

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

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The Common Kingfisher

The new year beckons! At my age (gonna keep you guessing about that one!), traditional new year celebrations are passe'. Every year, we are out in the wilds, welcoming the new year in some national park or sanctuary. This year is not going to be any different. Even as I write this, I am packing to leave on a 5 day trip to the Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary near Gopeshwar. I will be welcoming the new year gazing at snow clad Himalayan peaks. What a delicious way to start the new year! I hope 2010 turns just as wonderful for all my readers.

When it came to penning this article, I scratched my head hard, wondering what I could write about. I wanted to write about a creature that capture the excitement and vibrancy of the new year. Something that at once causes us to “aha”. As always, nature has its way of providing its own answers!



This morning, we ventured out on a morning walk at the Tons river behind the Forest Research Institute. The disillusionment caused by the burgeoning population at the banks of the Tons landscape was speedily dissipated by the flash of bright blue that flew past me. Even without the binoculars, I knew what it was-the Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*.

The Common Kingfisher is amongst the prettiest birds you can see in an urban landscape. The kingfisher, no more than four inches high, is a bright turquoise-blue colour. Below, the bird is a bright rufous colour. Despite its bright colours, the bird merges deceptively with its background when it is sitting, and is difficult to see. In flight, however, it is a different story. Bright blue colours startle you as the bird whizzes past you, calling loudly “*chee, chee, chee*”. The Common Kingfisher is seen frequently near water in urban habitats. Its primary diet is fish (and no, its not a Bengali! It is found throughout India). The kingfisher sits on a perch a few feet above the water's surface. On spotting its prey, it dives into the water gracefully, and comes out triumphantly with a fish in its long bill. It then proceeds to beat the fish dead against a rock, before devouring it. Despite being a kingfisher, the bird does not hesitate to feed on other prey such as aquatic insects.

The kingfisher nests in hollows in vertical mud banks, at the edge of water bodies. With rapid urbanisation, it is faced with a decrease in suitable nesting habitats.

Just like so many other creatures, the new year brings hope-hope that birds like the Common Kingfisher will continue to thrive. Hope that the beauty of nature will eventually win over the destructive streak of man. Hope that our children will also get the chance to see the wonders of nature. With that hope-have a great 2010!

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

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Making a difference: Time for your New Year Resolution. Take your pick...reuse, recycle, reduce, repair, re-invent. Find a way of making better use of the earth's resources....and make a difference.