

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

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This Squirrel Can Fly!

Devalsari is an off-the-beaten track reserved forest about 40 kilometers from Mussoorie beyond the small town of Thatyur. We had discovered this quaint location last year and the forest's beauty and solitude dragged us back there again earlier this month. Tall conifers, mainly deodar, dwarf the forest rest house at Devalsari. Ban oak and rhododendron paint the hill slopes. For the wildlife lovers, numerous trails along *nalas* beckon. For the more adventurous, a 14-km trek to Nag Tibba, will ensure that the city-bred folks will have loads of blisters!

Late one April evening, my son, Yash and I landed up at Devalsari. We trekked the 1.3 km trail from Bangsil village to the Devalsari forest rest house, only to be greeted with loud shrieks and screams! Surely, this wasn't some animal putting up a show at the FRH? Arriving at the FRH, our desire for solitude was rudely shattered. A few dozen boisterous young lads from Doon school were camping at Devalsari, and solitude was the last thing on their minds!

A little despondent, Yash and I wandered off for a night walk after dumping our bags. Only a few meters from the camp site, a small furry creature curled up amidst the roots of the tree. Motioning for Yash to walk quietly, we edged closer. Up above us, we could hear the boys from Doon school having fun. As we got closer, we carefully shone the torch on the furry little animal, ensuring that we were not blinding the animal. Wow-a squirrel, I exclaimed softly to Yash.

Less than 3 feet from where we stood, the Red Giant Flying Squirrel (*Petaurista petaurista*), a giant nocturnal flying squirrel, as large as a mongoose, peered out inquisitively at us. It was feeding, possibly on some nuts, and did not seem alarmed by our presence at all. While I had seen the flying squirrel before, most sightings of the rodent were high up in a tree at night. On many occasions before, I had seen the squirrel, up in the branches of tall trees, its large eyes shining in the torchlight. On just a few lucky occasions, I had seen the squirrel glide majestically from one tree to another, using a flap of skin between its front and hind limbs.

Yet, right here, only a few feet from us, the squirrel sat cutely. Did it know that we were "friends" and hence was not afraid?. Not wanting to spend too much time on philosophy, when photography beckoned, we slowly removed our camera. We had a 105 mm micro lens, which is suitable for close up photography, mounted on the camera. We were so close to the squirrel that this turned out to be just the right lens!



The squirrel posed for us. A series of photographs followed, in all kinds of cute poses. Peering out from behind the tree trunk, feeding with both its paws held close to its mouth, perching on the branch with its tail curled along its back. Wow! Seeing the squirrel close up is unusual. Being able to photograph it up close is phenomenal! After ten minutes of photography, the animal finally decided that it had had enough, and it clambered up to the higher reaches of a tree from where it peered down on an exhilarated father and son.

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Making a difference: Exhilarating wildlife sightings are sure to arouse your interest in protecting India's forests and wildlife. For your next holiday, take your family out for an eco-friendly nature holiday, and get everyone interested in wildlife. Do so, and we might just show you the flying squirrel, up close and personal!