

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

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The Art of Camouflage

The survival strategies adopted by various creatures are indeed mysterious. These strategies have evolved over thousands of years, and even today we struggle to understand how and why these adaptations evolved. Watching animals deploy some of these strategies in the natural world gives me unending pleasure.

I was on an evening walk on a forest track near my house. Dusk approached and the setting sun painted the horizon with a glorious golden hue. A flicker of movement from the undergrowth caught my attention. In fading light, I peered into the bushes searching for the source of the movement. Zilch-I could not see anything at all. As I stepped closer, a brown creature took to wing, only to immediately settle into the relative safety of the foliage. Another step closer and this time I was prepared, so I watched really closely. Once again, something brown flitted into the air and promptly disappeared! Much as I searched, I could not locate the creature.

So you want to play hide-and-seek, I muttered to myself. Well, I am not going to give up. It took two more failed attempts before I finally located my "adversary". The elusive creature was a butterfly called the Common Evening Brown (*Melantis leda*).

The butterfly's colours and patterns were such that it merged with its leafy surrounding perfectly. Brown in colour, shaped like a leaf, with dark patterns on its wings resulting in a perfect camouflage.



The Common Evening Brown is an interesting butterfly. During the breeding

season, mainly in the summer and the monsoons, the butterfly has an attractive pattern on its wings. It is finely striated with brown and white with numerous “ocelli” or eyes on the wings. This is the butterfly's wet season form and its attempt to make itself attractive. The butterfly's version of dressing up to woo its mate. When the breeding season is over, the butterfly no longer needs to look good. Much like us menfolk who attempt to look good before our marriage, before lapsing into sloth and decrepitude once we are married! The butterfly loses its attractive look, the “eyes” reduce to mere dots and it adopts a dull brown “bland” look, which offers it camouflage from predators. This is called the butterfly's dry season form.

The Common Evening Brown is one of the few butterflies that is active at dusk and even at night. It is attracted to light, and often enters homes. So if you see a dull brown butterfly in your home, fluttering near a light, you are looking at the Common Evening Brown.

As always, watching nature unfold its mysteries warms my cockles. How did butterflies evolve their strategies to change forms in seasons? Why is the Common Evening Brown attracted to light, a behaviour normally displayed only by moths? I have no ready answers, but enigmas of this kind keep my interest in nature alive and kicking.

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

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Making a difference: Nature watching is an art. Often, we look at things, but don't really “see”. Developing the art of nature watching-subscribe to nature magazine such as Sanctuary or become a member of wildlife organisations such as World Wide Fund for Nature (wwfindia.org) or Bombay Natural History Society(www.bnhs.org) and help save nature.