

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

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SWALLOWED!

The welcome rain in the last few days have cleaned up the air around us. This morning, up and about at 630 am, I stepped out of the house to be greeted by clear, blue skies. In the backdrop, the Mussoorie hills beckoned. Up above, white, cottony cloudy swirled, every now and then, breaking up to form a new shape. I allowed my imagination to run amuck, even as one of the clouds looked like a bird, while another mimicked an animal's head.

Even as I watched, flecks of black flickered by, silhouetted against the azure blue sky. The black specks came closer, and I realised that they were swallows. Peering through my binoculars, I identified them as Red-rumped Swallows (*Hirundo daurica*). The swallow is a dainty looking bird with a deeply forked tail. It is bluish-black on the top of its head and back while the side of its head is red coloured. Its belly has fine striations. Its lower back (called the rump) is red, hence its common name.



Photograph caption: Red-rumped Swallow objecting to the author's presence!

The pair of birds settled on a wire above me, and proceeded to preen themselves. I crept up closer to try and photograph the birds, and one of them objected in no uncertain manner, letting me know what it thought of the intrusion (see picture)! Soon, the birds took to wing again, and were busy foraging again. Swallows feed on insects in flight, and will forage all day, hawking small insects, swallowing them in flight. Often, they are seen in the company of other birds which forage in a similar manner-swifts, crag martins and other swallows-dark specks against the sky.

In the winter, swallows gather in large flocks, sometime hundreds of birds. Swarms of the birds darken the sky. Often, they will descend to sit on a telephone wire, with hundreds of birds sitting cuddled together. In the summer, when swallows breed, they are normally found in pairs.

As I followed the birds, one of them picked up a small feather which it would use to line its nest. A little while later I spotted the same bird alight to the ground, near a small puddle of water. Here, the bird picked up a small pellet of mud and flew off. Wow-the bird was actually in the process of building or repairing its nest. Swallows build their nests of mud, under roofs, ceilings, bridges and other similar construction. They pick up small pellets of mud in their beaks, mix it with their saliva, and use it to build a dome-shaped nest. The entrance of the dome has a long tunnel, through which birds enter the nest. Often, this tunnel gets damaged while they enter the nest, and even while the birds are already nesting, repair work continues. And given all the repair work I am supposed to do in our house, nowadays, I can sympathise with the swallows! Both the parents participate in this activity sending out a strong message to all those delaying-house-repairs kind of guys (namely me!).

Even as I watched, the birds twittered happily, obviously enjoying their togetherness. Taking to wing, one of swallows swooped down close to me, caught a small insect swallowed it, and merrily returned to forage up against the clear blue sky.

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