

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

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Ladybird, Ladybird

“Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home
Your house is on fire and your children do roam
All except one, and that's Little Anne
For she has crept under the warming pan”

Standing in the forest, watching the daintiest of beetles, the Ladybird, reminded me of the nursery rhyme above, that I had read as a child. Unfortunately, truly apt, given the forest fires that have ravaged Uttarakhand in the last few weeks.



Caption for photograph: Ladybird photographed at Sahastradhara

The Ladybird I was watching a bright red coloured beetle, spotted with black. As a child, during my annual vacations in the picturesque hill station of Dalhousie, these pretty insects provided me with unending pleasure. Allowing a ladybird to crawl onto my hand, watch it clumsily raise its wings, and then in an amazing transformation, gracefully fly away, is a sight that I still cannot forget. I always believed that some other child had caught these red beetles and dabbed black spots of paint on them! I

would catch the ladybirds and collect them in match boxes. At that young age, I had little knowledge that catching beetles disrupts their life cycle, but even then, I do remember releasing them back into the wild.

The Ladybird, belongs to a family of beetles called Coccinellidae. Over 5000 species of ladybird beetles are known worldwide. They are also called ladybugs, or lady beetles (the latter name, I am told, is preferred by male entomologists!). The ladybird's colour can vary from red to orange and sometimes even white. Some are spotted, while others have different shaped markings on their wing covers. Ladybirds are known to excrete a toxin which makes it distasteful to predators. By being brightly coloured, they actually advertise their presence, mocking potential predators "You can't eat me, I don't taste good!". Ladybirds feed on aphids, mealybugs and mites, making them a good friend to the gardener. Like other insects, the ladybird's life cycle involves laying eggs, from which emerge larva. The larva feed and grow into a pupa, from which emerges the adult beetle. The ladybirds are common during summer and the monsoons, and during the winter season, hibernate, often in groups. Some individuals might be seen in winter as, well, especially if it is not too cold.

In many cultures across the world, the ladybird is said to bring luck and good fortune. Many people believe that if you "blow" away a ladybird sitting on your hand and make a wish, your wish will come true. So here goes-I wish that the forest fires that end up destroying vast stretches of forest, and animals that come in its path, go away! With the rains making their way to Dehradun, here's hoping this wish comes true!

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Making a difference: The next time you see a forest fire, or even someone burning scrub forest in your area, call in the Forest Department and stop the fire.