

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

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### Death's Head Hawk Moth

My recent interest in moths has opened up a completely new, yet intriguing world of natural history. A few months ago, I was really excited to find the caterpillar of a hawk moth feeding on the leaves of the Devil Tree *Alstonia scholaris*, just outside our house. Hawk Moths belong to a family called Sphingidae. Their caterpillars are easy to recognize; most of them are large, thick bodied, and have a peculiar tail-like protrusion, which sets them apart from most other caterpillars.

I observed the hawk moth caterpillar with interest, watching it change colours as it grew, and then finally become a cocoon, partially buried in the soil of the container that I had kept it in. Curiously, the moth's cocoon often wriggled and moved. Unfortunately, my frequent interest in observing the cocoon, aroused the curiosity of Tiger, our pet cat. One night, tragically, she got to the cocoon, and ate it, leaving me bitterly disappointed.

During my days in Pune, I have reared a common hawk moth-the Death's Head Hawk Moth *Acherontia* sp. This moth is a stocky moth which gets its common name because of a peculiar skull-like marking that it has on its head. The skull-like



markings have resulted in many myths about the moth; including one which believes that it is a harbinger of death, when it appears in large numbers! There are two common species of Death's Head Hawk Moths in India *Acherontia styx* and *Acherontia lachesis*. The scientific names of both these moths make a reference to "death". In Greek mythology, "styx", is linked with the river of death, while "lachesis", too, is linked to the concept of

death.

The Death's Head Hawk Moth has some interesting facets to it. For one, the Death's Head Hawk Moth can squeak! I remember the first time I heard the moth squeak, I was petrified, wondering whether I had erroneously harmed it. It was only later that I came to know that the moth squeaks to scare off predators, by forcing air through its pharynx. These moths love their honey. In order to get to bee's hives, they are able to mimic the scent of bees, thereby allowing them easier access to the hive! Hawk moths are also known to migrate long distances-from the higher mountains down to the foothills. Their heavy bodies give them enough energy to fly long distances without feeding, but the reasons for their migration are not clearly understood.

The Death's Head Hawk Moth is nocturnal. If you have a flowering plant in your house that blossoms at night; keep your eyes peeled for the moth, and you may be fortunate enough to see this moth in your home!

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

Making a difference: Have you felt the impact of the rising prices of vegetables? If yes, this is a great time to start to grow your own vegetables! Home grown food is healthy (free of pesticides), and environment friendly (very low carbon footprint, as this food does not need to travel a long distance to your plate).

Photograph caption: The Death's Head Hawk Moth

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