

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

Published on 20 March 2009

The Butterfly Bugs

Recently, I was ambling along a narrow forest track near Malsi. From the cobwebs that brushed into my face, I determined that the path was not often used, which was good, as it meant that the area was relatively undisturbed. After an hour's walk in the forest, nature had not served up any appetizing sights and I was wondering whether this was going to be one of those dull mornings. At that very juncture I brushed past a plant on the narrow trail, and emerged covered with a white powdery substance. Intrigued, I peered closely at the plant and discovered that the entire stem of the plant was covered by a whitish powdery layer. Close to the powdery layer were a number of astoundingly colored insects which suddenly jumped up as soon as I got close!

Excitedly, I observed an inch-sized insect with beautiful green wings, with narrow borders of blue and red. I had found some incredible insects called the Planthoppers or Butterfly Bugs. On account of their lovely color, I christened them the Green Butterfly Bugs.



The Butterfly Bugs are insects that belong to an Order called Homoptera (homo-uniform, ptera-wings). These insects are soft bodied bugs that jump when disturbed, and are hence called planthoppers. Their wings are normally folded over their bodies like a tent, and they come in many different hues.

These insects normally feed on plant sap and excrete honeydew. Honeydew is a sweet tasting liquid that sap sucking insects secrete. Often other insects such as ants and wasps feed on the honeydew. The Butterfly Bugs provide the ants with honeydew, while the ants in turn provide them with protection, thereby forming a unique symbiotic relationship. In fact, a lot of bees feed on honeydew and the resultant honey is much sought after.



The white powdery substance that I had seen was actually alive and when I touched it, they jumped up! These were the young ones (or nymphs) of the Green Butterfly Bug. Dozens of nymphs sat huddled together on the stem, such that the entire stem turned white. The nymphs had white waxy threadlike structures on the back and they looked like aliens from another planet. The nymphs left a trail of white secretions everywhere they moved, including on me! The ground below the bush on which these insects sat was bathed in white powder.

Insects are such amazing creatures. Did you know that insects have been around on the earth for more than 350 million years and that 80% of the animals on Mother Earth are insects! While the earth has about a million species of insects that are described by science, even today a very large number of species possibly await discovery!

Finding insects as pretty as the Green Butterfly Bug in Dehradun only adds to my determination. We've got to protect the little forest cover we have left. And we need YOUR help to make it happen.

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

© Sanjay Sondhi

Making a difference: Reduce, re-use and re-cycle any paper that you use, and help save our forests.