

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

To be published on 7 October 2011

Garden lizards on the prowl

I am back in Dehradun after a spending four weeks in Arunachal Pradesh. Its good to be back home in the green environs of Doon (even though the jungles of Arunachal Pradesh are awesome, too!). Resuming my morning walks near our home, I looked forward to observe what nature has to offer in this, the post monsoon season.

One of the first sights that greeted me was a juvenile garden lizard (*Calotes versicolor*) on a bougainvillea bush. Looking closely, I spotted a second lizard, and then a third! A few minutes of observation revealed no less that six juvenile garden lizards on the bougainvillea bush! Most reptiles breed during the monsoon months, so spotting so many juveniles was not surprising in the post monsoon season. Garden lizards lay eggs in clutch sizes of approximately twenty, but many of the eggs, and the juveniles don't actually survive to adulthood, being preyed upon by other predators like birds, and small mammals.



Looking more closely at the lizards, I observed that the bougainvillea bush, with its accompanying thorns was a good selection by the juveniles. The thorns of the plant provide additional protection to the juvenile lizards, when they need it most. The lizard's coloration, which merges well with the bushes stem helps, too, in camouflaging them from predators.

I also noticed that most the juvenile lizards were moulting. Unlike humans, where our skin expands as we grow, reptiles periodically shed their skins as they grow. Many of you would have seen shed snake skin. Unlike snakes, where the entire snake's skin peels off, in the case of lizards, pieces of skin fall off the lizard as they moult. For many reptiles, the skin is a source of calcium, and is hence eaten. (I display reptile behaviour, too. I often chew my nails, and the explanation I give to folks who chide me for my behaviour, is that this is a good source of calcium for me, too, just like the reptiles!).

Garden lizards primarily prey on insects, though other invertebrates form part of their diet. These predators use stealth and camouflage to catch their food. Even as I was writing this article, I heard a commotion down in the garden. Taking a peek out of my balcony, I watched as Tiger, our pet cat, had located a garden lizard in our backyard. Even as the tables turned, and the predator became the hunted, I yelled at Tiger and ran down to chase away the garden lizard. Fortunately, the lizard had escaped on its own, and lived to tell its story!

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

Making a difference: The puja season approaches. I hope you are taking the necessary eco-friendly steps. Earthen, biodegradable diyas and idols (and not the plastic or synthetic kind) should be on your shopping list.

Photograph caption: Garden lizard

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