

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

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The Spot-winged Grosbeak

Last week, I related the enchanting encounter we had with the flying squirrel in Devalsari. Another, equally memorable sighting during our visit was that of a bird called the Spot-winged grosbeak (*Mycerbas melanozanthos*), an uncommon bird of the Himalayas. During a previous winter visit to Devalsari, we had seen a flock of grosbeaks on an hill slope, opposite the forest rest house. The grosbeak is an altitudinal migrant, descending to lower altitudes in the winter, when food is scarce, and then returning to higher altitudes to breed in the summer. Given this, we wondered whether we would still find the birds at Devalsari in April.

Yash and I set off in search for this elusive bird, and as luck would have, at the very same spot that we had seen the birds earlier, we heard them calling. The Spot-winged grosbeak is a really pretty bird, with bright yellow colours underneath. They have thick beaks, with which they eat seeds, berries and kernels of fruit stones.



We spotted three birds sitting up in the branches of a tree. Even as we looked at the birds through our binoculars, they descended to the ground near the

path very close to us. Wow! I whispered to Yash “Lets try and get some pictures”. Out came our long lens and we approached the birds warily. They were now only 10 feet away. Stealthily, Yash and I crept closer, hearts in our mouth, hoping the birds would not be disturbed by us. Soon we were only a few feet away. Of the three birds feeding on the ground, I noticed that two of them were juveniles, while one was an adult female. We managed to take only a few pictures when some villagers pounded down the path accompanied by a mule, and chased away the birds.

Disappointed, we decided to wait for the birds to come back. Sure enough, after a five minute wait, the birds returned to the same spot, warily. This time around, we squeezed off quite a few photographs of the juvenile birds. The wary adult female, did not allow us to get close and flew away. By now, Yash and I were determined to photograph the shy female. The female, sat up in the tree, viewing us suspiciously. I’m married.” I told the distrustful bird, “Come on down! “ Another ten minute wait finally convinced the bird that we meant no harm, and she was back on the ground, feeding.

Excitedly, Yash and positioned ourselves for what we hoped would be some nice pictures. To our despair, the thud of hooves on the path told us that more mules were on the way. This time, Yash, alerted the villagers, and requested them to stop, to which they gracefully agreed. As I crept closer, an old man pattered forth. Yash's plea to him to stop failed to slow him down as did my frantic gesticulations! Approaching us-he queried “*Baraat ki photo le rahe hai kya?*” (Are you taking pictures at a wedding function?) Not only us, even the bird was shocked by the question, and off she flew! For life of us, we could not figure out why the old man thought we were wedding photographers! Only later, we realised that there was a wedding in the village, explaining the old man's conduct.

Cursing our luck, we settled down for another round of waiting. This time, the bird took even longer. Obviously she did not fancy getting photographed by “wedding photographers”. Fortunately for us, hunger got the better of her qualms, and the chary bird finally allowed us to get some decent pictures.

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: Last week, on 22 nd April 2010, Earth Day, we organised a campaign called One Lakh Cloth Bags in Dehradun. Close to 600 school children from 22 schools got together to make hundreds of cloth and paper bags, and pledged not to use plastic bags. Can all of us support them

and pledge not to use plastic bags, too?