

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

Published on 10 January 2014

Rolls of the Roller!

There is a bird buzz in the air! The Uttarakhand Spring Bird Festival, the first ever bird festival in the state, is just round the corner! The bird festival is scheduled to be held from 7 to 9 Th. February 2014 at the Asan Conservation Reserve, at outskirts of Dehradun. Starting this week, I will begin a series of pieces of some of the amazing birds that you might just see if you do attend the bird festival.

While the sighting of a rare bird invariably gets “twitchers” (as birders are called in the United Kingdom) excited, personally, I get my kicks not just from rare bird sightings, but also from observing a variety of very pretty, but common birds and their behaviour. High up on that list is a lovely bird called the Indian Roller (*Coracias benghalensis*). The Indian Roller is a pigeon-sized, stocky, brown and blue bird. Seated, the bird’s colours are pretty but not spectacular. However, when the bird flies, it’s a different story! A flash of blue, turquoise and indigo burst through, startling the observer, and potential predators!



The Indian Roller is normally found at the edges of agricultural fields, roadsides, and open scrub forest in rural and urban India. The bird can be seen perched at the top of a tree stump or overhead cables. From its perch, it seeks out its prey, often diving down to the ground to grab a morsel. Its diet is varied; reptiles, amphibians, insects and arachnids are caught and eaten with relish. When winged termites emerge, pre-monsoon, large flocks of the Indian Roller gather, along with other birds, to feast on the abundant insects. During the breeding season, the bird uses acrobatic displays,

rolling this way and that, twisting and turning to display its gorgeous colours and attract its mate. This gives it its common English name.

This beautiful bird has its place in India folklore, too. Called the *neelkanth* in Hindi (=blue throat). It is associated with the deity, Shiva, who is believed to get a blue throat after having consumed poison. In north India, the Indian Roller is associated with festivals like Dussehra. Indian Rollers, unfortunately, are captured, to be released during Dussehra to commemorate the festival.

If a common bird is so pretty, can we, humans, be far behind in exploiting its beauty! Four Indian states-Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka and Odisha have the Indian Roller as their state bird. Come to festival, and you might just spot, not just the Indian Roller, but a bevy of winged beauties!

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

Making a difference: Interested in birds and bird watching? Or not, but keen to find out more. Block your dates the Uttarakhand Spring Bird Festival approaches from 7-9 Th. February 2014. Organised by the Uttarakhand Forest Department, the festival will have guided bird watching, a photography workshop, a rural travel mart, an exhibition, a conference and lots more. Find out more at www.facebook.com/uttarakhandbirding.

Photograph caption: The Indian Roller on its perch

© Sanjay Sondhi