

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

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A "Waspish" Story!

Our letter box is the usual place that our newspaper vendor dumps our morning reading material. I am one of those old fashioned blokes for whom a morning trawl through the newspapers is preferred to a blaring idiot box, especially first thing in the morning! This habit means that I am often peeking into the letter box, impatiently, well before the newspaper vendor has actually delivered the papers. Recently, on one of my futile pre-delivery morning peeks at the empty letter box, I noticed that it had new visitors. A group of wasps had started building their nest inside the box!



These wasp, called paper wasps, belong to a genus called *Ropalidia*. They are orangish-red in colour with a yellow band around the abdomen. Paper wasps, are called so, because their nests are built out of paper-like material. The wasps in our letter box had assiduously built a small circular nest using plant material such as bark and stems. The wasps chew their building material, mix it with their saliva and use the resultant mix to construct the nest. A close examination of the nest revealed that the wasps were good architects-they had systematically build the nest consisting of

equal sized hexagonal cells, ensuring optimum use of space.

In addition to being good home builders, wasps have a great deal to teach humans in terms of social behaviour, too! The wasp are really well organised socially-each nest has only a single female queen wasp (ensuring there are no *saas-bahu* stories at each nest site!). Laying one egg per cell, the queen is supported by a group of sterile wasp workers who assist in nest building and tend to the young. Interestingly, if the queen wasp dies or is removed, one of the worker wasps becomes a "potential" queen and develops reproductive organs by itself over time!

Every morning's visit to the letter box allowed me to observe the wasps at work. One day, the wasps made it clear to me that this intrusion into their privacy was not welcome-one of the wasps stung me leaving me wringing my hand! Its important to note that wasps do not generally attack humans. In fact, if you see a wasp nest in your house, ignore it-the wasps will not sting you if you leave them alone. Of course, if you happen to be like me, who sticks his nose into "waspy" affairs, then its a different story altogether! Of course, I just rubbed a bit of my own saliva on the sting and it has quickly healed in only a few days. Poor wasps-this nosy parker naturalist is not gonna leave them alone!

Feedback on this column is welcome at sanjay.sondhi1@gmail.com

Making a difference: During a recent interaction with a entomologist from the UK, he related a story wherein he found an old letter from his parents relating how he had been raising caterpillars at the age of three! The caterpillar, which had been described in the letter, turned out to be that of moth, and this information resulted in a new record for the species-albeit fifty years later than it was observed! Many children have developed an early interest in nature because of encouragement from their parents-so start them off young!

Photograph caption: Ropalidia-Paper Wasps

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