

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

Published on 21 January 2011

The Wary White-breasted Waterhen

As is only to be expected from a nature-loving family like ours, most new years are welcomed by us at some sanctuary or national park. This year, we ushered in the new year at the Harike Bird Sanctuary in Punjab. Harike, is a large man-made reservoir, at the confluence of the Sutlej and Beas, and is a haven for migratory birds that stop over either to winter, or are on passage to the warmer parts of peninsular India.

Prior to the visit, I had grandly declared to the family that I intended to photograph at least twenty bird species during the 5 day trip. All my grandiose plans came to nought, when we had significant mist on the first few days, rendering photography impossible. On the third day, the mist lifted, and I finally started working toward my own T20 goal-photographing twenty birds in the twenty hours of birding left!



While we had a terrific bird watching trip, one of the "fun" moments of the trip was not provided by a migrant bird, but a resident one, that is even found in Dehradun-the White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus*. The waterhen is a large bird

belonging to the rail family. Its easy to recognize because of the white bib that it has down its front. It lives close to water, and moves with jerky movements in its search for food. Very cautious, its difficult to get close to the bird.

Walking along a water canal, I spotted the White-breasted Waterhen, warily walking along the canal banks. Surreptitiously following the bird, taking cover amongst the reeds lining the canal, I stalked the bird for fifteen minutes. Finally, I was in a great position to take a photograph, when my wife barged into the frame, talking loudly about another bird she had seen, scaring away the waterhen!

After this close encounter, my son Yash, too, decided that the waterhen needed to be photographed. As a result, he spent a great deal of time and effort following the bird with limited success. The chary waterhen was getting on our nerves-when were we going to get a good photograph!

On the last day at Harike, our luck finally changed. We were driving our car, when we spotted the waterhen along the road. This time, I decided to adopt a different strategy-car photography! Given the wariness the bird had displayed when we were on foot, I asked Anchal to drive the car close to the bird. Bingo-we hit the jackpot; the bird was not afraid of the car at all, and allowed us to get really close. Imagine, being scared of a nature lover like me, and not being bothered by the metal monster of a car! Anyway, car photography delivered on a excellent photograph of the waterhen, even though I failed to achieve my T20 goal for trip!

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Making a difference: Talking of cars. A great way of saving fuel in Dehradun is drifting! Given the sloping roads in Dehradun, for example Rajpur and Sahastradhara road, you can actually put your vehicle in neutral gear and drift down all the way downhill on these roads. Unlike a hill road (where its unsafe to follow this strategy), its perfectly acceptable to do so on a city road. Its an easy way to save fuel and make a difference!

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