

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

Published on 18 March 2011

Bakain beckons the Black bulbul!

Last week, if you recall, I had written about the Bakain tree at Jardhargaon. Today's story is about the Black bulbul that attracted my attention to the Bakain in the first place. After all, I have got to give credit where it is due, and give the bulbul its own space in the limelight!

The Himalayan Black bulbul (*Hypsipetes leucocephalus psaroides*) is slaty-grey in coloration, and not black. Its slaty-grey body colour contrasts with a bright red beak and feet. The perky bird tops its natty dress code with a black crest, which is erect only when it is alert or alarmed.



On many occasions, I have been asked why this bird is called the Black bulbul, when it is actually slaty-grey. Well the explanation for this is that the bird we see in the western Himalayas is a different sub species from those seen in other parts of Asia, where the bulbul is actually black. An interesting insight, is that in one of the colour variations that this bird shows, its head is actually white (not in Dehradun, though). The bulbul's scientific name "leucocephalus" means exactly that-white head!

Coming back to Jardhargaon, I recall watching the bulbul on the Bakain tree. Hopping along the branch of the tree, the bird positioned itself such that it had ready access to the ripe Bakain fruit. Reaching out with its red beak, it grabbed one of the drupes. The drupe was so large, that I actually thought that the bulbul would not be able to swallow it. No such problems; the bulbul opened its mouth wide, allowed the drupe to settle at the base of its open beak, and with a big gulp, swallowed it! After the first sighting of the bulbul feeding on Bakain, I observed that the Black bulbuls loved the fruit, and large flocks of birds descended on a single tree to feed.

Pappu, the village lad who was standing next to me mentioned that other bulbuls such as the Himalayan bulbul do not eat the fruit, and nor do the monkeys (which eat practically everything else!). His view was the Himalayan bulbul, which also inhabits this habitat, found the drupe too large to swallow. Whatever the reason, Black bulbuls alone seemed to relish feeding on these fruits.

Later in the evening, I watched a flock of twenty Black bulbuls sitting on a virtually leafless tree, silhouetted against the skyline in fading light. I could just about make out their notched tails. With a sudden flurry of wings, the whole flock of bulbuls took to the air with harsh "chhaaeeya chaaeya" cries. Watch out for these birds in Dehradun. They are winter visitors, and can often be seen at forest edges, gardens and other suitable habitat. Fruiting trees are a favourite with the bird; and if the Black bulbul is eating a fruit, you can probably assume that its safe for human consumption and taste it, too!

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

Making a difference: Don't feed wild animals! The work that takes me to Jardhargaon, is to study the conflict between monkeys and humans. We, too, face this issue in Dehradun, with monkeys entering homes, gardens and making a nuisance of themselves. Well, we are part of the problem. If you want to help-do two simple things a. don't feed the monkeys b. don't leave garbage lying around in the open.

Photograph caption: Black bulbul eating Bakain fruit

© Sanjay Sondhi