

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

Published on 4 June 2010

“Herping” days are here again!

The exceptionally warm days set me thinking-what impact was this having on the fauna around Dehradun. With a friend, Kathikeya Sharma, in tow, I decided to go for a night walk to search for “herps”-frogs, lizards and snakes. These creatures are very sensitive to changes in temperature and rainfall, and a terrific indicator of the health of the environment. We picked a small montane stream, that feeds the Bindal river at Sahastradhara, about a kilometer from the bridge.

The stream has been a revelation in the past. Last year, I spotted the Long-billed Thrush, an uncommon migrant bird that passes through Dehradun in the spring. On another visit, I spotted an elusive montane frog, Dubois's Frog, at the same stream. Debris, construction material and raw excavated earth greeted us. Development had reached this spot, too, and with a sinking heart, I realised that the very existence of the stream would soon be threatened. A new road was being constructed, as well as a proposed tourist resort.

Fortunately, the obscure forest path that I normally take along the stream was still intact. After climbing uphill for about fifty meters, we could hear the stream gurgling to our left. We descended down the slope to the edge of the montane stream. In the darkness, the sounds of the night reached out to us. The water in the stream pleasantly tinkled its way down the hill slope, oblivious to the dangers that development brought with it. Light from our torches shone brightly on the water's surface. Our search for “herps” began.

After only a few minutes at the stream, and I spotted a small, nondescript looking frog sitting on a stone. It was olive-brown and really well camouflaged. Looking closely at it, I realised that something about the frog was different-it had round disc-like skin on its fingers and toes. Excitedly, I spoke to my friend-“Its an Amolops!”. Despite the darkness, I saw a perplexed look on his face. “What's that?” he queried. “Its an uncommon frog”, I retorted. “As far as I know, its never been seen in Dehradun before!” Even as we spoke, I moved my torch away from the frog for only a moment, and in a jiffy, the frog was gone! It had jumped to safety and vanished from our sight! Cursing myself, we decided that patience might help, and we sat down quietly at the spot. Ten minutes later, our patience paid off!. We spotted the frog sitting on a twig in the water, again!

The frog, called the Jaunsar cascade frog (*Amolops jaunsari*) was discovered in the Chakrata area by a ZSI scientist in 1985. Uncommon and elusive, this frog lives near mountain streams, amongst the rocks and associated foliage. Named after the Jaunsar tribe that lives in the area of its discovery, it is elusive and little seen. Imagine, seeing

this little fellow right here in Dehradun! The camera popped out and we proceeded to make the lil' fella famous!



As I have mentioned so often in this column-there is so much that still remains to be discovered even in Dehradun. Should we let unbridled development take over? Will we lose the area's flora and fauna even before we know what exists?

And what about this obscure, rare frog? Will the new road that is being built, blast its breeding site into oblivion?

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: Development versus nature. Is this an “either-or” story, with no middle path? In my view, protecting our forests and wildlife is essential for life on earth and needs to be balanced with development. And equally important is that we make ourselves heard and make our choices known. Why don't you voice your views-write into newspapers, join email groups, and let your voice be heard.