

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

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### **Mudpuddling butterflies**

Hungry kya? Isn't it surprising that even though we eat no more than four meals a day, spending perhaps less than 10 percent of our time awake in this activity, yet, food is such an important part of our life. Creatures in the natural world aren't so fortunate. Most creatures spend a large amount of their active hours feeding. And they adopt techniques that are unique and varied, to eat.

During a recent visit to the outskirts of Dehradun at Kadua Pani, the rain decided to provide us a brief respite, and the sun shone through brightly. We spotted a large group of butterflies at a damp spot by the river. I counted more than two dozen yellow and white butterflies gathered together. The butterflies belong to a family called Pierids. These butterflies are also called Whites and Yellows as many of them are white or yellow coloured.



Butterflies have a long tube-like structure called proboscis, which is their mouthpart. Using the proboscis, butterflies normally feed on nectar from flowers and sap from rotting fruit. However, every now and then, butterflies get together at a damp spot, often in large numbers, and feed on essential minerals which are present in the soil. This activity is called mudpuddling. During mudpuddling, large numbers of freshly

emerged males butterflies, usually a single species, gather together to feed as well as socialize; their equivalent of a "night out with the boys!". Imagine, partying as soon as they begin their life cycle! Other butterflies congregate in large numbers on dung or bird dropping, to consume the nutrients on offer.

As I ventured closer to attempt to photograph the mudpuddling butterflies, they immediately took to wing, and a swarm of yellow and white surrounded me. Soon, their avarice got the better of their fear, and the butterflies were back to feed! As I watched the butterflies from close up, I observed that as the butterflies sucked up water with salts from the soil, at the same time, they excreted excess water in small drops from their body. In through the front, out through the back!

Most species of butterflies mudpuddle, though the Papilios or Swallowtail butterflies especially congregate in large numbers of the same species, sometimes in dozens! On many occasions, multi-species congregate as well, though a group of butterflies called the Skippers, never seem to want to party together, so they are never seen mudpuddling in large numbers.

For living creatures, food is life. However, butterflies are far more particular about the food they eat than us! A healthy eco-system is essential for them to survive and the onus is on us to keep it so.

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Making a difference: Food and feeding are such a large part of our lives. Acquisition of food is such a simple task for us-visit the market and purchase whatever you want. However, packaged food isn't necessarily healthy, nor environment friendly. Why don't you start a kitchen garden at home? You will be surprised as to how much you can grow. And its tastier, healthier and more environment friendly, too!

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