

Urban Nature Watch for TerraGreen by Sanjay Sondhi

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Predators on the Prowl

How many times have you watched vivid pictures of large carnivores hunting its prey? The menace in the tiger's quiet, surreptitious approach, as it stalks its prey. The stealthiness demonstrated by the snow leopard hunting ibex on perilous Himalayan rocky slopes. The viciousness displayed by "crows" as they hunt in the water. While the beauty of such scenes is unparalleled, for me, the thrill of watching other smaller, and lesser known predators is equally satisfying. Each of these creatures adopts different strategies for hunting; what's common is that brute force is replaced by cunning and guile!

The simple strategy of the gecko, which is often seen in our homes, is to park itself at a light bulb. As insects get attracted to the light, the gecko has its own version of a romantic candle night dinner! One monsoon night, I observed a Brook's gecko (*Hemidactylus brookii*) gorging on adult winged termites that had emerged from their holes. The greedy geckoes fed to their heart's content as the fluttering termites were easy prey. On one occasion, one of the geckoes swallowed a termite in a fashion that only its wings protruded out, giving the gecko a really comical look. (See picture: gecko eating termite)



Many spiders adopt differing strategies. Most spiders, of course, spin a web, in which they catch their prey. Once caught, the spider may devour his prey on the web, or carry it to safety and eat in peace. (see picture: spider devouring butterfly). One one occasion, I observed that a sheet web spider had constructed its web over a termite hole. Once the winged termites emerged, the spider just sat back and waited as they entangled themselves in its web. Literally, a "walk into my parlour" story! On another occasion, inside a cave, I observed that the spiders had vertical web strands hanging down from the cave roof. The spider had figured out for itself that vertical web



strands gave a better chance of catching its prey, compared to its traditional flat web. The Giant Wood Spider, three inches in size, weaves a large web between trees. On one occasion, I watched as a juvenile bird got caught in the spider web. The more the bird struggled, the more it got enmeshed in the web. Days later, the dead bird was still in the web, but now being slowly devoured by the spider.

Often predators hunt, but not for themselves. Many wasps are predators, but do so for their larvae. On one occasion, I was watching the caterpillars of Indian Red Admiral *Vanessa indica* as they fed on the leaves of Stinging Nettle *Urtica dioica*. Even as I watched, a wasp descended on the plant, picked up a caterpillar, and off it flew. As I watched, it did so repeatedly, making no fewer than five sorties in less than ten minutes! The wasp was taking food back for its young, as its larvae feed on caterpillars. (see picture: wasp feeding on caterpillar).



Amongst the deadliest of small predators is the Praying Mantis. This small insect, sits with its legs folded in front of it, as though in prayer. Of course, its a different issue that the prayer is probably the last rites for an insect passing by! The mantis, has strong powerful legs, with razor sharp claws which help it grasp at potential prey, as they trundle by.

Other predators are not so lethal. Many ants predate on injured insects. Its is a comical sight to observe tiny ants, carrying wings of butterflies or moths, often many times their own size. "Super ants" at work! (See picture).



All this and more is probably visible in your own garden. All it takes is patience and curiosity! Go on, wake up the

naturalist in you, and find your own nature stories to relate.

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