

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

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The Long Jumper

My heart thumped loudly, my heart beat faster than normal and I gulped down the clean fresh air that wafted by me. Don't get any fancy ideas-I wasn't seeing something exotic, no PYT's here. I was just striding up the steep hill slope near Sahastradhara, and discovering that I was not quite as fit as I should be. Even as I hoofed my way up the hill, a small creature suddenly flew up from my feet, startling me. A flash of yellow, flailing wings, and then as suddenly as it had appeared, it dropped down into the undergrowth and disappeared.

Intrigued, I searched for the creature, and sure enough, sitting amidst the shrubs, close to the ground, a grasshopper peered out at me. It was black in colour, with yellow spots on the wings. Its black abdomen and head was slashed with a reddish-white band which made the grasshopper appear as though it had a leering grin. Topping this eerie look were two large black eyes that added to the grim-looking appearance of the creature.

I was watching the Yellow Spotted Grasshopper (*Aularches miliaris*). The grasshopper is found in the lower hilly regions in the Himalayas, as well as in the Western Ghats.

Grasshoppers are interesting insects that belong to the order Orthoptera which includes its cousins-the crickets. The peculiarity of grasshoppers are their powerful, stout rear legs, which allows them to jump long distances. It is estimated that grasshopper can jump 20 times their own length-Carl Lewis and Bob Beamon have serious competition here!

Grasshoppers can make loud sounds by rubbing their hind legs against their forewings.

Most grasshoppers are sedately coloured and merge in with their surrounds, well camouflaged from their predators. However, when they fly, they reveal brighter coloured wings, which also serve to frighten their potential predators, both with the suddenness of their flight and the colours they display. Some grasshoppers that are brightly colored make no attempt to camouflage themselves as they are toxic and predators actually avoid them.



Photograph caption: Mating pair of the Yellow Spotted Grasshopper

Hence they have no hesitation in parading their beauty, knowing fully well that actually this reduces their chances of being served up on a platter to foraging birds. For those uninitiated and foolish birds, that do attempt to make these grasshoppers their early morning meal, the first bite is normally accompanied by a lot of spitting and head-shaking, and curses of “never again!”.

During certain conditions, hundred of thousands of grasshoppers congregate at the same time. Swarms of grasshoppers, called locusts, often migrate long distances, descending frequently on fields to feed ravenously. With voracious appetites, these locusts cause tremendous damage to many crops including coffee, cashew, black pepper and banana.

Grasshoppers form an important part of the web of life, being preyed on by birds, reptiles and even insects. In many countries such as Mexico and China grasshoppers are eaten by humans and are considered a good source of protein. So man enters the wild web of life, too-probably appropriate, given our lack of appreciation for all things natural!

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