

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

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Wake up the amateur naturalist in you!

Curiosity, they say, is the start of many a journey. Despite having no formal training, I have spent decades observing nature at work. Every walk into a forest, grassland, or even my garden, reveals some hidden facet of nature, which could remain just that-hidden, till you dig deeper! Many of these secrets get revealed simply by observation, some by spending time on the internet, while many questions remain just that-questions!

On morning walks near our house, I have observed that numerous butterfly species roost at night, dawn and dusk on Congress grass (*Parthenium* sp.). Normally butterflies roost hidden in the foliage, not visible to the naked eye. The Sorrel Sapphire, Common Grass Yellow and even the Tawny Coster sat on the weed apparently without any fear of being disturbed. Could it be that the butterflies had figured out that cattle normally do not feed on *Parthenium*, and hence settling on this



weed provided them with some safety from feeding cattle? Or could it be that potential predators avoid Parthenium?

On one occasion, I had set put up a mercury vapour lamp to attract and observe moths. On doing so, I watched as a Praying Mantis-a predatory insect, walked from more than 20 meters away to the bulb. The mantid had figured out that other insects would be attracted to the light bulb, and its chances of a good meal increased significantly if it hung around near light!

I have written about the story of the Rangoon creeper and the caterpillars of the Yellow Underwing moth that feed on its leaves a few weeks ago. On this very Rangoon creeper, my wife, Anchal and I watched as a flock of Jungle babblers converged and ate a whole bunch of caterpillars. The babblers seemed to know that the caterpillars would be on the creeper, and also seemed to know their habits, and protection techniques. How did the birds know that the caterpillars were on the creeper? Given that the caterpillars were really well camouflaged, how did they find them? Could it be that some of the birds recall having fed on these caterpillars at the same time last year? Watching them feed, I believe that the birds knew the caterpillars would be on the creeper in this very season.

Watching nature at work is thrilling. So many of the things I have learnt are purely through observation. In a time when earth's depleting resources are posing severe questions on sustainability, when our natural forests are disappearing at a rapid rate, and the rate of species extinctions are the highest they have been for many centuries, the very first step toward oneness with nature is to observe it. Wake up the amateur naturalist in you and begin to watch nature through your own eyes....and hopefully, this will awaken a new respect and love for nature, and Mother Earth.

Sanjay Sondhi is a Dehradun based naturalist. Feedback on this column is welcome at [sanjay.sondhi1@gmail.com](mailto:sanjay.sondhi1@gmail.com)

Making a difference: Some really nice guide books on nature are "The Amateur Naturalist" by Gerald Durrell and the Amateur Naturalist's Handbook by Vinson Brown. These are great books to wake up the amateur naturalist in you!

Photograph caption: Sorrel Sapphire on Parthenium

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