

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

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The Sixbar Swordtail Emerges

Summer is well and truly here! Be it the pond in our house, or the small trickle of water in the forest, every patch of water is abuzz with activity. Birds, insects, lizards- they've all begun their breeding season, and the entire focus of many species is reproduction.

In this midst of this frenzy of breeding, interesting stories emerge. On a recent visit to a small forest stream in Mussoorie with my son Yash, we spotted a butterfly that flopped down at my feet for a few seconds, before taking to wing again. This brief glimpse was sufficient to get my adrenalin rushing-the butterfly was a swordtail! Swordtails are butterflies that belong to the family called Papilionidae (or Swallowtails). What excited me about this particular butterfly was that I had never seen a swordtail in the western Himalayas before. This had to be a species that I had not seen before.

For the rest of the morning, Yash and I spent craning our necks upwards. The swordtails could be seen, but were high up at the canopy. A few hours of patient watching yielded no additional sightings as the butterflies refused to descend to ground level. Determined to figure out what the butterfly was, we were back at the same spot a few days later. Yet again, the swordtails taunted us from up above. And then came the moment we were waiting for-one of the swordtails descended to the moist mud near the stream, and we popped off a few photographs. Wow! The butterfly was a Sixbar Swordtail (*Graphium eueos*). As always happens, once we had our first sighting numerous others followed; so we found several more swordtails feeding on flowers on a tree. The Sixbar Swordtail is a whitish coloured butterfly with six bars on its fore wing; hence its name. It has a long, sword-shaped tail, which gives it its



common name-a swordtail.

The Sixbar Swordtail is seen only at some very specific locations, near its larval food plant. While its distribution is widespread from Kashmir east to Assam, nowhere is it common. Reading up on literature lead to some interesting insights-this butterfly is single brooded which means that it breeds only once a year (many other butterfly species are double-brooded, while some may actual breed for extended periods of time). The Sixbar Swordtail flies only for a few weeks from 15 April to early May. Imagine-a life cycle of just three weeks!

Having spent a few hours watching the swordtails, and having squeezed off a few satisfactory photographs, we headed back home, mission accomplished. Yet, as we drove back to Dehradun, the dreaded thoughts came back-how much longer will Dehradun and Mussoorie's green cover remain? And what can WE do to save it.

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

Making a difference: People are waking up to the fact that it is not essential to cut down trees. One of the solutions that exists to save our tree cover, is to transplant trees instead of cutting them down. This has already been successfully demonstrated in Dehradun. If you think that you can help save a tree by transplanting it, instead of cutting it down, contact Anchal Sondhi at 9412992728.

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