

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

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Agama Tales

One of the many pleasures that I get from travelling to far flung places, is hearing the local community relate animal stories. Most animal tales related by local communities, are passed on through generations, and I like hearing them as much as the locals like telling them.

One of the creatures about which I have heard many captivating stories is the West Himalayan Rock Agama (*Laudakia tuberculata*). Agamids are a family of lizards with large heads and flattened bodies. The Rock Agama, a large agamid is quite common in rocky terrain throughout the western Himalayas, occasionally entering rural homes. It can even be seen at Rajaji National Park, basking in the sun on a rock, during the day.



As the lizard is cold-blooded (as are all reptiles), it needs the sun's warmth to regulate its temperature. It can grow to more than a foot and a half, and during the summer, when it breeds, the normally staid grey lizard adopts an attractive blue colour. Females are duller grey-brown while young ones have black spots. Like other reptiles, the agamas also moult and shed their skin as they grow (see picture). The lizards are quite wary, and will scurry into a hole or a crevice if you attempt to approach it.

In the Garhwal Himalayas, the agama is called *chibaada* and as it is large and noticeable; most people have loads of captivating stories to tell. In most locations, people mistakenly believe that the *chibaada* is venomous, and hence fear it. In Govind Pashu Vihar National Park, a local told me that legend has it that the agama only bites on the day of the week which does not have the syllable “*waar*” in it. Rock agama's are always bobbing their heads. Locals believe that the agama is counting the days by bobbing its head, in order to get to the day of the week, which does not have “*waar*” in it. And as all the days of the week (*Somwaar*, *Mangalwaar*, etc) have this term, it does not bite at all!

At Mussoorie, I was told that the agama is caught live, crushed and eaten as a cure for numerous illnesses. And during a recent visit to Jardhargaon, a village in Tehri Garhwal, the locals told me that though they consider the *chibaada* to be venomous, they do not harm it because the local belief is that if you kill it, your ears will rot! Enough of a disincentive not to kill it!

Most of these stories are not based on fact, but any attempt on my part to tell the locals otherwise, is met with the disdain and disbelief! For all you know, I end up becoming another story for them.....that crazy guy who likes lizards!

Sanjay Sondhi is a Dehradun based naturalist. Feedback on this column is welcome at sanjay.sondhi1@gmail.com

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Making a difference: There is a story teller in every one of us! The next time you visit the remote areas of Uttarakhand, don't forget to ferret out a local story to tell us. Captivating nature stories of your own is a great way to get your children interested (and email me, I would like to hear your stories, too!).