

Northern Sri Lanka, 15th-24th February 2018

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At the end of January 2018, I was given the exciting opportunity to consult on some ecological surveys in the far north of Sri Lanka, which would include some field sessions. Things moved fast, and just over two weeks later my colleague Tom and I were on our way. Due to the nature of the job, and work commitments at home, our options for visiting other wildlife sites were extremely limited. Ideally, visiting another part of the dry zone would have been arranged (leaving the southern half of Sri Lanka for a future trip), but it wasn't quite possible. However (and for the second trip in a row), some well-timed advice from Paul Carter proved invaluable, and we realised Wilpattu National Park was perfectly placed for a stopover en route to our survey areas. The intervening time was spent in the extreme north of the island, which is well off the usual mammal- or birdwatching circuits. I'm grateful to Ruvinda de Mel and Amila Sumanapala for sharing their knowledge on where to find some species in, and for assisting in compiling a list of species for, the Mannar area.

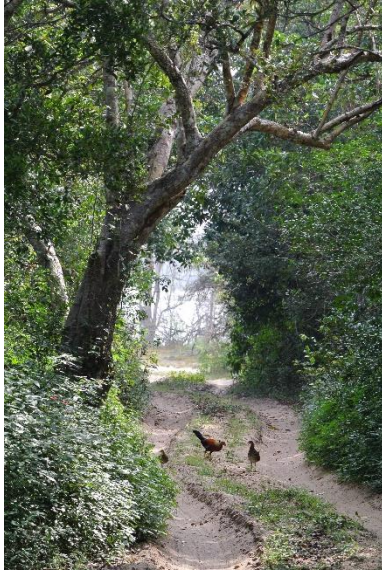


Wild Boars & wetland scenery, Wilpattu NP

Wilpattu NP, 15th/16th & 23rd/24th February

On the basis of Paul's [trip report](#), we arranged to stay at Big Game Camp Wilpattu. The package for each night, booked through their parent company EcoTeam (via the Big Game Camps [website](#)), involved full board accommodation and one jeep drive into the national park. On top of that, we booked an extra 'safari' on our first visit, and got them to arrange transport by car from Colombo on 15th & on to the airport on 24th. This all worked without a hitch; the accommodation (in tents) is a little cramped, but comfortable, the food is excellent, and there is plenty of wildlife around the camp itself. Since Paul's trip, however, Sri Lanka has experienced drought conditions, and the dining area overlooks dry grassland and scrub instead of a wetland! On at least some nights, there is a naturalist on hand to take a short night walk around the grounds. On the first night, we were tantalised with the possibility of a three hour nocturnal trek, with the chance of Jungle, Fishing, and even (on occasion) Rusty-spotted Cats; we attempted to arrange such a trip for our return, but it turned out that the necessary member of staff was on leave. Luckily, our decision to venture out alone worked out well anyway...

The park itself is an absolute delight: superb forest interspersed with wetlands, lots to see, and relatively few other tourists (compared to, say, Yala, according to other guests). There was a bit of a crowd at our first Leopard sighting, but nothing too unpleasant. At the time of our visit, Leopards were being seen almost every afternoon – a remarkable rate of success, and possibly the best place in the world to see the species currently. Sloth Bear, in contrast, seems far more hit and miss at this



time of year. I'm little bit surprised that there don't seem to be any territories known at all; however, in late May/June, they are apparently reliably seen feeding on Palu fruit.

Like many places, the quality of drivers seems variable: some just follow directions from other drivers, others seem very sharp and will look for whatever you want. In theory, you can book a dedicated naturalist and/or a private game drive; however, once the staff at BGC realised Tom and I were keener than your average tourist, they kindly arranged us vehicles accordingly, and one of the guys from camp came with us one day. If possible, I would recommend staying for two or more consecutive nights to allow for full-day trips into the park, thus avoiding a 20km drive out from the core part of the NP and back in again.

freetail bat *Chaerephon/Tadarida* sp – one seen well hawking over BGC at first light on 16th

Schneider's Roundleaf Bat *Hipposideros speoris* – likely this species recorded over BGC at dusk on 23rd

Common Palm Squirrel *Funambulus palmarum* – common around BGC and in the NP

Sri Lanka Giant Squirrel *Ratufa macroura* – brilliant views of a pair by the BGC dining area at lunchtime on 15th; one in the NP on 25th

Indian Hare *Lepus nigricollis singhala* – a few seen around BGC at night, and up to 5 on each game drive (very early in the morning and just before dusk); an attractively black-naped and rufous-toned subspecies.

Golden Jackal *Canis aureus* – two separate individuals on the game drive on 16th

Leopard *Panthera pardus kothiya* – Two fantastic sightings. A young male at very close ranged (but mostly resting out of view) in the NP on 15th, and a superb encounter with an adult female (tracked by the naturalist from BGC) on the game drive of 16th. The Sri Lanka subspecies is particularly richly-coloured and well-marked.

Fishing Cat *Prionailurus viverrinus* – After taking an educated guess at where night walks targeting this species might go, we decided to explore the area west of BGC on our own after dark on 24th; at around 10pm, we found a superb Fishing Cat resting on the banks of a dried water tank. The highlight of the trip.

Ruddy Mongoose *Herpestes smithii* – seen on both morning game drives – 7 on 16th, 2 on 25th

Toque Macaque *Macaca sinica* – seen on both morning game drives in - a scavenging troop hangs out around the picnic/toilet spot in the park's core zone

Tufted Grey Langur *Semnopithecus priam* – small troops seen on all three game drives

Grey Slender Loris *Loris lydekkerianus* – after hearing one on the guided night walk at BGC on 15th, we returned to the area later and after quite some effort got good, if brief views. Surprisingly fast-moving! Heard (but not seen) near the dining area and by the entrance at BGC on 24th, though we

didn't look too hard. The remarkable call is distinctive – a loud, wheezy whistle like the sound made by blowing through a split blade of grass.

Wild Boar *Sus scrofa cristatus* – We almost literally bumped into one which initially didn't want to back off on our night walk outside BGC on 24th. Less disconcertingly, groups of 10 and 6 in the NP on 25th.

Domestic Water Buffalo *Bubalus bubalis* – three feral animals on the game drive on 25th

Chital *Axis axis* – Common in the NP

Sambar *Rusa unicolor* – Just two seen in the NP, on 16th

Northern Red Muntjac *Muntiacus vaginalis* – one or two seen on all three game drives

[**Asian Elephant** *Elaphus maximus* – fresh droppings on morning on 16th]

Other possibilities: White-spotted Chevrotain was the main miss. It's apparently seen regularly in the thickets at BGC, but despite searching at all hours we failed to find it. Like the Sloth Bears mentioned above, seeing elephants is a matter of luck on short game drives; they were being seen more regularly on full-day trips at the time of my visit. Golden Palm Civet occurs in the area, but possibly only in the national park itself.



Leopard & Sri Lanka Giant Squirrel, Wilpattu NP (both [Tom Lowe](#))

Mannar and Jaffna, 16th-23rd February

The far north of Sri Lanka is still relatively-little visited by tourists, have suffered during 26 years or armed conflict, and in many ways is still recovering. A good diversity of dry-country species are present, although most are probably found just as easily elsewhere. Still, it's an interesting area with a mosaic of thorn scrub and seasonally-inundated flats (the number of waterbirds is incredible), so the below may be of interest.

Indian Flying Fox *Pteropus giganteus* – common on Mannar Island, and a flyout of over 1000 from somewhere southeast of Jaffna Heritage Hotel

tomb bat *Taphozous* sp – a couple of probable tomb bats emerged from the impressive Kandaswamy Tamil temple in Nallur, Jaffna

Dusky Roundleaf Bat *Hipposideros ater* – recorded on Mannar Island

false vampire bat *Megaderma* sp – seen in flight on Mannar Island

Coromandel Pipistrelle *Pipistrellus coromandra* – recorded over Palmyrah Hotel, Mannar Island

Greater Asian Yellow House Bat – *Scotophilus heathii* – seen hunting around Jaffna Heritage Hotel

Common Palm Squirrel *Funambulus palmarum* – typically abundant anywhere with trees

Little Indian Field Mouse *Mus booduga* – seen at night in the grounds of Palmyrah Hotel

Indian Hare *Lepus nigricollis singhala* – singles seen in both Mannar and Jaffna areas

Golden Jackal *Canis aureus* – a single in rich paddies near Chavakachkeri, east of Jaffna

[**Jungle Cat** *Felis chaus* – a roadkill in the Chavakachkeri area; tracks found nearby and on Mannar probably from this species, apparently common in the latter area]

Indian Grey Mongoose *Herpestes edwardsii* – Seen at Palmyrah Hotel, Mannar town and near Jaffna

Small Indian Civet *Viverricula indica* – seen a couple of times at Palmyrah Hotel

Asian Palm Civet *Paradoxurus hermaphroditus* – one living in the roof of our site ‘office’ near Jaffna, and another moving around Jaffna Heritage Hotel in the early hours. Also present in Mannar town.

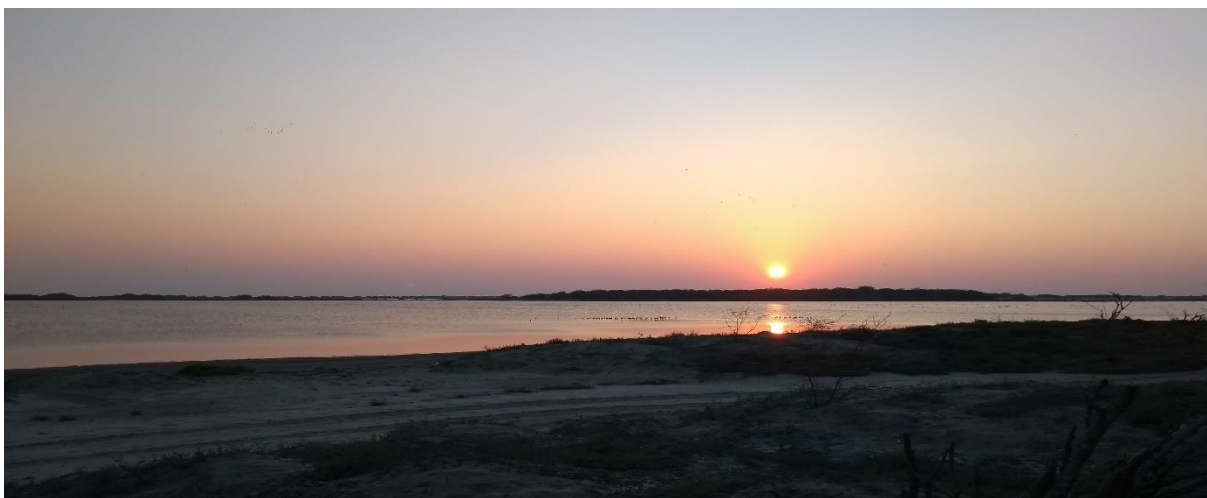
Tufted Grey Langur *Semnopithecus priam* – seen by the roadsides between the north and Wilpattu a few times.

Grey Slender Loris *Loris lydekkerianus* – seen in the grounds of the Palmyrah Hotel. Apparently very common on Mannar Island, despite large trees being scarce!

Feral Horse *Equus ferus caballus* – a couple of herds on Mannar Island. A free-living population descending from groups left by Dutch and Portuguese traders.

Feral Donkey *Equus asinus* – very common on Mannar Island, the population dating back to East African and Arabic trade, perhaps several hundred years ago.

Other species that have been recorded around Mannar include Schneider’s Roundleaf Bat, Indian Gerbil, Fishing Cat (one recent record), Dugong, Wild Boar and Chital.



Vankalai Sanctuary, Mannar