

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

Published on 21 October 2011

The Red Pierrot "spreads" its wings

Last week, during a day trip to Rajaji National Park to conduct a training session for local tourism guides, I noticed that a particular butterfly was quite common near the Chilla Forest Rest House. The butterfly, the Red Pierrot (*Talicauda nyseus*) is unmistakable. Belonging to the Lycaenidae (or Blues) family of butterflies, there is not even a hint of blue on it! Instead, the butterfly is largely black and white, with a prominent orange border on the upper and underside of its hind wing.



Taking a walk around the forest rest house, I counted as many as seven Red Pierrots. The butterfly has a slow hopping flight, and loves to visit flowers to feed on nectar. As I strolled about near the FRH, I noticed that there were many plants of Kalanchoe growing in the garden. That provided me with the explanation I was seeking; the larval food plant (the plant that the caterpillar of the butterfly feeds on) of the Red Pierrot is Kalanchoe, and its abundant growth in the garden obviously provided the host plant the adult butterfly needed, to lay its eggs on. The caterpillar actually feeds inside the thick leaves of Kalanchoe, but comes out to pupate.

As I shared this information with the local guides, they, too, had a tidbit to share with me. They informed me that Kalanchoe was called *Dard mar* (meaning pain killer) locally. One of the lads, who was a football player, and often ended up with sprains,

explained that they used Kalanchoe leaves as a pain reliever. The locals apply mustard oil on the leaf, heat the leaf, and bind it with a cloth over the sprain. This helps to relieve the pain, and hence the name-*dard mar*!

The Red Pierrot makes an interesting story. Once found largely in peninsular India and the eastern Himalayas, it has colonized newer areas, and its range has spread. For instance, this butterfly was not reported from Dehradun in the past, but it is now commonly seen in city gardens (reported in a paper published by Dr. A P Singh in 2005). In fact, a few days ago, I saw the butterfly in Mussoorie, too! The reason for its spread seems clear-its larval food plant, Kalanchoe ssp., is a common ornamental garden plant, thereby providing the butterfly's caterpillar its food, permitting it to colonize new areas. What could be the impact of this? Like so many other changes caused by man, we don't really know.....

Making a difference: Unknowingly, humans play a role in changing nature, like in the case of the Red Pierrot, not really understanding its impact. However, you can do your bit. The next time you plant saplings in your garden, ensure that you plant only species that are native to the Doon valley.

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

© Sanjay Sondhi