

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

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The Black Stream Glider Dragonfly

I sat on the Baldi riverbank at Sahastradhara, mulling over the past few weeks. The elections have come to an end, a new Environment Minister, the erudite and politically savvy Jairam Ramesh is the man entrusted with ensuring our children have a “greener” India to live in. Would he be able to make a difference, I wondered. 5 th June-another World Environment Day has come and gone, with apparently little difference in the attitudes of humankind to the fate of the planet. What could we do to change this, I mused. As these relatively serious thoughts buzzed around in my head, I was broken out of my reverie when something buzzed over my head. I looked up to see a small blackish-blue dragonfly. The dragonfly made another sortie over my head, as if to say-hey forget all your serious muses-come look at me fly!



For the next 30 minutes, I rapturously watched the dragonfly-the Black Stream Glider *Trithemis festiva*. The Black Stream Glider-the dragonfly had

to justify its glamorous name! And proceeded to do so. The dragonfly flew past me with a jagged, yet graceful flight, occasionally hovering delicately. As it hovered, the sun reflected off its wings, revealing a glossy brown tinge to otherwise transparent wings. The dragonfly settled on a boulder in the river bed, and then changed its mind, deciding that a twig presented it with better camouflage.

Merely settling on a twig involved a series of tightly controlled maneuvers for the dragonfly! Selecting a twig about a foot above the water to sit on, the dragonfly seemed unhappy with its position. It swiveled this way and that on the twig till it found what was apparently a better position. Next, the dragonfly comically raised its tail, bit by bit, till its tail was almost at right angles to the body. Then the dragonfly adjusted its wings at just the right angle, to counter the gusts of winds that threatened to blow it off its posture. Finally settling into a position that it seemed to like, aligned with the stick, head and body looking into the water, like a dive bomber at full alert, ready to launch itself at unsuspecting prey. Its body and tail now seemed like an extension of the twig, thereby camouflaging it from predators and prey alike.

Being an aerial predator, every few minutes, the dragonfly sallied forth into the air to look for a tasty morsel, only to come back to same spot every single time. And go through the same intricate motions on the twig all over again! On occasion, the dragonfly cutely proceeded to clean its large compound eyes and its mouth with its front legs.

Dragonflies are winged insects that belong to the order Odonata. They are amongst the oldest of insects having first appeared more than 250 million years ago, and are possibly the first insects to fly. In India there are more than 500 species of dragonflies and damselflies (more about damselflies later). They are found near most aquatic habitats-rivers, streams, ponds and even small stagnant pools. Dragonflies lay eggs in or near aquatic habitats, and their larva (young ones) are entirely aquatic. Both the larva and the adult dragonfly are ferocious predators, and help to control mosquito populations by consuming mosquito eggs and larva. The presence of dragonflies is a clear indicator of the health of aquatic habitats.

Even as I watched the Black Stream Glider, the dragonfly endearingly cocked its head, and peered at me with its large eyes. It appeared to say to me-I've been around for 250 million years. Tell mankind that I would like to

be around at least that much more time, so do your bit to keep the world safe for us. Are we listening to its pleas-ministers and people?

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Making a difference: Key to our survival (and the dragonflies) is conserving water. Don't allow taps and pipes to leak water in your home.

Photograph caption: Black Stream Glider on a boulder