

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

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### The Termite Story

I was watching the Spain-Germany football semi-final at home on Wednesday night, when, suddenly the room filled up with hordes of winged insects. Hurriedly, my son, Yash, switched off the light inside the room, and closed the window. We watched through the window as swarms of these winged insects clustered around the light bulb in the courtyard. The next morning, all that remained of these winged insects, were hundreds of discarded wings, scattered across the courtyard.



I am sure that what I have described above is a common experience for most people throughout the wetter parts of India. Have you ever wondered about these winged creatures and their life cycle? These winged insects are termites and they have an amazing story to tell.

Termites are commonly called "white ants", and belong to an order of insects called Isoptera but are not "true ants". More than 200 species of termites exist in India-most of them live either in the soil, or in wood. The termites that live in the soil can live either underground or above the ground, while those that live in wood, normally live in trees (and sometimes in your furniture!). The termites we were watching lived

underground in the soil.

Termites, believe it or not, have a well established caste system, that, unlike us humans, works extremely well for them! Most termite species have winged reproductive males and females, wingless soldier and worker ants. Given the right conditions to breed, mainly at the start of the monsoons, the winged termites (kings and queens) emerge from holes in the ground. With a weak fluttering flight, they fly for a very short duration, look for a suitable nesting site, and then shed their wings. The sole purpose of their flight is primarily to spread their species. Once a suitable nesting site is found, typically in moist soil, the king and queen proceed to mate, lay eggs and establish a new colony.

In any colony, work is clearly defined. While the king and queen are at the top of the hierarchy, wingless soldier and worker ants are small, white coloured insects, with swollen heads. The red-headed soldier ants (visible in the photograph) protect the colony from predators. The pale-headed worker ants are left with the so-called menial chores of nest building and collecting food.

Given the success of the "caste system" in the termite world, I wondered what makes this system so successful for these insects, but a pain in the you-know-what for us humans. No politicians and elections? No quotas? No rich and poor? Lack of human intelligence? Well, I am not sure I have a ready answer, but what I do know, is that these insects have perfected their art of survival in this world, something that the "intelligent" human being is still struggling to achieve!

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Making a difference: Is there an amateur naturalist in you? Have you often observed unique things about nature in your garden, that you have struggled to explain? If so, write in to me, and we can do a joint article on your observations in Doon Watch!