

Down-toad-den: A Series of Unfortunate Events



Common Indian Toads defend themselves against approaching predators by inflating themselves, making it difficult for the adversary to hold the toad.

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It's a beautiful morning on the campus of IIT Mumbai. Everything is wet from the nightly showers and the morning dew. Powai Lake is still lazily wrapped up in a thick blanket of mist. Everything is calm and quiet.

Somewhere in that serenity, the perpetual game between life and death is unravelling. A Common Indian Toad (*Bufo melanostictus*) is in the grip of a mighty Checkered Keelback (*Xenochrophis piscator*)! "Now, it's just a matter of time", comments an onlooker. But then something descends. A pair of House Crows (*Corvus splendens*) land at the spot. Rightful or not, the crows want a share as well. The feathered ones are fearless of the snake. Using all their faculties, they attack the snake ferociously. Approaching from different directions, they poke it with their strong bill. The reptile is now in a peculiar position. "Defending its own prey", smiles the observer. Its mouth being full, the snake can

only use its tail to scare away the Crows. The agile Crows continue to harass the snake till it has no choice but to spit out its prey. The Keelback considers it better to save itself than be greedy. Angered by being made to give up its prey, it hisses venomously at the crows. To avoid its fury, the crows fly to a nearby tree. The dejected snake moves away without delay.

The Toad is left **dead** on the grass. The blood from the wounds inflicted by the snake spreads on its back and along its left forelimb. The Crows are back to claim their feast. One strike from the Crow and suddenly, the Toad springs back to life! It was just lying still, pretending to be dead. Alive or dead, the Toad has but one destiny. Recovering from the sudden surprise, the Crows renew their attempts at hurting the Toad.

The distressed Toad starts making calls, sounding "pup-pup-pup". The poking by Crows and the jumps

and cries of the Toad continue till the Crows grow anxious of something above them. The frenzy and possibly those distress calls have caught the attention of some Jungle Crows (*Corvus macrorhynchos*) and Black Kites (*Milvus migrans*)! A pair of Jungle Crows, strike down like lightening bolts. The House Crows that were having an upper hand so far had to make a way for the mightier Jungle Crows. "Help from heaven or assault from hell?" wonders the onlooker. Death surely is mocking the Toad.

The Toad endures the strikes from the ruthless Jungle Crows. It jumps, jumps, and jumps more to avoid the jabbing crows. But how long can this go on? Sooner or later...

Not knowing where to seek refuge the Toad is jumping haphazardly. But now it seems to have made up its mind. Wounded and bleeding, bearing the injuries inflicted by the crows, it moves ahead resolutely. Still making those miserable noises, the Toad is undoubtedly advancing towards the onlooker. That is its last hope of survival. Seeking help from the highest predator! Man! The life force had not deserted it even for a moment. It has now planned a masterstroke.

The crows quickly see its move. The distance is some 7-9 m. They still stand a chance of finishing it off before it gets near the human being. In desperation, they shower the Toad with blows. Enduring all of it, the Toad continues with great courage and finally manages to come literally to the onlooker's feet knowing very well that the Crows would not dare come closer.

The tired Toad rests for a while under the supposed safety offered by the presence of a human being. But then greed comes in all shapes and sizes! Every one has a right to have a bite or two and why would the ants be left behind? A big black ant makes most out of the opportunity and takes its own share. The Toad cannot stir from its place as long as the Crows are there. The Crows are still lurking around with a show of disinterest. Toying with grass and pebbles they try to feign that they eat grass or even pebbles! The onlooker knows better and doesn't leave the Toad to die a miserable death.

He does not mean to interfere in nature's course, but the little one has fought too many battles, too long and deserves a chance at life. The Crows




Heavy billed and having a deep, hoarse 'caw', Jungle Crows are known to be omnivorous



Ants render their victim powerless by injecting it with formic acid

probably lose interest and leave the spot. The Toad is injured but triumphant at the end of it. It slowly moves along in small and unsteady leaps, but with courage and faith in life and itself! For once, it has defeated death and honoured the spirit of life and what could be a greater reward than life itself.

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