

The Nursery We Thought We Knew

Our native plant nursery had never seemed ordinary. As the saplings grew, they drew in butterflies, dragonflies, bees and birds, each adding a little more life to the space. Sunbirds regularly visited the flowers, bulbuls moved through the shrubs, and tailorbirds were familiar residents. Their presence had become so much a part of the nursery that we rarely paused to think about it. We believed we knew the place well.

It turned out we didn't.

One morning, as we walked through the nursery, a chorus of sharp alarm calls broke the usual rhythm of birdsong. Curious, we stopped to look more closely. Hidden among the foliage were three recently fledged tailorbirds accompanied by two adults, presumably their parents. Without realising it, we had wandered into the middle of a family trying to keep a watchful eye on us.

The adults continued calling from nearby branches while one of the fledglings fluttered onto a perch surprisingly close to where we stood. Whether it was confused, frightened or simply uncertain of where to go next, we could only guess. It remained there for several moments, answering the persistent calls of the adults.



Photo and video. © Priyanka Iyer.

For the first time, we were able to observe a recently fledged tailorbird from only a few feet away. Its plumage still carried the softness, and its tail was so short that it was almost unnoticeable - a gentle reminder that this tiny bird had only recently left the nest and was still taking its first steps into an unfamiliar world.

As our attention remained fixed on the fledgling, another detail slowly revealed itself.

What appeared to be a leaf hanging from the very same branch suddenly shifted. It was not a leaf at all, but a remarkably well-camouflaged praying mantis. Perfectly blended into the surrounding foliage, it had remained invisible until that moment.

Without warning, the mantis thrust its raptorial forelegs towards the young bird. The strike missed the fledgling's head by what seemed no more than a hair's breadth. Another attempt followed, and then another, each falling short.

Whether the mantis was attempting to capture the fledgling or simply reacting defensively to an unexpected visitor on its perch is impossible to know from such a brief encounter. Before either possibility could unfold further, the fledgling suddenly took flight, disappearing towards the waiting adults whose alarm calls echoed through the nursery.

Within moments, calm returned.

The entire encounter lasted only a short while, yet it revealed a side of the nursery we had never truly appreciated. We had entered thinking about plants. We left thinking about relationships- between native plants and the creatures they support, between parents and their young, between camouflage and vigilance, between predator and prey.

Native plant nurseries are often celebrated for attracting wildlife. Yet perhaps their greater achievement lies in something deeper. They become places where life does more than simply exist; it begins to interact. Birds find shelter, insects find food and refuge, predators find opportunities, and countless stories unfold beyond our notice every single day.

That morning reminded us that our nursery was no longer just a place where native plants were being grown. Quietly, season by season, it had become part of a living ecosystem.

The nursery we thought we knew had been full of these stories all along.

We had simply taken the time to notice.



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