

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

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Another "cat's" story

Just outside our front door, the Rangoon creeper, a large dense bushy creeper has enveloped our front entrance. This dense creeper not only ensures that "unwelcome" visitors to our home keep wondering where the front door is, but it also provides a welcome "home" to many creepy crawlies!

The most prolific creepy-crawly that has made this bush its home, is the caterpillar of a moth called the Yellow Underwing (*Ophiusa coronata*). (I must confess that I have made up the common name of the moth, myself, as none exists!) The entire bush is covered with caterpillars of this moth-small, medium and large sized "cats" are munching away on the leaves of the plant, in effort to grow and merge as an adult moth. The caterpillars are voracious eaters-the area below the creeper is blackened with caterpillar droppings!



The caterpillar has given us its share of entertainment over the past few weeks. As we have watched them grow, we have been amazed at the various strategies the caterpillar has adopted to hide itself. The simplest strategy of the caterpillar is its coloration and shape. A brown caterpillar, it has numerous longitudinal stripes along its body, which help it hide amidst the foliage. Even its large eyes are striped! As if this colour camouflage were not enough, the caterpillar sits along the similarly coloured curved stem. Its sitting posture makes it seem part of the stem itself!

Despite hiding itself quite well, if there are persistent "predators" like me, then the caterpillar changes its strategy. Curling away from the branch, the caterpillar makes a "loop" out of its body. The belly of the caterpillar has two large black spots. I believe that this is meant to appear like "eyes" making the caterpillar look bigger than it

actually is. Sitting in this posture, the caterpillar wriggles its front legs at you, in attempt to scare you away! If this tactic does not work, then the caterpillar begins to beat its own body against the stem, actually making a loud noise. The force with which it beats itself, scared me; what if the caterpillar hurt itself!

Finally, if all this fails, then the caterpillar simply lets go of the branch and falls to the ground below, in the hope that it can hide itself amidst the leaf litter. The elaborate attempts by the caterpillar to save itself, may seem humorous to us, but for the caterpillar, its a grim battle for survival, in the hope that it can emerge as a moth, and live to raise another brood, thereby ensuring survival of the species.

Feedback on this column is welcome at [sanjay.sondhi1@gmail.com](mailto:sanjay.sondhi1@gmail.com)

Making a difference: Being green is all about reducing consumption-of everything that uses earth's resources (which effectively means almost anything that you use!). Recently, I got laughed at for stating that I shaved only once in three weeks to reduce my consumption of shaving cream and water! But seriously, shaving less often means reducing consumption. There are so many little ways to go green and do your bit to make a difference!

Photograph caption: The Yellow Underwing caterpillar

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