A record sighting

A birder from Coimbatore records a butterfly species for the first time in India

He calls it beginner’s luck. P.B. Balaji, a member of Coimbatore Nature Society spotted the Frosted Duskywing butterfly at Kibithu in Arunachal Pradesh. “I followed the butterfly as it flitted from one one boulder to another, and clicked the photographs as it rested for a little while in between,” he says.

What makes this sighting special is that the Frosted Duskywing butterfly, identified as Erynnis pelias, has now been recorded for the first time in India. “These have been spotted and recorded in South East Tibet to West China as far back as the 1920s. Apart from this, very little is known of the species,” he says.

Balaji is a birdwatcher and he visited Arunachal Pradesh because the state has 600 species of birds (India has 1,200 species). “This is my first trip to Arunachal Pradesh. It is a bio-diversity hot spot, and I saw 90 new species of birds,” he says excitedly. But the butterfly sighting has now triggered an interest in butterflies. “I never paid much attention to butterflies. But from now on I will start observing them too.”

The sighting happened at Kibithu, the easternmost settlement of India located at an altitude of 1250 mts above mean sea level. “There are no roads, no cellphone signals, we were literally cut off from all communication channels during most days,” says Balaji as he recalls the mountain terrain of Kibithu with its picture postcard views and the beautiful River Lohit, a tributary to the mighty Brahmaputra. “It was after an early morning birding trip, while resting that I accidentally spotted this butterfly on a boulder by the river side.”

After returning from the trip, he looked up field guides in India on butterflies, including the BNHS field guide called Butterflies of India (by Isaac Kehimkar) and A Naturalist’s guide to the Butterflies of India (by Peter Smetacek) and an on-line resource forum ifoundbutterflies. “I found no mention of the species. I referred to a few experts in the North East, and while they initially suggested that it belongs to Erynnis species, an exact identification was still elusive,” says Balaji. Then, he posted it on Butterflies of India forum on Facebook. That’s when it turned out to be a new addition to the Checklist of India. It was a male specimen of the species.

The identification was done by butterfly experts Krushnamegh Kunte of National Center for Biological Sciences (NCBS), Bangalore and Hiduyuke Chiba, a leading expert on Asian Skippers.

A new page created on the species can be found on ifoundbutterflies.org