

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

Published on 24 September 2010

The Gigantic Burmese Python

The heaviest rain in Dehradun in more than forty years has taken its toll. While the tragic impact on people's lives, especially in the hilly areas, has been in the news, wildlife, too suffers, though silently. Last week, I received a call from S. S. Rasaily, Director, Rajaji National Park. A python had been captured in Dehradun-could I take a look at the snake to confirm its identity, before it was released back into the forest?

Tracking down the snake lead us to Bullawala, near Doiwala, just inside Rajaji. The snake had been rescued by the forest department and an NGO called EFFECT near the Rispana river at Kishenpur.

We drove well into the forest to ensure that the snake was released well away from habitation. The snake was a massive 11-foot long Burmese python (*Python bivittatus*). Its body was thicker than my thigh, and the snake was agitated and furious, at having been kept in captivity. As we observed and photographed the python, it struck out aggressively, with its enormous jaws snapping wildly. Clearly, the ordeal of being captured, pouched in a bag, cooped up for a few hours while it was transported to the forest, had justifiably upset the snake. As we released the snake, it let out a powerful odour-something that snakes do quite often when threatened.



The python found more commonly in India is the Indian rock python (*Python*

molurus). These two snakes differ only slightly (the Burmese python has a whitish, complete inverted V on its head, while this marking is faded in the Indian rock python). The Burmese python was earlier considered a sub-species, and has only recently been upgraded to a separate species. In Dehradun, only the Burmese python has been recorded; the rock python is found throughout the Indian peninsula, preferring drier areas.

Pythons are possibly the heaviest snakes in India. They are not venomous, and hunt their prey by catching them in their jaws, and asphyxiating them by wrapping their bodies around the prey and squeezing them. Their jaws can open really wide, and on one occasion, I have personally witnessed a python swallowing an adult deer!

Pythons are normally creatures of forested areas. It is very likely that this snake, found near the river, had been washed down with the flowing river water, on account of the torrential rain, and thereby rendered homeless. Hopefully, the rescue of the snake and its relocation to the forest will allow it to survive, albeit in a different home.

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: Most people are petrified of snakes. Don't be-most snakes are not venomous, and will not bite, unless threatened. If you do see a snake in your home or your locality, either let it be, or help to rescue it. Dr. Abhishek Singh of EFFECT (Endangered Flora and Fauna on Earth Conservation Team) and their team in Dehradun assist in rescuing wild animals including snakes. So the next time you need see a wild animal that needs help, call them at 9719440099.

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