

Doon Watch Nature Series in Hindustan Times by Sanjay Sondhi

Sounds of the Night

Published on 29 April 2009

Darkness has always fascinated me. A walk through forests at night is always mesmerizing and you need a different set of skills to appreciate nature at night. Instead of seeing things, you now need to hear things. Humans are so used to using senses of sight that switching “off” your eyes and using only your ears is a unique sensation.

Recently, my 15 year old son Yash and I decided to take a night walk in the scrub forest close to our house. We left the house at dusk, and by the time we arrived in the forested area, it was already dark. I advised Yash-listen, rather than see and a whole new world beckons! As we trudged along through the darkness, the humming calls of insects reached out to us. Crickets started to call “*tirrrrr; tirrrrr; tirrrrr*”, a buzzing incessant call. After the first few minutes of the cricket’s calls, our ears adapted to their buzzing. Just like in a movie, the insects-crickets and grasshoppers, provide the background music, waiting for the dialogues of the main actors!

As we stood listening silently in the darkness, over the background score of the insects, the sounds of bird calls reached out to us. We heard the loud calls one of the main actors. The “*payou, payou, payou*” call of peacocks resounded, saying goodnight to the world! I cannot understand why the peacocks want to “pay you”. Being India’s National Bird and so very pretty to boot, we should be paying them, especially to watch them dance and pirouette during the breeding season!

As we walked along the jungle path, suddenly, a large bird flushed out from the bushes near us. The frighteningly loud wing beats had Yash and me clutching at each other! The large bird flew off, without giving us a clue to its identity. Almost immediately, the Muntjac-a barking deer starting calling in the distance “*wakh, wakh, wakh*” went its loud barking call. Screeching langurs joined into the crescendo of sounds. They kept calling for a while and I whispered into Yash’s ears-maybe a predator of some kind. Could their still be leopards in the area?

Now we were a little more cautious. Every new scabbling sound in the undergrowth was examined more carefully. I decided to put on the torch now as we continued on our night adventure. Sticks on the forest path cast eerie shadows, and we kept our eyes and ears open for snakes and other reptiles. The torchlight aroused new, yet unseen life around us. Moths, attracted to the torch light, hovered around us. We noticed that the moth’s eyes glistened orange-red. A marvelous

green spider glistened on its spider web. Intriguingly, the spider eyes shone a greenish color in the torchlight. I caught a glimpse of movement in the mud banks aligning the road. We peered carefully into a rectangular shaped opening in the mud bank, and spotted a small black scorpion waving his claws at us, telling us to go away!



A curious, soft “*kroo, kroo, kroo*” call greeted us as we neared a stream. Looking around, we spotted a number of Common Indian Toads. With the recent rains in Dehradun, the toads had emerged from under the ground, and were now ready to breed. Toads have different call notes-contact notes to keep in touch, advertisement calls to attract the female, distress calls when in trouble. The calls we were hearing were probably the advertisement calls of the toad. Even as we watched, we saw a pair of mating toads clasped together (in a position called amplexus).

It was now getting late, and I gestured to Yash that it was time for us to head home. Even as I did so, I heard a bird calling out to us “*Did you do it?*” The bird, the Redwattled Lapwing, called out to us incessantly as we returned. And I felt like replying-yes we did do it, we did appreciate the beauty of nature and its sounds at night. And we hope to help to keep it that way!

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

© Sanjay Sondhi

Making a difference: Help save the green cover in Dehradun. The next time you see a forest fire in your area (and there are a quite a few in the summer months), inform the forest department about it at 0135 2632335.