

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

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Yes-s-s-s its pretty

Despite the hiccups of the Indian cricket team against a bunch of Aussie tyros (there are quite a few guys in their team whose names I have never even heard of), it is with pride that I can say that I have hit a half century. Yes, believe it or not, this is the 50 th. article in the Doon Watch series! A big thanks to the encouragement from the readers, which has kept me enthused about sharing Dehradun's natural history with you.

When I sat down to write this article, I wondered whether there was any creature in the animal family that I had not written about. And, yes-sssssss, it came to me. I had not yet written about a ssssssnake!

As luck would have it, last week, I got a call from a friend at the Wildlife Institute of India. One of the students had caught a snake along the road from Dehradun to Mussoorie-would I like to photograph it, he asked?

At WII, I saw the snake and was spellbound. Wow! The snake, a Himalayan whitelipped pitviper (*Cryptelytrops septentrionalis*) was a beauty. About a foot and a half long, the snake was bright green in colour, while its underside was cream coloured. A white line, ran above its upper lip, hence its common name. This snake, a pitviper, is venomous. The snake is nocturnal and arboreal in its habits, and is normally found in bushes, or amongst the lower branches of trees. Its green colour camouflages it well, and it is not easy to spot.

The pitviper, is called so because of the “pits” that it has close to its nostrils. Most snakes hunt by sight and smell, but the pitvipers have an additional tool. They are able to sense temperature differences in the air around them using the thermal sensory organs in their “pits”, which helps them locate warm blooded creatures, which form part of their prey base.

Many people have an irrational fear of snakes, but I find them amongst the prettiest of creatures. Pretty-I hear a lot of people saying “UGH!”. But all of you out there with ophidiophobic (ophio=sneak, phobia=fear) tendencies,

pause a while and look at the picture. Isn't the snake really attractive?
Forsake your fears!



Photograph caption: Himalayan whitelipped pitviper

Most snakes found in urban India are not venomous, with the exception of the Spectacled cobra, Russel's viper, Saw-scaled viper and Common krait. Also, most snakes will not bite, unless they are threatened. As I watched the pitviper from up close, its pink tongue snaked out out. It seemed to be smelling me (the snake's tongue is its “taste organ”), and saying-hey this guys seems to be OK. In all the while that I was photographing the snake (an a hour and a half, some eighty photographs!) and making my acquaintance, up close and personal, not once did the snake threaten.

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

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Making a difference: While some snakes are venomous, most are not. More importantly, snakes will normally not harm you, unless threatened. Hence, don't kill snakes, nor should you allow others to kill them. After all, don't they deserve the right to live, just like us?