

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

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The Q-P bird!

The rustling in the undergrowth attracted my attention. Lantana bushes lined the road and from the midst of these thickets I could hear something scrabbling on the ground. Bird or mammal, I wondered. I was not carrying my binoculars, so I ended up on my knees, peering into the bushes. I caught a glimpse of brownish bird which, to my frustration, hopped further into the undergrowth. Silence ensued, and for the next few minutes I heard nothing from the Lantana. Having a big brown face leering at you when you are busy feeding wasn't possibly the best introduction to the bird in question. Can you imagine sitting at the table eating, while a big brown creature leers at you!

A few more minutes of patience (and less leering!) and out popped a really pretty bird. Larger than a myna, the brown bird had a long down-curved yellow bill. With a whitish bib down its front, a beautiful rust colour decorated its cheeks and flanks. The petite bird was the Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler *Pomatorhinus erythrogeus*, a babbler belonging to the



Timaliidae family of birds. The bird gets its name from its long down-curved scimitar-shaped bill. The scimitar babbler sat on the branches of the bushes only a few feet from me. Peering at me curiously, it tilted its head this way and that. The bird seemed to be asking me-why are you sitting on your knees looking at me. Are you proposing to me? If so, you are too late-I am already hooked up for the summer!

Photograph caption: Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler peering at the author

Struggling with the disappointment of being spurned by a mere bird (a female, as I found out later on), I stayed still on my haunches and continued to observe the bird. The scimitar babbler flew back onto the ground, and resumed feeding. With its long bill, the bird flicked over large leaves and twigs, searching for insects. The busy bird's incessant search for insects in the leaf litter caused a loud rustling sound, which had attracted my attention in the first place.

Even as I watched, from a distance, another bird called. “Q-P” (qewpee), went the fluty call. I knew this to be the male's call. And the bird I was watching, the female, responded with “quip”! For the next few minutes, the birds conducted a melodious duet, with the Q-P's calls of the male, being responded to immediately with a “quip” by the female. The calls-”Q-P” & “quip”, though uttered by different birds, were completely synchronized, and sounded like one bird. The “very much in love” couple proceeded to perform their own version of Bollywood's “song 'n dance-prance around the tree” routine perfectly!

The Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler is actually quite a common bird in Dehradun and can be seen at nullahs and in bushes and scrub, at the edge of forests. However, given its surreptitious behaviour, it is more likely to be heard, than seen. So the next time you take a walk in your area, listen out for the fluty duet of these pretty birds.

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