

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

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Pauri, Peaks and Parakeets

Last week, I drove up to Pauri via Rishikesh, Byasi and Devprayag on work. Not only was the road in good condition, but there was limited traffic, and I encountered spectacular Himalayan landscapes as I drove. The Ganga River just below me, mountainous terrain above clothed with chir pine, and flowering trees of Sandan with their gorgeous pinkish-purple blooms made the drive an enjoyable one.

I was staying at the GMVN TRC and as the sun rose the next morning, my colleague, Arun Prasad, rushed into the room to tell me that a lovely “parrot” was sitting on a tree in front of the tourist lodge. I made my way outside to be greeted with a marvelous view of snow peaks with Chaukhamba, Trishul and many other peaks glistening in the sunlight. On a tree in front of the tourist lodge, a female parakeet sat on a tree. I immediately recognized it to be the female Slaty-headed Parakeet (*Psittacula himalayana*). The parakeet was perched on a tree stump just above a nest hole. Explaining this to Arun, I also informed him that parrots and parakeets are different. Generally speaking, parakeets are small parrots with long tails, but there are many other scientific differences between them. It is sufficient to say that there are no parrots in the wild in Uttarakhand-only parakeets.



Seeing the female Slaty-headed Parakeet took me back to a childhood memory. I was spending my summer holidays at my grandparents' home in Dalhousie in Himachal

Pradesh. One morning, our caretaker came home with a bunch of fledgling parakeets. The fledglings had been captured by some local boys from the nest hole of a parakeet, and our caretaker had scolded them, and confiscated the fledglings. Now came the dilemma. Rescued fledglings will normally not be accepted back by the parents. Also, we had no idea exactly where the parakeet's nest hole was. As we were going to be in Dalhousie for the next six weeks, I decided to rear the fledglings, in the hope of being able to release them back into the wild.

For the next week or so, after many a trial and error, we were able to get the fledgling birds to feed. I was now certain that we would be able to rear them until they were able to fly. There was great excitement in the house, and the fledglings took center-stage. Unfortunately for us, this attention was noticed by a jealous pet dog, who lived downstairs. One unfortunate day, I entered our room after an evening stroll and found the room saturated with floating feathers of dead parakeets. The fledgling birds lay dead on the floor, having been attacked and killed by the jealous dog, who managed to sneak into the house. I was shattered and cried for hours. Poor parakeets.....

Feedback on this column is welcome at sanjay.sondhi1@gmail.com

Making a difference: The lesson I learnt from the parakeet episode stayed with me. Humans, despite our good intentions, are not meant to “fiddle” around with nature. The best way to preserve our natural resources is, to the extent possible, to let nature be and re-generate on its own.

PS: A reader pointed out an error in my Benog piece last week. The Himalayan Goral, and not the Himalayan Tahr is likely to be found on Benog's hillslopes.

Photograph caption: Slaty-headed Parakeet on its nest hole

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