

Tolly Club haven for butterflies: Study

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Kolkata:It started with a walk. Strolling around the lush green grounds of Tollygunge Club, Bonani Kakkar, veteran club member and a naturalist, noticed a riot of colour in one corner. Then one day, they were all gone. The overgrown bushes with wildflowers had to be trimmed and with them went the butterflies.

The sense of loss made the Tollygunge Club authorities wake up to the need for conservation of butterflies in a congested city like Kolkata. They hit upon the idea of conducting a study on the ever so elusive winged creatures and wildflowers, which are synonymous with insects but are sacrificed every time the garden is spruced up.

A year on, the field guide has been put together in the form of a document by Arjan Basu Roy, who led the study. The findings are startling. There are 76 species of butterflies and 36 species of wildflowers in the 100-acre grounds, covering almost 60% of the entire diversity of butterflies in Kolkata. The book, 'Butterflies and Wildflowers of Tollygunge Club', contains a detailed description and photographs of these butterflies.

"Considering that we managed to capture such a rich variety of butterflies and wildflowers, the study could go well beyond the Tolly Club greens," said Basu Roy. He is more than just a butterfly aficionado. Basu Roy is curator of Butterfly Garden at Banobitan in Salt Lake and has published a number of research papers on the colourful insects. "Butterflies possess some of the most striking color displays found in nature. As they fly from flower to flower gathering nectar, their brightly coloured wings shimmer and change colours before your eyes. That's a rewarding experience," he said.

Mind you, there is a bigger truth lurking behind the informal butterfly chase. "Everyone's aware of conservation of tiger, rhino, elephants and the like. But with the introduction of biodiversity conservation, preservation efforts of smaller life forms like butterflies, spiders, dragon flies, etc, have gained momentum. Maintaining the butterfly count in the urban environment is an excellent way to main the ecosystem," said Basu Roy.

Some species of butterflies enjoy the same protection as tigers under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1976. They are Schedule I species. Common Mime, found in the Tolly Club and in many places of Kolkata, is one of them. There are 135 species of butterflies in Kolkata. Most of them can be traced at Tolly Club.

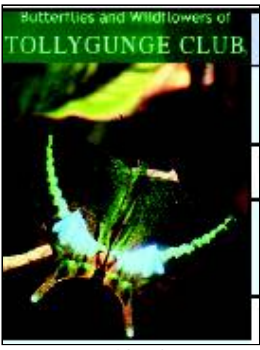
"What makes Tolly Club unique is its strong sense of ecological heritage," said club CEO Anil Mukherjee. "This institution, one of the lungs of Kolkata, is an ecological haven. It's our responsibility to foster the legacy – at the same time balancing its sporting heritage."

Club president Aniruddha Lahiri felt Tolly Club has its own eco system which must be nurtured and protected. "The vastness of this place, the flora and fauna within, inspired us to take up the project. Butterflies are a crucial part of the eco system."

Conserving butterflies would mean protecting a particular habitat as the research has reaffirmed. Indeed, conserving butterflies can't be done in isolation. This is where wildflowers come in. "The study and the consequent book capture the eternal romance between butterflies and wildflowers," said Kakkar, adding, "I think the study on wildflowers is more interesting – the flora we take for granted and often replace with showy varieties. But a lot can be done with wildflowers – they could form a carpet and look as beautiful. They would also attract insects like butterflies."

Did you know?

- * Butterflies are cold-blooded and will not fly if their body temperature is below 27°C
- * Butterflies' growth is restricted only to the larval stage
- * There are some species of butterflies like the Black Rajah that prefer feeding on rotting fruit and animal dung
- * Butterflies 'taste' with their feet. Their feet are actually tiny receptors that allow them to binge on the food that they are standing on



Around 60% of the city's butterflies are found at Tolly Club, says the book