

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

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Cackling Cicadas

I was bird watching in a forest in the outskirts of Dehradun. Armed with binoculars, and a shotgun mike, that I use to record bird calls, I was hoping for an enjoyable morning with my feathered friends. Even I stood trying to hear some birds calling; loud raucous calls shattered the silence. “ke-ke-ke-ke” went the sound. As abruptly as the loud calls started, they stopped, and there was an eerie silence. A few moments later, the cacophony resumed. At first only a few calls started, and then suddenly, hundreds of creatures began to call simultaneously, drowning out every other call in the forest. It seemed to me that my interest in birds had ended up upsetting some other sensitive creatures!



The creatures I was being hounded, no “sounded” by, were cicadas. These cicadas are two-inch long insects that belong to the family called Cicadidae. The word cicada aptly means “buzzer” in Latin. These interesting creatures are best known for the loud sounds they produce. Unlike other insects which produce sounds by rubbing their legs against their wings, cicadas produce loud sounds using a thickened membrane on their exoskeleton. This

membrane is vibrated in and out to produce a clicking sound, much like the “*tik-tik*” metallic toy that we used to play with as children. It still remains a mystery why the insects call all together, but perhaps one of their ideas is to scare their prospective predators with their cacophony. I know how their predators might feel, because the noisy cicadas made me abandon all plans of bird watching!

Despite the fact that there were obviously hundreds of cicadas around, I could not see them. Watching the trees, I observed that every now and then, a cicada would take to wing, with a flash of a yellow and black; a fluttering flight would be followed by the cicada descending and disappearing amidst the foliage. I searched in vain for the insects, but their camouflage was just too good. Finally, one of the cicadas took pity on me and descended to the ground. It sat on a protruding branch, upside down, permitting me to take a few photographs. The insect was beautiful, with its wings painted a bright yellow bordered with black and brown.

Cicadas have a very interesting life cycle. The female cicada lays eggs under bark. Once the eggs hatch, the nymphs go underground, where they remain for long periods of time. Cicada life cycles vary from 3 years to 17 years, depending on the species. A cicada in Meghalaya's Ri-Bhoi district, is called the World Cup insect. The Niangtaser, as this cicada is called locally, appears every four years, exactly a month before the FIFA Football World Cup! The local community organises a festival to celebrate the insect's appearance.

The next time you hear a loud continuous sound in the forest, look for the cackling cicadas on a tree near you.

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Making a difference: The noisy cicadas were a reminder to me, that noise pollution is a significant concern in Dehradun. Don't honk your horn when you drive. Patience will provide you peace of mind (and safety on the roads). After all, if cicadas can wait 17 years to emerge, surely we can wait a few seconds more on the roads!