

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

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Hoopoe-The "Oopy" Bird

You've got your favorite cricketer, right? Well, I have my favorite birds! A common city bird that is one of my "favs" is a petite bird called the Hoopoe *Upupa epops*. I am pretty sure that the observant amongst you would have seen this bird in your garden lawns. Generally rust-brown coloured, its wings have black and white markings. It has a prominent black tipped crest, which seems stuck loosely to its head, though on occasion, the Hoopoe spreads its crest into a fan. It has a long down-curved beak which it uses to probe out insects. When the Hoopoe flies, it has a slow, looping flight, wherein its black and white wing pattern stands out.



Most days, on my morning walk, I see a pair of Hoopoes feeding on the lawn in front of the IT Park, near Sahastradhara Road. I watch as the birds peck away relentlessly at the soft mud, sinking their long beaks deep into the soil. Repeated jabs into soft soil are followed by a perky short, business-like walk, and back to jabbing again. Grass and soil cling to the Hoopoe's beak as it pecks away, in its search for food. Every now and then, it comes up with a long earthworm, and gulps it down quickly. The Hoopoe has such strong mouth muscles that it can open its beak under the soil, to catch worms!

I watched with amusement, as a drongo and myna descended near the Hoopoes. Watching the Hoopoes success with earthworms on the lawn, they decided to try their luck as well. Dumb birds-both the drongo and myna have short beaks, and they

cannot reach as deep into the soil as the intrepid Hoopoe. After trying in vain to replicate the Hoopoe's success in locating earthworms, and coming up empty handed, the disappointed birds, having learnt their lesson, departed to catch prey that was more up their street (and matched their beak shapes!).

The Hoopoe is a common garden bird seen throughout India's cities. It has a peculiar, far-reaching "*oop-oop-oop-oop*" call, from which it gets its scientific and English names. The Hoopoe build its nest in tree hollows and crevices in building walls, quite close to human habitation. Though the Hoopoe does migrate from the colder areas in Europe and Asia in the winter months, in Dehradun, and most of the Indian region, they are residents.

Watching these graceful birds, feeding on the lawn, oblivious to my presence, I marveled at the fact, that though common, these birds literally light up the landscape with their petite presence. There are so many sights in nature that provide us with pure unadulterated joy-if only we would let nature be, and allow it to orchestrate many more gratifying sights.

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: Simple things can make a difference. Recently, I came across someone who chopped the branches of a tree in his house because it sheds its leaves! Its only leaves, right-they can be swept? After all, by cutting the trees branches, you have also put an end to other life forms (bugs, beetles, maybe even a nest site for a bird) on the tree. Can't we let nature be?

Photograph caption: Hoopoe

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