

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

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The Spittle Bug

The rains have finally receded, somewhat, and I have been able to resume my morning walks. (I can see that nature is just itching to play spoilsport, and perhaps the next few days is going to see some more torrential downpours!). Well, till that happens, camera in hand, my morning nature "trawling" has kept me happy.

Just yesterday, I spotted what is a common sight for all the observant folks out there. A plant stem with a whole bunch "spit" on it! When I was young, I used to wonder why people would go around spitting on plants early in the morning. I used to also wonder how the "spitting folks" always managed to get the spit on the plants and not on the ground! It was only when I read about this that I realised that the "spit" was



actually the home of an insect!

The spit on plant stems is actually created by an insect called the spittle bug (or the spit bug). This bug, a soft bodied insect, is a froghopper. Eggs laid by an adult insect hatch during the monsoon. The young insect that emerges from the eggs is its nymph (young insect). The nymph goes through many moults and sheds its skin as it grows up. The nymph (and the adult insect) feed on plant sap. They have a pointed tube-like mouth part, with which they pierce the soft stem of the plant. The liquid that the insect does not digest is excreted. By passing bubbles through the waste liquid, the insect creates its "spittle"!

The spit that forms around the insect serves many purposes. It provides the spittle bug a place to hide from its enemies. In some bugs, the spittle is also supposed to be distasteful, which prevents potential predators from wading through the mass of spit to get at the insect. The spit also keeps the spittle bug nymph moist and helps it to maintain its temperature.



The nymph of these insects are tiny, no more than a few millimeters in size. You can make out they are nymphs because their wings have not fully developed. When the insect nymph finally grows up, the adult "froghopper" does not stay inside the spittle. The adult froghopper can take huge frog-like leaps to protect itself. Just like the nymph, it, too feeds on insect sap.

So the next time you spot the spit on a plant, you know what you are looking at the spittle bug! Isn't nature fascinating!

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

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Photograph caption: Spit on a plant

Photograph caption 2: Spittle bug nymph

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