



Rufous-bellied woodpecker. PHOTO: ASHISH KOTHARI

By Ashish Kothari

In my wanderings through India's forests, I've often seen a strange, symmetrical pattern adorning many trees. Tiny holes in the bark forming rings around the trunk, sometimes from bottom to top! I used to think they were part of the bark's pattern, or, because sometimes they would be covered with fungus, some strange vegetative growth.

It was only in March this year that I finally learnt what it was... not only by seeing, but by tasting! Up in the Himalayan forests of Uttarakhand, Theo, a friend and a

keen observer of things in nature, first asked me if I knew what these patterns were. When I told him what I had guessed, he shook his head, smiling mysteriously. He then refused to talk, not caring that I was dying of curiosity! Suddenly, at one point he stopped, glancing at me inquisitively while pointing up to a drumming sound coming from high up a tree. I whispered 'woodpecker'; he motioned me to spot it through the binoculars, which I did.

Circular motion

It was one of the most beautiful birds I've ever seen, with a bright rufous underside, red

head and bottom, and lovely black-and-white markings on its body. I recognised it as the Rufous-bellied woodpecker, and told Theo so. He nodded, and told me to observe it carefully. It was then that I noticed the bird behaving strangely – not only was it pecking holes into the bark, it was moving sideways in a circular motion around the trunk while doing so. It dawned on me that this was the creature responsible for the patterns I had observed so often!

However, there was a further surprise in store. Theo signalled me to come closer to the tree trunk, and pointed silently at the holes. I noticed that

The bird with a sweet tooth

The woodpecker in the Himalayan forests of Uttarakhand was pecking not so much to dig out insects (which many of its cousins do), but to get at the sap!



“THE RUFIOUS-BELLIED WOODPECKER IS ALSO CALLED THE SAPSUCKER! IT TAPS TREES FOR THEIR SWEET LIQUID

some of them were oozing sap, glistening in the sunlight dappling through the foliage. He whispered 'taste it'. I was sceptical, but nevertheless did as he bid...and to my astonishment found that the liquid was sweet.

Maple syrup

Greedily, I put my tongue to several holes, not caring that I



Rufous woodpecker. PHOTO: KRUPAKAR SENANI

must have looked pretty stupid! I found the sap akin to maple syrup. It was then I suddenly realised...the woodpecker was pecking not so much to dig out insects (which many of its cousins do), but to get at the sap! I did not have to put this in words – my eyes indicated my realisation, and Theo nodded a silent affirmation.

Digging deeper – into my field guide, not the tree bark! – I found that the Rufous-bellied woodpecker is also called, aptly, the Sapsucker! It is one of a family of such birds that specialise in tapping trees for their sweet liquid. They also capture insects that get attracted to the sweet sap, and take

them home to their young ones! Their beaks are slender, not heavy like some other woodpeckers, and their tails are stiff, helping them to sit vertically on a tree trunk while eating their dessert!

Wonders of nature

It is such close observation that brings to us the wonders of nature. You don't need to be an expert to find out that different woodpeckers peck wood for different reasons...you just need to be keenly observant. You'll notice that most of these birds use holes in trees for nesting. But if lucky and patient, you may also notice that there is one woodpecker that

behaves differently – it makes its home in the nest of tree ants!

The Rufous woodpecker (different from the Rufous-bellied!) has a softer beak than its cousins, and does not attempt to make a hole in a trunk (its beak would be severely dented if it tried!), but just uses the hospitality of ants. These creatures, which could do serious damage to any animal, leave the bird alone, and of course the bird does not eat the ants. Another of nature's wonders... as sweet as the diet of the Sapsucker!

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