

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

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The Amorous Owlets

In the last few years that we have lived in Dehradun, I have frequently seen Spotted Owlets (*Athene brama*) in our society. The Spotted Owlet is a small brown owl with dull white spots on its body, commonly seen in most cities, including Dehradun. The owlets are active at dusk and dawn and one can hear their screeches and chuckles, especially near lamp-posts, where they forage for insects. During the day, the owlets sit in a tree or a hollow, and are generally not visible. On the few occasions that the owlets are seen during the day, they are almost always chivvied by other birds, to whom the owlets represent a threat.

These small owls have evaded me for more than a year, and all my attempts to photograph them have been unsuccessful. Imagine my pleasure, when, a few days ago, I spotted a pair of Spotted Owlets sitting on the wall, just opposite my house, at 900 am in the morning. Rushing indoors to pull out my camera, I returned to find the owlets still sitting there. Even as I set up my camera, the owlets were unconcerned. While they did give me a glare, they were busy cuddling up to each other. I noticed a small hole in the wall behind the owlets and deduced that this was possibly a nest site, as their breeding season commences in February. The two owlets were probably a couple.



Even as I watched, the cuddling continued. The owlets had eyes only for each other. Every few minutes, the amorous owlets would give the other a friendly peck on the head with their beaks. Whether this was a kiss or just plain old-fashioned grooming, I will never know! The only interruption in their "I am for you only" looks was a

periodic glare sent in my direction. "You peeping tom! Stop peering at us!" the owlets seemed to say! As I continued my photography, the birds finally tired of my intrusion, and one of them flew away. The other owlet retreated into the hole in the wall, and every now and then, cutely poked its head out as though to check whether I was still around.

The next day, the owlets were once again seen sitting outside the hollow in the wall, confirming my suspicion that this was a nest site. What fun! Over the next few weeks I am gonna watch them. Hopefully, a few weeks from now I will see some juvenile owlets fly out of the nest site. And I will tolerate "peeping tom" glares from the couple!

Sanjay Sondhi is a Dehradun based naturalist. Feedback on this column is welcome at sanjay.sondhi1@gmail.com

Making a difference: The little things you do matter! There are many occasions when a shopkeeper offers me an envelop for a bill or receipt for a payment made. I make it a point to refuse the envelop, or return it. The envelop won't be used, and will probably go into a trash can. So why accept it anyway-every piece of paper that you reduce consumption of, eventually helps to save a tree or a plant.

Photograph caption: Spotted Owlets

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