

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

Published on 21 March 2014

Benog Beckons

The wonder of staying in Dehradun is that there are loads of nooks and corners waiting to be explored. The Dehradun-Mussoorie area is a treasure trove of nature, if only we care to peek. One such area, near Mussoorie is the Benog Mountain Quail Wildlife Sanctuary, some times also called the Mussoorie Wildlife Sanctuary. Established in 1993, this protected area covers an area of 10.82 sq. km. of some of the finest forest in Mussoorie.

This little known sanctuary (there are residents of Mussoorie who did not know about it!) is a great place to watch nature-birds, mammals, butterflies, frogs and a whole lot else. However, Benog's claim to fame is something special. A bird called the Mountain Quail (*Ophrysia superciliosa*), after which the sanctuary is named, was last spotted in 1876, near Nainital. This bird, which is known from only 12 specimens in museums, has not been recorded ever since, despite many surveys, and is now feared extinct. Benog, is one of the few locations where this quail was sighted in the 19 Th. century.

A couple of weeks ago, we decided that the weather had warmed up sufficiently to pay a visit to Benog. Benog can be approached from Cloud's End at Mussoorie. However, this area has too many people for our liking, so we prefer taking a different route-one from the Kempty Falls side. From a few kilometers before Kempty Falls, a forest jeep track allows you to drive up to the entry of the sanctuary. To actually enter and walk in the sanctuary, its best that you inform the forest department.

The walk inside the sanctuary is marvelous. Along the forest track, a Himalayan stream gurgles. Giant deodar trees loom over you, making the forest track dark in places. The steep rocky slopes on the right looks to be a great place for ungulates like the Himalayan Tahr. You can trek up this path all the way up to Cloud's End, a distance of approximately 5 kilometers.

We had assumed that it was too cold for any activity other than birds and mammals, but to our surprise, it was warm enough for insects to be active. My very favorite creatures, butterflies, were just beginning to welcome the spring. At every stream crossing, we would stop, and sure enough, a butterfly would pop out. As we stood at a stream, a lovely, fast flying butterfly whizzed by. This butterfly, a Tailed Punch (*Dodona eugenes*) was fresh, and had probably just emerged from its pupa. We stood by the tinkling stream as the hyperactive Tailed Punch beckoned to us to "Go out and explore Benog".

Feedback on this column is welcome at sanjay.sondhi1@gmail.com



Making a difference: Why don't you get out with your kids and explore little known areas like Benog over the weekend? Open up the world of nature for your children! And who knows, you might just re-discover the Mountain Quail at Benog!

Photograph caption: Tailed Punch at Benog

© Sanjay Sondhi