

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

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Robber Fly-The Silent Assassin

You've heard the saying "Harmless as a fly". Well, this is one fly that ain't harmless. The Robber fly (also called the Assassin fly) is a predatory fly belonging to the family Asilidae. They are true flies, and hence belong to the Order Diptera, but are as different from the normal flies we know, as chalk is from cheese.

I had the opportunity to observe these flies on my morning walk through a forest path near my house. It was quite early, at 8:00 am, but the bright sun ensured that insect life around me was frenetic. Butterflies flitted by merrily, moths fluttered forth from the undergrowth, bees buzzed around flowers, and the mosquitos eagerly sucked my blood. Amidst all this merriment, I spotted the Robber fly, sitting on the upper surface of a leaf. The silent assassin was absolutely rock still, patiently watching the exuberance of all the other insects around it. With its large compound eyes, it evaluated the unfolding scene around it. It gave me a look as well, as though checking whether I would make a good meal. Deciding otherwise (was I too big, or not tasty enough, I wondered), the fly continued its patient vigil.

Even when I approached the fly, it did not move. I took a few photographs, and the beckoning fame did little to excite the fly. Hey, I am taking some photographs of you-show me some expression. My pleas made no difference to the fly. It continued to sit motionless on the leaf surface, with nary a blink of its eyes.

After what seemed like ages of surveillance, without warning, the Robber fly flew up into the air with a bee-like buzz, snatched at a butterfly in mid-air, snaring the unfortunate creature in its legs. Having caught the butterfly in its arial sortie, the Robber fly descended onto a leaf surface. The Robber fly pierced the butterfly with its short, powerful proboscis and injected its saliva into the struggling butterfly. The saliva contains enzymes which paralyze its prey and dissolves its insides. The Robber fly then waits patiently for its saliva to act. If disturbed during this time, the fly does not hesitate to take to wing, carrying its tasty morsel with it. Once the enzymes have dissolved the

insides of the captured prey, by now, dead as a duck, the Robber fly sucks up the liquid to complete its tasty meal.



I have seen the Robber fly catch butterflies, moth, bugs-it does not even spare its own brethren, other flies are relished by the Robber fly. I have often wondered why this creature is called the Robber fly. It does not steal anything, hence its name is a misnomer. Despite searching on the internet, and reading up on various books, the reason for calling it a Robber fly remain a mystery to me. Possibly some overzealous, non-scientific, naturalist (like me!) named it so, and the name stuck.

Despite its predatory nature, and seemingly ruthless behaviour, the Robber fly performs sterling service to mankind by preying on, and thereby controlling insect pests. Watch out for it the next time you step out in your garden.

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

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Photograph caption: Robber Fly feeding on a butterfly