

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

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The Brownies

Early one morning, I sat sunning myself in the balcony of our house. From my pedestal, for the next hour, unnoticed by my avian friends, I watched two different brown birds (the Brownies as I ended up calling them) indulging in the “early bird gets the worm” game.

Both the birds, despite being different species, were a dull nondescript brown colour. For the uninitiated, differentiating the birds could be an issue, but the key is close observation of their features and their habits.

The smaller bird was the Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*, a migrant, which visits the foothills and peninsular India during the winter, after breeding in the Himalayas. The larger bird was the Brown Rock Chat *Ceromela fusca*, a resident, which can be seen near houses in north India, throughout the year. The Chiffchaff is a dark chocolate brown colour above, and paler brown below. It has a small whitish coloured streak above the eye, a small, thin black beak and black legs. The larger Brown Rock Chat is also



Picture caption: Common Chiffchaff

chocolate brown, has a darker brown tail, and entirely lacks any eye streaks. It has a stouter build and a longer, thicker beak.



Picture caption: Brown Rock Chat

Both the Brownies are insect eaters, but with different styles. The Chiffchaff reminds me of a Mumbai-ite-busy, restless, always on the move, flicking its wings constantly, as it searches for food. Hopping on the ground, jumping up to a bush, sometimes ascending to sit momentarily on the clothesline, but quickly getting back to work. All business-like. In contrast, the Brown Rock Chat is more of a Delhi-ite-in no hurry at all and languorous in its movements. It intersperses its hops with with an inelegant bob, followed by lazy wag of its tail. *Kya jaldi hai* ?(What's the hurry?)-is the attitude that the bird exudes. The Brown Rock Chat, typical of its Delhi brethren, is very concerned about what all the other birds around it are doing. So it keeps one eye on the Chiffchaff, even as it peeks over the neighbour's wall to keep tabs on the Indian Robin next door. Only periodically, the Brown Rock Chat hops onto the ground, and finds itself something to eat. In stark contrast, the

Chiffchaff couldn't be bothered about any of the other birds. It is busy feeding and doesn't have a moment to waste.

I also noticed that the Brown Rock Chat was never single-the male and female were always close together. The possessive male eyeing the female and ensuring she kept within reach at all times. Must be the effect of excessive eve-teasing amongst Delhi-ites!

Over the next few days, I observed that the Chiffchaff turned up every day precisely at 4 p.m. to feed in our garden. This left me nonplussed. I could see no specific reason for the birds turning up precisely at the same time almost daily. Only when I started doing this article that wisdom dawned on me. The Chiffchaff was waiting for the stock markets to close; watching over its investments before resuming its feeding. So Mumbai-like!

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