

Urban Nature Watch for TerraGreen by Sanjay Sondhi

Published in July 2010 issue of TerraGreen



The mating of the Common Indian Toad

With the onset of the monsoons, a host of creatures begin to live out the very purpose of their existence-to breed and ensure survival of their species. Amphibians are amongst the many creatures that use the abundance of food and water during the monsoons to multiply. Most amphibians have an aquatic larval stage, and hence water is crucial to their survival.

Possibly, the most common amphibian in Indian cities is the Common Indian Toad (*Duttaphrynus melanostictus*). A hardy species, it can breed in the most innocuous of places. Give it a pond, a stream, or even a small puddle, and the toad will attempt to breed!

An encounter with large numbers of breeding toads within city limits is a memorable experience. One monsoon night, walking towards a small pond in a south Indian city, I was greeted with a crescendo of calls. “creooo, creooo, creooo!” Hundreds of male toads, calling in unison, were deafeningly loud! Arriving at the pond, I had to literally shout in my companion's ear in an effort to be heard. The males obviously believed that the louder they called, the greater were their chances of winning a female. All the WAG's (wives and girlfriends, for those who know not) out there-please note-loud and boisterous males are preferred in nature! With external balloon-like vocals sacs, the male toads displayed their bloated throats, in an attempt to attract the female. In addition, the male toads adopt bright yellow or red colours in order to make themselves more attractive to females. Males dressing up instead of females-someone has got this script mixed up!



The competition amongst male toads is intense. On locating a female ready to mate, often more than one toad rushes to the female. All of them jostle to get her to mate. Often, brawls break out with males climbing on top of each other display their superiority and dominance. On many occasions, more than one male toad climbs onto the female, resulting in the whole cluster of toads sinking into the water!

When a male finally succeeds in mating with the female, it typically remains in this position (called amplexus) for hours. As the female toad lays her eggs, the male toad externally fertilizes the eggs. Thousands of eggs are laid in long strands by the female. The strategy of the toads is clear-given that all the eggs will not hatch, and many of the tadpoles will be devoured by predators, they believe that safety is in numbers. So by laying eggs in thousands, they are increasing the chance of many toads reaching adulthood.

In a few days, the eggs will hatch, and small black tadpoles will emerge. These tadpoles scavenge on plant and animal water, and take weeks to develop. As they grow, they will develop legs, and then shed their tails, and eventually grow to become juveniles toads.

A few days ago, an adult toad entered our house. Our pet cat, Tiger, immediately pounced on the toad, and began to harass it. Tiger, I warned, stay away or else you will repent it. Cats being cats, she ignored my warning. Soon, she grabbed the toad in her mouth, and immediately spit it out! Then followed a hilarious sequence of our dear cat grimacing and trying to clean her mouth of what was obviously a pretty bad taste. With looks of “I told you so”, I offered some water to my cat to wash her mouth.

The toad had just displayed another unique survival strategy. Most toads have glands on their backs. The glands have toxins, which the toads secrete when preyed upon. As our dear cat had just discovered for herself, these toxins have a bitter taste, and deter the experienced predator (which obviously our cat was not!).

For many species, feeding and breeding, forms the very purpose of their existence. A pretty simple life, unfortunately disrupted by one species, Homo sapiens, for whom the purpose of existence has exceeded this simple brief! Hopefully, as we continue to stamp our unique footprint on the face of this planet, we don't forget the right of other species to aspire to do the same.

© Sanjay Sondhi

Urban Nature Watch is a monthly column that is published in TerraGreen, TERI's magazine.