

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

Published on 12 March 2010

Common Mormon-The Dainty Swallowtail

The rising mercury cockles my heart. I am more of a warm and wet season person. The hot weather brings blue skies, the background cacophony of birds gearing to breed to the accompaniment of softer “buzzzzzz” of insects. In the last few weeks, my favourite group of creatures, butterflies, have started to put in an appearance. Largely absent through most of the cold weather, bright sunshine brings out these winged fairies.



Sitting in my garden, one bright sunny morning, I watched our pet cat, Tiger, lick herself clean. The funny positions adopted by cats as they clean themselves will put most yoga practitioners to shame! Even as I watched Tiger, a large black butterfly flitted just over her. At once alert to the prospect of a tasty meal, I watch in amusement as the butterfly did its utmost to give Tiger a sprained neck! With a flit here, a flit there, the butterfly sashayed! With a twist here, a twist there pirouetted poor Tiger! A few

minutes of neck wrenching left Tiger scowling, even as I had a good laugh at her expense!

I sat back contentedly to watch the butterfly-a Common Mormon (*Papilio polytes*). A flicker of black, a quick flutter at the flowers in the garden, and then the butterfly was off again, looking for tastier fare. Commonly seen in our gardens, a large black butterfly with a white band across its hind wings, with a zig-zag flight, is likely to be the Common Mormon. If you look really closely, you will see that the butterfly has a pair of black tails. These large tailed butterflies are called Swallowtails precisely on account of their tails.

Soon, the Common Mormon will begin its breeding cycle. Interestingly, the Common Mormon lays its eggs on the curry leaf plant or the *kariya patta*. If you grow *kariya patta* in your garden, and observe that some of the leaves are nibbled at, you are sure to have Common Mormon caterpillars on it. Even more interestingly, the caterpillars are small and black to begin with, looking like “bird shit”! As the caterpillars grow, they change colour to eventually become a really pretty green.

The Common Mormon exhibits Batesian mimicry which means that it mimics other butterflies which are inedible, in order to protect itself. The females of the Common Mormon mimic another swallowtail butterfly called the Crimson Rose which is inedible! The butterflies look very similar, but the Crimson Rose has a red body, while the Common Mormon has a black body.

Swallowtail butterflies have often been collected because of their beauty. In fact, India's largest butterfly, the Common Birdwing, which is as large as a small bird, belongs to this family.

As I watched the Common Mormon waft by, I wished it luck in coming season. With mimicry or without, butterflies, like all other creatures need all the help they can get in these times of ravaged landscapes!

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Making a difference: Butterflies have often been collected and used as decorations. In these times of depleting wildlife, don't use any decorations that involve collection of live specimens.