

Doon Watch Nature Series for Dehradun Live Hindustan Times
by Sanjay Sondhi
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The Wallcreeper Descends to Dehradun

The onset of winter changes lives, and routines! Even though I can no longer drag myself out of bed for 6 am morning walks, I still have to wake up early! The reason for this is that the Himalayan Whistling Thrush, a migrant bird, which arrived in our colony last month, screeches its presence precisely at 6 am every morning, ensuring that all bird watchers are up early! My late morning walks (and by that I mean, 8 am; I am not one of those lazy retired folks!) are welcomed by a host of Himalayan birds. The Yellow-breasted Greenfinch can be heard twittering amongst the bushes, while the Black Redstart hops along the colony's wall, quivering its tail. The ubiquitous Common Chiffchaff, a nondescript brown bird, hops around the lawns. On occasion, the White-tailed Rubythroat, a petite bird, with a brilliant ruby-red colour on its throat, hops out of the bushes along the roads. All these winter visitors have one thing in common-they spend the warm summers in the Himalayas, but as winter approaches, they descend to lower altitudes in search of food and warmer weather.

A few days ago, my morning walk revealed another uncommon winter visitor-the Wallcreeper *Tichodroma muraria*. I saw the bird flying overhead, and recognized it



immediately because of its unusual flight.

The Wallcreeper has very broad rounded wings, and its looping flight are a give-away. When the WallCreeper is sitting, it is a dull grey bird, with black wings. However, as soon as it flies-it is unmistakable; it has bright maroon coloured wing feathers, outlined with white spots. These colours flash at out at you when the bird flies; the contrast between the sedentary bird, and the one in flight is spectacular!

The Wallcreeper is an insectivorous bird. Its natural habitat is rock faces and cliffs. With its long black beak, it probes for insects in crevices; often hovering at a rock face while it forages. Of course, on occasion, the Wallcreeper does the same at old buildings; it has been seen on the FRI campus, probing at nooks and corners of building walls. A rock face or a building wall-its all the same to the Wallcreeper, as long as it can get something to eat!

Though the bird is not really seen within the city, during the winter, it does occasionally visit Dehradun, and sometimes even descends to the plains. In the summer season, the bird is seen in the Himalayas, at altitudes as high as 3,000 m. So on your next drive to the city's outskirts, keep your eyes peeled along the rocky hill slopes-you might just spot the flashy Wallcreeper!

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

Making a difference: As always, little things make a difference. Switch off computer monitors and TVs at the end of each day or each time you have finished using it. Even in standby mode, these devices are still using power, adding to global warming.

Photograph caption: The Wallcreeper

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