

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

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Monkey Menace

Sitting beside the road, the female monkey scowled at me. I scowled right back. She glared at me, and I glared right back. After a few minutes of making faces at each other, the monkey gave up. Giving me a weird look look which said “Why is this human exhibiting simian-like behaviour which is the privilege of us monkeys?”, the female monkey jumped onto the roof of a nearby house, to join her troop of monkeys.

I was watching the Rhesus Macaque (*Macaca mulatta*), the monkey that is commonly seen in northern India. Rhesus Macaque's have a red rump, which differentiates it from the Bonnet Macaque (*Macaca radiata*), which has a curious cap of hair on the head, and is largely seen in south India.

Troops of monkeys have an “alpha male”, which is the dominant male. On the roof top, the alpha male lay sunbathing, while a younger male hovered around in attendance, removing lice from the larger monkey. Nearby, a female scratched herself contentedly, cuddling a young one in its arms. Another youngster played on the roof, in the safety of the adults around. The youngster playfully stuck its fingers into a crack in the roof, hurt itself, and let out a series of screeches. On not getting any response from the adults, it spit once or twice, and got disapproving looks from the mother. Bad manners, her look seemed to say. Is this what I have taught you? Nearby, another sick-looking, young monkey coughed a few times. Do monkeys get swine flu, I wondered?

Rhesus Macaques represent a dilemma to us. On the one hand, the monkeys are revered by humans and often fed by them. On the other hand, the monkeys are a menace, given to stealing food, and damaging crops, both in urban and rural India. During a recent visit to a village in Uttarakhand not far from Dehradun, we were informed that crop damage by monkeys had reached unimaginable proportions with a very large percentage of their crops being eaten by monkeys. Even in urban India, including Dehradun, monkeys are a nuisance, often stealing food from homes. They are fearless and demand food with impunity and indeed, even attack people at times.



I was broken out my reverie about the monkey menace by the alpha male, who woke up, stretched and proceeded to give me stern looks, accompanied by snarls and growls. A few minutes of its fiercest performance followed. “Performance” because all of this was just to distract me while another monkey stole an apple which was in my bag while I was busy observing the “angry” male!

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Making a difference: Don't feed monkeys! A significant reason for the monkey menace is their lack of fear of humans, and the ease with which they get food from people.

Photograph caption: Rhesus Macaque female giving me the glare