

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

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The Dung Beetle

Walking along the forest track, I spied a small, spherical ball of dung, that seemed to be moving! Intrigued, I moved a little closer to observe that a beetle was rolling the dung ball along the forest floor, backwards! Fascinated, I watched as the glossy black beetle, with bright yellow horn-like antennae, rolled the ball of dung using its rear legs. As the beetle did not have a rear view mirror, its progress was comical. A few feet of backward movement, and it banged into a protruding stick. Engaging its forward gear, it moved forward just a bit, and slipped into reverse gear again. The beetle made good progress for a few more feet, rolling the ball of dung, before, with a rude thud, it banged into a big rock! Undeterred, the beetle moved forward and back again, to resume its dung rolling. The energetic beetle's amusing journey across the forest floor reminded me of a computer game, Pacman, that I used to play many years ago!

A few feet away from the beetle was fresh elephant dung. Here, I observed many more beetles "playing" in the dung! Actually, the dung beetles were not "playing"; they were immersed in putting together a ball of dung-essential for the survival of their species. Using their three pairs of legs, the dung beetles were collecting dung, under their body. Once enough dung was collected, the beetles would roll these into a ball. Then, hurriedly, the dung beetles scrambled away with the dung balls, rolling them backwards. The cause for the beetles rush, was that, often, other dung beetles steal away dung balls! Let someone else do the hard work, and then nip in to dispossess the poor beetle of its precious dung ball!



Dung beetles use the dung ball for two purposes. They will either feed on it themselves (yucky, but true!). Or else, they will use the dung ball as a brood chamber for the female to lay eggs. The male beetle will bury the dung ball in a tunnel in the ground. The female dung beetle will lay her eggs inside the dung ball. When the

young ones of the beetle emerge, they feed on the dung ball itself. As you can see-the adults feed the kids yucky food from the very beginning just to ensure they are well trained! Children-beware, watch what your parents feed you!

Dung beetles exist on every continent on earth, except possibly Antarctica. They perform a crucial role in nature. By carrying away dung balls and burying them under the ground, they assist to spread nutrients, and hence keep the soil fertile. Just like every part of nature, the dung beetle plays its role in the mysterious web of life.

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Making a difference: If you have a garden, what do you do with the dried, fallen leaves-burn them? Don't burn the leaves-the dried leaves play a crucial role in providing humus and nutrients to the soil when they decompose. Either let them be on the ground or instead, dig a pit in which you allow the leaves to decompose. At least their nutrients remain in the soil. So like the dung beetle-play your part in the web of life!

Photograph caption: Dung beetle rolling a dung ball

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