

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

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The Fig Party

The small garden in our house was best described by one of our friends as an “uncultivated” garden! So while my wife, Anchal does grow vegetables and has planted a few fruit trees, by and large, the garden grows wild. This is just as we had planned it, and from all the wild visitors we have, they seem to agree, too!

The fruit trees in the garden are only a couple of years old. The fig tree has grown to a height of over six feet assisted by Dehradun’s fertile soil. Despite being young, the fig tree is already fruiting. Just this morning, I counted over fifty figs on the tree.

As the tree is not tall and sturdy, we had assumed that frugivorous (fruit eating) birds



would not visit the tree so initially we plucked the figs for ourselves. Soon, however, I noticed that the leaves on the fig tree were stained with bird droppings-a sure indication that birds were visiting the tree. So, we decided to leave some of the ripe figs on the tree. Sure enough, in the last few weeks, I have observed a variety of birds feeding on the figs. The most frequent visitors are the Red-vented and the Himalayan Bulbul. Even though the branches on the tree are young and slender, the lightweight bulbuls have no difficulty in perching and pecking away at the figs. As a result of the

feeding bulbuls, many of the ripe figs on the tree are now partially eaten, the rich succulent insides of the fruit inviting more birds to the al-fresco feast!

Occasionally, the Jungle and Common Babblers pay the fig tree a visit. Though these birds primarily feed on insects, they don't mind feeding on easily accessible fruit, such as on a small fig tree, or even lantana berries. A few days ago, I watched from my balcony as the Rufous Treepie, a large bird, attempting to partake some of the figs. The slender branches of the tree were not sturdy enough to support the treepie, and it kept falling off clumsily. Eventually, complaining bitterly to whoever cared to listen, the treepie flew off, without being able to party on figs!

The figs are not really the "fruit" of the fig tree in the traditional sense. The flowers actually reside inside the fig. These flowers need to be pollinated before they can form fruit. Hence each species of fig plays host to a different insect. These insects enter the figs and lay eggs on the flowers inside the fig. Once the eggs hatch, the emerging insects carry pollen from one fig to another, thereby assisting in pollination! Once pollination is complete, the fruit forms inside the ripe purple figs, which is what the birds love to party on!

Feedback on this column is welcome at sanjay.sondhi@gmail.com

Making a difference: In these days of soaring inflation, growing your own vegetables is a sure way to make your monthly budget go further! You can grow vegetables even on your terrace. Besides saving you money, the vegetables are tastier and healthier; and you are doing your bit to help reduce the pressure on earth's resources!

Photograph caption: Partly eaten fig

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