

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

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### The sighting of a lifer

For many naturalists, the ultimate high in nature watching is seeing a tiger in the wild. After more than two decades of peregrination in India's forests, I have yet to see a tiger. The primary reason for this is that I refuse to visit forests where I cannot walk, and where tigers will be “paraded” while I sit comfortably in a jeep. The second reason is, while I would love to see a tiger, I still get my “highs” from watching other interesting sights in nature.

I got just such a high a few days ago in Dehradun. I was bird watching with my family on the hill slopes beyond Sahastradhara. We were walking up a *pakdandi* above a small village called Karligad, which is about 4 km beyond Sahastradhara, when we saw a flock of birds. The birds, called prinias, had an unfamiliar call. I told Anchal and Yash-this bird is different ; I cannot recognize its call. We searched for it desperately. To our frustration, the bird played hide-and-seeK with us and we could not see it long enough to identify it.

While climbing down the hill, later in the day, now completely alert, I kept my eyes and ears open, looking for the prinia. Luck was with us! Despite the bird continuing to play hide-and-seeK, we able to get a good sighting, and hence identify the bird. It was the Greycrowned Prinia *Prinia cinereocapilla*-a really uncommon bird. I quickly pulled out my camera and squeezed off a photograph. Wow! The bird was a lifer for me. (A lifer, in bird watching parlance, is the first ever sighting of a bird species by a birdwatcher). The Greycrowned Prinia is endemic to the Indian subcontinent and is quite rare. It is listed as “vulnerable” by the IUCN in its list of threatened birds.

Prinias are slender, insect eating birds that prefer grassy and scrub habitat. They scramble clumsily over grass and bushes, often disappearing amidst the undergrowth, only to pop up elsewhere, suddenly. The bird's tail seems to be very loosely attached to its body. I remember that the very first time I saw a prinia, I thought that its tail was falling off! When disturbed, some prinias often beat their wings against their body, making a snapping noise, in an apparent attempt at self-flagellation!



The sighting of this resident prinia (which means that it does not migrate and is probably in the same area all the year round) in Dehradun was a timely reminder to me of the outstanding biodiversity in our city. God knows how many more such creatures await discovery. If only the rapid pace of our development does not devastate the green areas that remain. Are you gonna do your bit to help?

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Making a difference: Of late, I have come across many occasions when children have been actively supporting the cause of environment protection. Whenever I observe this, it almost appears to me that we are leaving our kids with the burden of saving the world. Why is it that we adults don't actively campaign to save our planet? Why do we want our children to clean up our mess? Think about it. And act differently to do your bit to save the planet.

Photograph caption: Greycrowned prinia in Dehradun