

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

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Kumaon Mountain Agama

Walking along a jungle track at Mussoorie, a small creature scrambled across my path. Quickly dropping to my knees, I watched a small lizard duck under a pile of dry leaves. If I had not seen it move, its likely that I would have missed it entirely-the brown lizard merged perfectly with the dry leaves and stones that it was resting on.

Peering at the small lizard, I realised that I was looking at the Kumaon Mountain Agama *Japalura kumaonensis*. Dear lizard, what are doing here, I muttered, as much to myself as the lizard. As the name suggests, the Kumaon Mountain Agama is a lizard found in Kumaon Himalayas, but this is Garhwal. Ignorance is bliss-apparently, nobody mentioned this to the lizard to it decided to turn up well west of its established distribution!



Actually, I have seen the lizard in other locations in the Garhwal Himalayas, but this was the first sighting that I had of the lizard in Mussoorie. The range extension of the lizard remains a puzzle-its appearance in the Garhwal region could be either because it has slowly extended its range over the years, or perhaps, it was always present here, but had been overlooked.

This lizard looks superficially similar to the well known Garden lizard or Bloodsucker that we see in our gardens. However, the mountain agama has a pale cream-coloured stripe along its sides and black triangular markings on its back. In addition, the mountain agama has prominent white lips that the Garden lizard lacks.

Finally, the mountain agama is largely seen in the forested montane regions at altitudes between 1800 to 2800 m, while the garden lizard is more likely to be found at lower altitudes.

As I photographed the lizard, I noticed that the black triangular markings on its back began to fade. Many lizards have the ability to change colour. The best known example of this is the Chameleon, which is found in southern India. Lizards change colour for a variety of reasons and on the basis of a variety of stimuli. The colour change is often linked to temperature, light conditions and even its mood! It can change colour based on its micro-habitat or when it is threatened. The colour change in lizards is brought about by certain pigments that they have below transparent cells that make up its skin.

So can humans change colour? Isn't there a popular saying-he went red in the face. Of course politicians routinely change "colour", before and after elections, but they are a different breed, aren't they! I leave this mystery for you to figure out.

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

Making a difference: As the summer approaches, it is a time for increased consumption of soft drinks. So will you be drinking Coke and Pepsi's from PET (plastic) bottles? If possible, buy drinks in recyclable glass bottles. If you do not have a choice and have to buy a plastic bottle, then remember not to throw it away and litter your city, especially as these bottles are not bio-degradable. Take the bottle home, put it in the trash, where it can be properly disposed off.

Photograph caption: Kashmir Mountain Agama

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