

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

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The Skittering Frog

As winter starts to retreat, and the warmer months approach, nature turns the invisible pages of its book and begins to pen a new story. Some of these “stories” are visible and vivid, such as the Flame of the Forest that I wrote about last week. Other changes are less visible, but equally remarkable and quite a few stories get told under the cover of darkness.

A few days ago, I decided to take a night walk close to where I live. About a kilometer away from our house is a scrub forest through which winds a tiny stream, with just a trickle of water. I walked in darkness, taking in the sounds of the night. Crickets hummed at me from every direction. Branches of a few tall trees crackled in the night. The nightjar, a nocturnal bird, announced its presence with a “chung, chung, chung” call. Overhead, the constellation of Orion-the Hunter twinkled down at me.

As I approached the stream, I heard a sound in the distance. “Creek-creek-creek-creek” went the sound. Could be it be someone on an old rocking chair? I knocked myself on the head-who in the world would be sitting outdoors in the middle of nowhere, rocking on a chair at 8 pm at night! As I walked closer, I put on my torch and as the light eerily reflected off the water’s surface, I heard a series of splashes.

As I shone my torch, I observed a frog floating on the water’s surface. The frog’s body was submerged in the water with only its head protruding out. It was completely motionless, and really well camouflaged, looking like a leaf floating on the water’s surface. Even as I watched, the frog called again “creek-creek-creek”. So much for my rocking chair theory! As I got closer, the startled frog skipped over the water’s surface, taking at least 6 to 7 jumps. A frog that walks on water!



I was watching the Skittering Frog *Euphlyctis cyanophlytis*, named so because of its habit of skittering across the water surface when disturbed. The frog is seen in Dehradun city almost anywhere that you have water including drains, ponds, streams and even ditches. Highly adaptable, the frogs can even be seen in water that is quite polluted including sewers. They are often seen comically perched on the heads of buffalos in the water. While abundant in India, this frog was one of four species that was harvested to supply the frogleg industry in India. While frogleg trade is banned in India, the frog is still collectively extensively for use in laboratories.

At the first rain shower, the frogs will start their breeding season and a new story will unfold. The males become extremely vocal when they breed. They will sit on rocks near streams, puff their throats and croak away without respite, saying the same thing over and over again. As elections near, I can think of at least one other species (our politicians!) that pretty much will do the same thing-puff themselves up, and say the same over and over again. At least the frogs don't make false promises!

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Making a difference: Avoid buying goods made from wild animal skins such as handbags, wallets, etc.