers, the skinks, like most other lizards, are carnivores. They feed primarily on insects; they don't eat seeds. It is likely, that the skink was attracted to the insects that attacked the grain, but the villagers blamed the poor skink. I had a tough time trying to explain this, and ended up leaving behind some very unconvinced villagers!

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: The impact of climate change is for real. A warmer climate could increase the altitudinal range of insects (e.g. mosquitos can now breed at higher altitudes, increasing the spread of malaria). Make subtle changes in your lifestyle to reduce the demand on earth's resources.

Photograph caption: Himalayan Rock Skink or the “*limchi*”