

From Dusk Till Dawn: Spotlight on Sri Lanka's Mammals

This report is entirely my own work using notebook, photos and trip checklist to reconstruct what we saw when. I've added some of the anecdotal stuff. In both respects my memory may be at fault.

Cast:

John Dixon (me)

Stephen Babbs

Roy Hargreaves

John Pilgrim

Dulan Ranga Vidanapathirana (Guide)

Plan:

Fly Heathrow – Colombo with Sri Lankan Airlines (Airbus A330-300 reg 4R-ALQ) arriving just after midday local, overnight Colombo to get a full night's rest before starting the tour.

Ten days with Bird and Wildlife Team:

Drive Colombo – Wilpattu. Transits were in an air-conditioned minibus, park and night drives in local open safari 4WD vehicles.

Three nights at Wilpattu, accommodated at Claughton Wild: day drives in park, night drives around the area outside.

Four nights at Sigiriya accommodated at Sigiriya Village Hotel: day sorties to various venues nearby and night drives with some walking.

Two nights at Kitulgala accommodated at Kitulgala Rest House: Night walks in forest across the river.

Drive Kitulgala – Colombo. We were lucky that our minibus driver was available after the formal tour so he then took us to Mirissa the same afternoon, where we overnighted prior to a whalewatching pelagic with Raja and the Whales: he then drove us back to Colombo and dropped us at our last accommodation to overnight before flying home the following day with Sri Lanka Airlines (the guesthouse provided car and driver to the airport). Aircraft was Airbus A330-300 reg 4R-ALP.

Our BWT guide, Dulan, was outstanding, combining practically encyclopaedic wildlife knowledge with frighteningly boundless energy and enthusiasm. In fact he is a Terminator: he absolutely will not stop until you are dead – on your feet! You do feel a little bit pushed onward but it is absolutely worth it. His good humour added to the experience, his invariable neat turn out as we became progressively sweatier, dirtier and more crumpled was slightly miffing. A really great bloke.

The trip was Steve's idea and he did most of the organising including finding a fourth member of the team (Big John) by advertising on BF and Mammalwatching. Though when asked for an opinion/vote in decision-making I contributed, I would like to offer Steve a big thank-you for his efforts because all I had to do was slipstream behind him and the results were fantastic.

With an overnight flight departing at 2130, what Naturetrek would call Day 1 of a tour was a non-event: as we didn't meet our tour guide and driver till the day after arriving in Colombo that is Day 1, so our arrival day is Day Zero. Confused? You will be.

Day Zero: Sunday 2 April

All the bags arrived with us at Colombo Airport and after a brief skirmish with an ATM for local currency and being hit by a wall of heat as we walked out we got a taxi to our hotel, the Saasha City

Hotel on Sea Road. En route we began the trip list with traditional city birds: Rock Dove (all right, Feral Pigeon), House Sparrow, Cattle Egret, House Crow. Before we arrived I had two ticks: **Brahminy Kite** and **Spot-billed Pelican**, numbers of the latter being seen roosting on lamp-posts along the highway.

The Saasha was a comfortable air-conditioned hotel (mind you we had to reassess our use of aircon after practically freezing overnight at about 16C – which I'd find warm in the UK – about 21 was more like it later in the trip) and we had a room each to ensure that we could get a good night's sleep after the grimness of an eleven hour flight and before starting an ambitious mammal-watching tour. We walked out to find a local restaurant for dinner and had an introduction to what was to be a fortnight of chicken curries. The waiter relied on his memory to convey our orders so dinner was in stages as we prompted him repeatedly for the elements that hadn't arrived.....

Returning to the hotel we decided we hadn't the energy for a planned walk/taxi ride to the park where the big Indian Flying Fox roost was, but it turned out not to matter because they were already flying over us in ones and twos. Instead we asked at Reception if there was access to the roof and it turned out there was, so we grabbed our bins and cameras and headed upwards.

Not only could we see Flying Foxes (some way off, but surely they would come closer) but it wasn't long before a Spot-billed Pelican darkened the sky overhead. However, I went straight into meltdown because I could not get my R7 to focus on anything. Naturally as this continued I got more desperate and after the usual quick remedies failed (turn off/on, take battery out and replace, try manual focus and so on) I dashed back downstairs and changed to my back-up 7Dii, cursing the Canon R7 to high heaven and furious that I wouldn't have it for the rest of the trip.

Back on the roof I added **Indian Swiftlets** and an **Indian Palm Swift** to the day's ticks along with trip fodder of Rose-ringed Parakeets, Grey Heron and Common Myna. Considering we were at least three floors up in a densely urban bit of city the Palm Squirrel nibbling something while sitting on a projecting bit of concrete was a surprise! I clicked off a few photos but decided to wait for better light on House Crows – possibly a mistake as I came home without any good ones. I also got some flight shots of Indian Flying Foxes as a couple came close to the hotel, and another pelican yielded itself up.

As the light faded we decided to get an early night and be both rested and keen for the morning. Unfortunately it appeared we had booked ourselves into a party hotel and the entire night (I am told) was punctuated by shouting, the sound of running feet and banging doors. I slept for ten hours but the guys got about three each. However, what I did manage was the realisation that I'd missed a likely solution to the camera problem: I investigated the viewfinder diopter adjustment wheel and found it had whizzed round, knocking the viewfinder way outside my eyesight's range. Every photo I'd taken with it was pin sharp. I rotated the diopter wheel back into whack and that was end of problem. Sorry camera, operator error not your fault (in any sense).

Day 1: Monday 3 April

We had time for breakfast before Dulan arrived with the bus to pick us up and head off for Wilpattu, promising us a stop for some general birding on the way to break the journey. We may have banged our room doors shut with less consideration than we would normally early in the morning.

Exiting Colombo took some time despite use of the excellent ring road: first we had to get to it and after it ran out we were in ribbon development for mile after mile even when it was obvious we had left the capital. We began to wonder whether this would persist all the way to Wilpattu but Dulan assured us otherwise and eventually we had roadside paddies and woodlands as a change from local architecture and the accompanying obstacles of scooters, tuk-tuks and wandering pedestrians. Actively worked paddies had flocks of Cattle Egrets and Black-headed Ibis with a few other egret spp mixed in.

Suddenly the bus slowed and turned off the main road onto a track: as we drove along it we encountered our first new mammals of the trip with views of our first endemic **Toque Macaques** showing their strange centre-parting flat-top hairdos. Dulan announced that we had reached

Anawilunbawa, a Ramsar wetland site and the venue for our first wildlife walk. As soon as the door opened that wall of heat hit us but at least it was dry heat. Sri Lanka's climate varies considerably with location and altitude, the South-west and hills being the Wet Zone and very humid while the North and East constitute the Dry Zone (or even Arid Zone although I don't think we got into that) and much more bearable.

Our route lay along a drivable track raised above surrounding wetland on both sides. The paddies held Indian Pond Herons, Purple Herons, Cattle, Little, Great White and Intermediate Egrets. Two **Grey-headed Swamphens** glowed in the sunlight. **Black-headed Ibis**, present in numbers, turned out to be a tick as I had thought they were just Sacred. A few **Asian Openbills** were dotted about, none close but still a welcome addition to my list. The first Jungle Crows of the trip were also present. A few familiar waders were feeding in the paddies: Greenshank, Marsh, Green and Wood Sandpipers, Black-winged Stilts and ubiquitous Red-wattled Plovers.

Far across the right-hand lake a tree that rose above the general forested horizon was fruiting Indian Flying Foxes, with hundreds hanging up in its upper branches. Near to the proximal shore of that lake a **Lesser Whistling Duck** added to the tick-list, unfortunately rather into the sun for pictures (which I took anyway).

Dulan pointed out a dozing **Dry Zone Grizzled Giant Squirrel** lying along a tree branch with its rope-like tail dangling and a bit of casting about found us a decent photographic line to it. Seconds later we were looking at a three-foot **Land Monitor** on a sloping tree trunk on the other side of the path, while an **Oriental Dart** perched high in an isolated tree showed well in the sun. Peafowl strode along the bunds between the paddies on the left. A **Jerdon's Leafbird** taunted from within the canopy of a close very leafy bush, giving occasional views of its blue face and apple-green plumage as it hunted very much among the leafery. A Common Iora was similarly elusive among the branches while from higher up a Black-hooded Oriole effortlessly kept twigs between us and its finery.

Dulan called a mongoose that ran onto the track from the right hand side. It proceeded away from us but kept stopping giving us decent looks at it and a fair record shot of the new for me **Grey Mongoose**.

The first day of a trip is always manic as you try to work out what is going to be a common species seen throughout the trip (with many opportunities for pictures) and what is a one-off to be nailed as hard and fast as possible. Another recurrent realisation is that it just isn't possible to do birds, mammals, herps, butterflies, dragonflies and everything else in the time available - something has to give..... doesn't stop a few making it especially when they are as stunning as the **Crimson Rose** butterfly that conveniently perched up for us. A **Green Forest Lizard** was a nice reptile to add in what became a long list of herps that had us questioning whether we really were on a mammal trip! My notebook went out of date very quickly. The trouble is the daily log only gives you taxonomic order albeit a complete list, so I may well get a few bits in the wrong place – hopefully Steve will chip in and correct me if necessary.

We headed onwards with a stop for king coconut water at a roadside booth (refreshing after our hot walk) and a brief stop at a wetland with a Caspian Tern flying above it (unusual inland according to Dulan) as well as a few Whiskered Terns and at least one Spot-billed Pelican from within the distribution of the wild population.

We seemed to reach our accommodation just outside Wilpattu National Park quite abruptly: not really any warning as we turned off the main road to new chalet-style accommodation named Claughton Wild. This produced some discussion of the origin of the name, and whether there was a village of Claughton in the UK (one on the Wirral and one in Lancashire, apparently: I'm not sure we got to the bottom of the naming of the accommodation). Bags into rooms, a quick look round and a spot of lunch before we were climbing into our safari truck for an afternoon game drive in the park. Claughton Wild had plenty of resident passerines with **Sri Lanka Woodshrike**, Indian Roller, Coppersmith Barbet, **Purple-rumped Sunbird**, Asian Paradise Flycatcher, Indian Robin and **Yellow-billed Babbler** being quickly added to the list as well as a few dragonflies to be identified later and the odd frog. I had a

Black-winged Kite from our veranda (Roy and I were sharing, with Steve and Big John a couple of chalets along).

It was only a short drive to the gate of Wilpattu National Park where we had a short wait while admin was completed. Toque Macaques ambled about the lawns while White-breasted Kingfishers and Red-vented Bulbuls were among the small birds foraging.

Through the gate we were almost immediately into search mode as there had been recent reports of Leopard and Sloth Bear, the latter one of our top targets... Meanwhile our first sighting was probably the best chicken in the world, a male **Sri Lanka Junglefowl** with contrasting red and yellow comb, gold/russet plumage and iridescent purple wings and tail. Even in the shadows of the forest edge it glowed. An **Indian Hare** was a treat for me as I'd managed to miss it in Bandhavgarh while the whole of my non-birding family got it, and small groups of Chital were a welcome reacquaintance. We had indifferent views of **Jerdon's Bushlark** and on one damp pan a single Yellow-wattled Plover (the only one of the trip) was just about close enough for a photo. A **Star Tortoise** was walking determinedly across one clearing, showing well, but distant views of **Green Imperial Pigeons** left much to be desired, as did my first sighting of **White-rumped Shama** (both did the business later in the trip though). Flying Malabar Pied Hornbills were brief but it's not hard to get everything on something that big.

At this point clouds that had been building up burst with a Hollywood rush of water that blotted out the park and sent our truck scurrying for the cover of a nice leafy tree by the track. We rolled down one side of the awning as the teeming rain was sufficiently directed by wind that only that side needed it. The temperature dropped somewhat but as long as you didn't get wet it was still warm enough for our light clothing. Luckily it was just an isolated storm cell and soon passed, leaving the track steaming briefly and everywhere glistening wet – also briefly. Soon the surface water drained away leaving the tracks once again dry if not quite as dusty. On we went.

Crested Treeswifts were sitting up on the upper twigs of a dead tree (dead trees make good hunting perches and are also easy places to find perched birds. Everybody wins.) Soon afterwards we found a rather bedraggled **Orange-breasted Green Pigeon** sat atop a dead tree. A lake with a **Water Buffalo** soaking in it had a smart perched **Grey-headed Fish Eagle** on a fallen tree on the far side, and we also had another brief Grey Mongoose along with much more satisfactory views of Ruddy Mongoose by the track and a female Sambar leading her fawn down to drink. As the afternoon faded into early evening we headed back home to regroup, dine, call the log and prepare for our first night drive.

During and immediately after dinner we found a bunch of invertebrates and herps around the dining room – moths, Praying Mantis, **Asian House Gecko** in the dining room, **Bark Gecko** on a tree outside, a tree frog of some sort and another Gecko not yet identified (by me anyway!) While this was going on our truck arrived and after a while we mounted up for the first of our night drives.

Night driving is a bit marmite: seawatchers will probably enjoy the constant anticipation that something might happen (with often long gaps before anything actually does) while those who like daylight, colour vision and relaxed birding probably won't. Fiendish concentration on spotting any flash of eyeshine in a weaving spotlight or a warm body showing in a thermal imager is coupled with tunnel vision that requires any member of the team with any consciousness to spare to call approaching branches likely to slap everyone's faces; everyone gains bruised ribs and arms from sudden lurches of the truck on uneven dirt tracks (since most people are standing up holding onto the awning framework while doing all this) and then of course when something is spotted there are the twin issues of giving directions and whether everyone's position in the truck actually offers a view, possibly through thick bush....

By the end of the holiday our team's proficiency was considerable, but the road to that happy state was as uneven as some of the tracks we negotiated with our extremely able drivers.

Anyway, we hadn't got very far when Big John called a stop for a thermal hot spot of a small animal in the roadside tall grasses (I mean elephant grass tall) – he initially thought a roosting bird but it turned out to be a mouse that we determined to be **Asiatic Long-tailed Climbing Mouse**, a new mammal

and a rather cute one with a prehensile tail and neat sharp features. It sat still for photos, too, which definitely gave it A+ in my book. We had such a good experience with this mouse that we were able to disregard the sequences of them that continued to flare up on the thermal imagers as we proceeded on our way.

When night driving you are in a bubble. The headlights show a little of what is in front of you, the spotlights show a bit more but you are quickly disorientated by turnings on and off roads onto side tracks across farmers' fields, along raised bunds and quite often teetering along edges that distract one into thoughts of mortality and how easy bailing out might be if the truck lurches off the top, especially with crocodile-haunted waters below....

In short I've no idea where we travelled on each night. I know where we were staying and sometimes I might recognize a stretch of canal or lakeside or field crop, copse and so on, on the way round, thinking "oh, we saw that last night": but for most of the time we could have been on Mars for all I knew of how our position related to start/finish. So, as I keep my location stuff on camera and phone turned off, I can't give directions to any of the places we saw animals. Which I think is OK: it's part of what you pay for in hiring a guide and releasing their stock-in-trade having had the benefit of it is more than a little out of order IMHO. It's my holiday but it's their career and for that matter with pangolin hunters and other unsavouries about it's better to keep the gen tight.

As a result of the foregoing wittering, when I say vaguely that we next went looking for Jungle Cats in some open short grass fields that looked quite promising, it's because I've no idea where we were, not least because of my own efforts to make sure I didn't know. Eventually we found one, which looked at us suspiciously and stalked away from us before turning to have another look and then getting on with a hunting attempt.

I'd taken on the back right seat on the truck, which meant climbing up the side into the back and sliding along the seat into position. There was enough room to stand up straight with my head out above the awning frame but the seat behind me was close to the back of my shins and turning round required a bit of shuffling. This did not put me in the best place for the first **Jungle Cat** but I did my best (obviously this is the sort of thing that evens out over a period of time). Actually, a worse problem was simply the efficiency of the cat's night vision, augmented by the tapetum lucidum reflective layer behind the sensory cells, which causes light hitting it to reflect back through the cells and effectively double the stimulatory signal for the same light level. It also causes carnivore eyes to flare like car headlights in the face of spotlights or flash: a partial solution is to turn down the flash a couple of stops but it doesn't seem to work on Jungle Cats. That apart, these leggy, tall-eared felines are pretty cool. Somewhere nearby we had another one, and started to think these were common and easy. They aren't easy. Most that we saw were distant or walked away from us.

Elsewhere we found **Indian Gerbils** – quite large members of the gerbil tribe compared to those school class pets – foraging along the tracks. They would quite often come into the open, generally moving on just as the camera focused. Frustrating.

Something easier to photograph was a roosting bird in a bush next to the track: a Brown Shrike was kipping among the twigs and gave good views before we moved on in search of bigger game. Initially it was only slightly bigger: we found two species of nightjar hunting from posts with **Jerdon's Nightjar** being first to fall, quickly followed by **Small Indian Nightjar**. Both sat still for us for some time, enabling pictures before the close passage of our truck lifted them from their perches for about a minute: craning necks to look behind showed them dropping back onto their chosen lookouts as soon as we had passed. For me this was nothing short of a miracle as I have in the past been a complete Jonah for nightjars on night drives. Hopefully our luck would continue.

It sort of didn't, or at least my Golden Jackal jinx continued in that we found a nice looking one but it was behind a thin screen of grass that defied my efforts to find a clear shot through it. We did get another Jungle Cat though, which showed at least as well as the first had. Returning along a dead-end track we'd followed out past a lake before lurching down a slope and turning in the corner of a field below the high bund then climbing back up in the other direction, we reached a sharp T-junction

that had taken a couple of reverses to get round and suddenly from the left side came a call of "Elephant!"

Now Asian Elephant was unquestionably one of my targets for the trip and given our itinerary, not one always available, so I reckoned we needed to take our chances when they arose. Now, in the pitch black lit by headlights and spotlights, I was severely torn: there are plenty of tales of elephants taking a dislike to being illuminated and charging down the line of the beam.... I wanted to see it but I wasn't sure we should pursue it.

Nobody asked me. The driver swung the truck to the left and we followed the lane on which the elephant's behind had been glimpsed before it lumbered round a bend. Within a minute John and Roy had contact on their thermal imagers (I really must get one of those). After a short time I asked Roy if it was OK if I had a look, and I'm not interested in any contentions as to the legitimacy of an image processed as thoroughly as that from a thermal imager. He passed the device over and I had a clear view of a purple-edged yellow monster, its forward end a vertical cliff with a spine sloping slightly down to its back legs, moving slowly right with parts of it occasionally occluded by tree trunks. **Asian Elephant** tick!

It managed to disappear behind thicker woodland and we turned round to go back up the lane we'd originally come down. John found another elephant out in the fields and this time we got a spotlight on its distant form enabling views with conventional optics. I was a little relieved when we left that one without incident.

That was pretty much the last notable episode in the night drive and by something around four in the morning we were falling into bed with alarms set to be up in time to breakfast and get into the park when it opened – the early bird gets the worm and all that.

Day 2: 4 April

There was a feeling of disbelief when the alarm penetrated my consciousness. It cannot be time to get up already? But it was. Somehow Roy and I got ourselves into gear and readied ourselves to face the morning – no future in contemplating the whole day at this point!

We breakfasted quickly and tried to get rolling in time to be first at the national park gate: no hope. So we were about halfway up the queue to get in – until Dulan did the paperwork and suddenly we rolled past everyone else and off to the gate about third. Another unsuspected thing that is part of the service you pay for with a formal tour. It still didn't get us a Sloth Bear... in fact to save words later I'll admit now that we never got closer than arriving five minutes too late for one. A beast that will have to wait for another trip!

A confiding Painted Stork in a pool along the entrance track was followed by more views of Grey (elusive) and Ruddy (accommodating) Mongooses and then another photographic taunt from a Golden Jackal, this one in the open and not too distant but entirely denuded by mange – yeuch! Poor beast... A sounder of Wild Boar showed only their backsides as they retreated into dense forest and a brief Indian Muntjac bolted into cover before cameras could be deployed.

We took a different route in the park from the one we had followed the previous afternoon, and found ourselves alongside a large lake with short grasses around a sandy/muddy shoreline. Shorebirds were present in some variety, with familiar birds such as Dunlin, Curlew Sandpiper, Ruff and Black-tailed Godwits intermingled with more exotic fare such as Pacific Golden Plover, Tibetan Sand Plover and what, after some patient observation and a few short flights from the object of scrutiny, was agreed to be Pintail Snipe. However, the stars of the shorebird show were a pair of **Great Thick-knees** that were not only in the open between us and the lake but then obligingly trotted towards our vehicle for a really excellent show of a top bird at point blank range. Outstanding! One of my bird targets for the trip safely stored in my own memory as well as that of the camera.

The odd Whiskered Tern was floating above the lake or roosting near its edge: not too close to the edge as the lake now revealed it was occupied by **Mugger** crocodiles, herp tick and like the elephant another one off my Jungle Book list of Asian animals to see. Unfortunately we never got a good

chance to photograph them out of the water but at least I'd caught up with what I felt had been a big miss from my Indian trip of 2011. A Black-headed Ibis was foraging along the lake shore (also not too close to the waterline) and gave a good photo-opp in glorious sunshine.

After the lake session we were back to driving through forest, not too dense to see a little way through but thick enough to concentrate our efforts on very nearby creatures including another Indian Muntjac, this time one prepared to stand its ground and model for our cameras. Eventually we reached a lodge/forest station by yet another lake and stopped to use the facilities and pick up some more variety: a pair of **White-bellied Sea Eagles** that circled briefly near the far side of the lake and then flew off (tick but less than satisfactory really), Great White Egret for pictures, a small lizard that was new, **Indian Common Clubtail** (which is more reminiscent of our Goldenringed Dragonfly), **Common Crow** butterfly, a tree frog on a toilet door.

Dulan let us know we would be back here later for lunch, then we were off back into the woods and a succession of White-rumped Shamans that just would not sit for pictures. We emerged from the forest near another lake and while driving past small copses between us and it Dulan spotted an **Indian Pitta** standing in an opening into one of them. I got my bins on it for a couple of seconds before it rocketed upwards to disappear in the leafy upperworks of the bushes, but that was enough to be dazzled by the patches of bright colour contrasting with the olive green back and beige underparts as well as the prominent face pattern. A big Land Monitor stalked across our wheeltracks and hunted about in the short turf beyond, its long and surprisingly pink tongue flickering in and out in search of prey.

Along the forest fringe we also encountered our first **Tufted Grey Langurs**, endemic Sri Lankan versions of the langur clan. On the far shore a herd of about 20 Chital grazed well away from the forest edge. Dulan had picked up intel that a Leopard had killed one earlier and was now lying up nearby. Quite likely, but it didn't wander into view while we waited. Leaving empty-handed Dulan found us a **Painted-lipped Lizard** immobile on a tree-trunk, enabling us to take a few pictures of it in situ. Then he spotted a small Land Monitor with only its head visible at the mouth of its refuge within a hollow branch – nothing was getting past him!

All of us could easily spot the next highlight, a Crested Serpent Eagle perched at eyelevel on a tree branch right by the track. Steve and John exclaimed over this as they were accustomed to seeing this species high over the woods, whereas I couldn't see the excitement as I'd seen several like this at Bandhavgarh years before. It sat tranquilly while we took our photos and drove onwards. Back on a lakeshore we encountered an Osprey perched high in a dead tree, not far from a Grey-bellied Fish Eagle being mobbed by a family of Malabar Pied Hornbills.

Then a Jerdon's Bushlark popped up right by the truck and also gave us a good photo-opp while it sang as it foraged on the sand and short grass. Shortly after this a White-rumped Shama finally sat up for its portrait and then we made our way back over the tracks to the lodge for lunch (brought with us), which was served indoors with guards on the doors to keep the local Toque Macaques from robbing us blind. Lunch was interrupted by a call from Dulan that an Elephant was at the far side of the lake outside, so we scampered off to get a few frames of that before it could disappear again, then returned to our curried chicken and rice.

After lunch we had more of a wander about immediate locale, adding pictures of Striated Heron and Brahminy Kite to the portfolio as well as a funky orange solitary wasp, before mounting up and heading off in yet another new direction that almost immediately brought us a lot closer to the male Asian Elephant feeding in the shallows of the lake near a tusked Wild Boar. Stopping for these also got us **Grey-bellied Cuckoos** flying between nearby bushes.

Back at one of the earlier lakes we had a close encounter with two big and zappy wading birds – a Purple Heron and a Painted Stork full-frame close and in no hurry. Presumably at a lake we hadn't visited before there was a herd of Water Buffalo which, after some considerable discussion of appearance and Sri Lanka history, were ruled tickable by the whole crew. They were definitely photographable as well.

Moving on we found ourselves revisiting tracks we'd been over in the morning but of course seeing different birds: a **Chestnut-headed Bee-eater** perched up for us, a Sri Lanka Woodshrike offered views and I had a brief but good view of a **Blue-tailed Bee-eater** that shot off before anyone else got on it. We had more difficulty with an **Emerald Dove** (or was it a sequence of them?) flying up from the track in woodland as we approached – tick but no pic in the end. Considerably easier to photograph was the Leopard we now encountered about ten yards from the track. On our arrival it was lying in the head up regal way that big cats do, but it fairly soon rolled onto its back with all four paws in the air, which may have been more comfortable because it had clearly absolutely stuffed itself on whatever it had killed, belly bulging considerably.

We moved a bit closer to try for a better angle and took more photos of the flat out cat, relaxed but keeping a very aware eye on us from this close range. Just wow.

As other vehicles began to arrive we moved on and encountered another bird of prey perched at head height right next to the track: this time it was a Crested Hawk Eagle and the views were awesome. One of those sightings where for practical purposes you've seen as much as you are going to (and all you need) in a minute but it seems sacrilege to tear yourself away! Somehow we eventually did and still the afternoon was not over as we recognized we were getting back towards the long stretch of entrance track to the park: a single Water Buffalo with accompanying Cattle Egrets was followed by yet more views of Ruddy Mongoose and then Dulan pointed out an **Indian (Sri Lankan) Cobra** crossing the track behind our truck just as I noticed a Shikra right next to us at guess what, head height. A couple of quick changes of emphasis and I decided to ignore the Shikra (which I've previously photographed in Africa and India) in favour of my first ever cobra. Luckily it decided to hunt among bushes separated by short grass areas very near the truck and I could get some reasonable pictures. It didn't put its hood up but you can't have everything and I was in any case very pleased to break my cobra duck.

Our final run out of the park added views of Flapshell Turtle in a pool on our left and another Star Tortoise striding purposefully across a clearing. Outside the park, on the way home we did find a couple of **Ashy Woodswallows** on wires above the road. Smart. By this time everyone was very tired, and of course we had a night drive scheduled for later: time to start using moments of down time to get some shut-eye!

Tonight's drive didn't start till 2300 giving everyone time for two or three hours sleep. Apart from the usual disorientation on waking from out of sequence sleep this was a big help and we mounted up hoping for something spectacular. As far as I was concerned we got it because the thermal imagers came up with several roosting small birds that included two more ticks for me, both of which were in the open and easy to photograph: **Plain Prinia** and **Ashy Prinia**, followed by a Blyth's Reed Warbler. A **Brown Vine Snake (=Brown-speckled Whip Snake)** wouldn't show its head clearly, which lessened its impact, a **Green Vine Snake (= Long-nosed Whip Snake)** was almost as tricky, but a **Common Bronzeback Tree Snake** gave excellent views and pictures. All three were up in the outer twigs of their respective bushes and they seemed to show up well in spotlights – maybe it's the shininess of their scales? Soon after the Bronzeback we were struggling to get good views of a very high value target, a **Grey Slender Loris**: I never saw more than patches of fur on this first one but later in the night one calmly steadily walked up a diagonal branch in full view providing the sort of joyful excitement one wants on this kind of excursion and also emphasising the necessity of prioritising watching over photography. Woohoo!

Next excitement was a warm body in a shallow ditch at the side of the track. A quick spotlight and quicker eyes than mine revealed a **Barred Buttonquail** creeping along in the bottom of it but if I wasn't quick to get on it my camera was effective at such short range and I managed a photo of this skulker in a little gap in the reeds it was moving about beneath.

Tiptoeing along a narrow track atop a tall, steep-sided bund, eyeshine was called down on the left in a triangle of deep grass (not elephant grass, just the equivalent of British rushes) just shy of a lake that pushed up to the base of the bank. A longish period of waiting, shuffling about for angles and alternating darkness with surprise switch-ons failed to improve the views for us though the feeling was we had a Fishing Cat. Eventually Dulan and our driver (whose name I have unfortunately not

recorded) attempted to get round behind it and push it in our direction, but cats are smarter than that and highly mobile: we all saw it leap from its hide and depart rapidly towards a line of trees and that was that: UTV. Exploring further along the bund we came to a dead end which was steep enough and wet enough at the bottom that our driver decided not to risk going down it to turn round but began reversing at what I felt was quite a rate in pitch black and on the narrow crest! However he really was that good and we completed the manoeuvre safely before turning in a field entrance and heading back. On the way home Dulan found a Small Indian Civet by a small midden but none of us got any kind of view of it: for once in the best corner of the truck I saw it streak away across the gap we were looking through but got nothing on it beyond its length and low-slung jizz. Another UTV. A Brown Fish Owl did give views but I managed to completely foul up what should have been easy photos.

Finally this long day was over and we could grab a little more sleep before resuming in the morning.

Day 3: 5 April

First thing on the agenda today was a walk to a bat roost, so it was a relatively slow start. That gave me the chance to concentrate on some of the birds near our chalet (as well as washing a few bits of clothing to hang up in our open air - but thoroughly insect-netted - bathroom). **Scaly-breasted Munias**, a Tailorbird, male and female Indian Robins and, over breakfast, a Small Minivet, all got the treatment. Immediately after breakfast as we were drawing ourselves and kit together a **Black-headed Cuckooshrike** and Asian Paradise Flycatcher on its nest also provided excellent sightings before Dulan led us out of the lodge gate and up a side track bounded by leafy gardens and substantial trees. **Sri Lanka Green Pigeons** with neatly piped bright yellow wing feather edges and lemon underparts contrasting with dark green or maroon backs lurked beneath the canopy. Nearby a Brown-headed Barbet sat in the sun on the edge of a more open tree.

Suddenly Dulan led us off the track and round behind a dilapidated looking cottage, warning us to be careful of the ants nest. This was the bat roost and had apparently had a couple of attempts to reclaim it for humankind, defeated by the tenacity of the roosting Chiroptera. Ownership was no longer disputed.... Dulan looked inside first, then we followed. The place was absolutely chock full of **Schneider's Leaf-nosed Bats**, mostly hanging up on walls, rafters or ceiling but with quite a few flying about round our heads. I guessed there might be 200 or more in all: it was a terrific spectacle. The smell was remarkable as well... I took photos quickly and slipped back out to the fresh air. Whew! Breathe again.

It was already hot and I was keen to get in the truck and have a bit of airflow over me. However, we had a while to go yet so I took the opportunity to photograph some of the highly colourful dragonflies around the small pond by our chalet and to watch the birds using the field behind it, including a jazzy Indian Roller, some Indian Pond Herons and over the top a distant Black-winged Kite and two Oriental Honey Buzzards. Big John, pan-species listing, found an Ant Mantis (a heavily built predator mimicking ants in form though not size) that we all went to see. Our resident Zitting Cisticola put on a bit of a show. As Roy and I left our chalet, we found a Paddyfield Pipit right by the edge of the nearest pond, mere yards from us, and got a couple of quick snaps. Then it was into the truck and away to the park for the first of today's drives.

We tried a new technique in our pursuit of Sloth Bear, staking out a concrete lined drinking pool that one had been seen using on several recent afternoons. It didn't work but we had some good birding at the pool, with **Black-naped Monarchs**, **White-browed Bulbuls**, Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, **Blue-faced Malkoha** (a cracker this was), **Brown-capped Babbler** and **Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill** – several of these last had been called but I'd managed to miss all of them to this point, when finally I got a good view - all contributing to the fun. There were a couple of showers but we sneered at them after the downpour we'd been treated to on our first visit to the park.

On the way back we saw not only the original mangy Golden Jackal but also its not-quite-as-mangy mate, which retained hair on tail and spine through to crown. Still not exactly what I was hoping for...

Dinner, log, a nap and it was time to mount the vehicle again for our next night drive. Before we even got on it we were enjoying views of **Indian Scops Owl** (two in fact) in a tree over the car park. They

didn't care a hoot about our presence or cameras and flashes and we were able to wander about trying for angles to our hearts' content.

We adopted our usual positions – it's funny how people do that on trips but it seems to me to be a universal habit – and set off. Does the chance of moving oneself out of position for the next creature and wishing one was back there, outweigh one's belief in the chance of gaining from a different position?

The usual Asiatic Long-tailed Climbing Mice were in the long grasses by the road, whenever we were on dirt tracks Indian Gerbils played hide-and-seek along the margins, and no fewer than three Jungle Cats gave us indifferent and usually distant views at various points throughout the night. We saw plenty of Jerdon's and Small Indian Nightjars but didn't pay them much attention after the excellent previous views – we were after new stuff.

We had another go at the lakeside bund where we had so nearly succeeded with Fishing Cat the night before but the wily feline was nowhere to be seen this time and a fisherman with a temporary shelter on the bund brought us to a premature stop (we'd slipped past him the night before but the driver seemed less confident tonight – maybe he'd startled himself previously!) We also searched up a different lakeside bund on which we first had great views of a big green frog which was apparently **Indian Five-fingered Frog** and then a thermal imager-located medium-sized roosting bird turned out to be an Indian Pitta in the open – wow! It was after this that we took a turn that turned out to lead us across a ford and then left to find ourselves on a set of steps that weren't exactly ideal for the vehicle... after a tight three-pointer we retraced our route. This was followed once we were back on normal tracks by another Indian Scops Owl, this one sitting on a telephone pole bracing wire below head height and ideal for photos.

We managed another Grey Slender Loris which gave decent views briefly and was appreciated. Not a hope of pictures though. Occasionally the thermal imager guys would find monkeys roosting in trees but these were generally deep among the branches. However, after another near-disaster in which I at least managed to see a **Small Indian Civet** in a painting-by-numbers bit at a time way, we were treated to one in a field that actually walked towards us in the open despite full illumination and granted us the chance to loose off at it with cameras. Fantastic! We were finally defeated by a closed road and had to retrace our steps for some distance to regain the main road and return home, obtaining a good view but bad photo of a properly furry Golden Jackal en route.

Back at the accommodation Dulan spotted a great-looking red and black **Sri Lanka Bullfrog** to finish the night's entertainment. In our room I took the opportunity to photograph our resident Asian House Gecko before falling instantly asleep for confused images of the night to whirl before the inside of my eyelids till the alarm went off.

Day 4: 6 April

We were moving on to Sigirya today but not in a hurry, so we had a while to photograph a couple of dragonflies that hadn't perched up for us till this morning before boarding the minibus to move on. Pied Paddy Skimmers and Common Picturewings fell to our lenses before we said farewell to the team that had been looking after us at Claughton Wild and relaxed thankfully into the air conditioning inside the minibus. On the way we stopped at an extensive wetland to tick off and photograph the funky and fantastic **Pheasant-tailed Jacana**, trotting across lily pads with enormous feet. We also stopped at a restaurant that wasn't quite as good as we had hoped, though its cool interior was appreciated on a bright hot day.

We weaved between some substantial but isolated hills – inselbergs – to arrive at the Sigirya Village Hotel, a large chalet-based resort whose dining room gave a good view (over another swimming pool we never had time to use) of a fine example of such a rock formation, the Sigirya Rock, a place of pilgrimage and now tourism that you'd never get me up in a month of Sundays.

The tree-shaded paths to the chalets were tarmacked, with formal ponds alongside that held small fish, frogs and Black Turtles showing rather more readily than the skittish one that dived away from our cameras at Claughton Wild. The trees were full of birds though getting views of some of them

proved a little challenging. A White-browed Bulbul sat up nicely for its portrait but **Oriental White-eye** and **Sri Lanka Woodshrike** bounced about in the canopy teasing from behind twigs and leaves before reluctantly giving themselves up while a **Crimson-fronted Barbet** made it to the SD card but all the pictures were out of focus due to interposed twiggage.

In a change of habit we piled back into the minibus for a drive to a track alongside the huge engineered moat surrounding Sigirya Rock, where we could have a bird walk in the late afternoon. It was nice to stretch our legs after a day in the bus and there were more new birds to see: high in a small cave on the side of the Rock a **Shaheen Falcon** was roosting in view of Dulan's scope, though it kindly leapt forth and swung round in the open a couple of times before landing back out of sight. I was later a little disappointed to find this was just a race of Peregrine but with its near-black upperparts it was a very distinctive form. A female **Indian Blue Robin** was much closer albeit sticking to very dark bush interiors and was a proper tick. We added **Drongo Cuckoo** to the list and having enjoyed a Brown Fish Owl on the nest, moved the bus before setting off up the track in the other direction from our previous peregrination.

We had parked next to a police post of sorts around which a number of native dogs lounged. One got up and trotted ahead of us as we made our way along the track, gradually stretching its lead to a couple of hundred yards as we birded our way along. Suddenly it started barking into the forest on the right of the track before backing a little towards us: a huge male Asian Elephant padded silently out of the woods and turned in our direction. Our bus was several hundred yards behind us. Dulan's instruction to set off back to it was redundant.... Here we are walking quickly away, I thought while waving to the driver to bring what now felt like a small fortress up to us. He was paying attention and did so promptly.

Our little canine friend was retreating steadily in our direction with the occasional defiant stand and bark. The elephant came slowly and steadily on regardless. Safely back with the bus, we were a little more confident and stood by the door to take some pictures. Beyond the elephant a local scooter rider who had been coming towards us down the track sat on his machine considering his options. Eventually he decided to take another route, turned his bike on the track and set off into the distance. The bull elephant turned off short of us into the woods and after a while Dulan ruled it was OK to continue our walk. The bus however stayed a lot closer to us!

The rule about dogs in Asia is simple: keep away from them. However, if I'd had anything at all to eat in my pocket that little Pi-dog would have had it. Without him we might well have walked right onto that elephant.

Dinner offered a number of choices but if you wanted meat then chicken curry was still the basic option. At least there were different vegetable accompaniments on offer and all of it was nice. Still quite hot though, no way my wife Marion could eat any of it!

After dinner we had a while to sort ourselves out a bit before our first night drive around Sigirya. New site – new possibilities – exciting!

The new vehicle offered its own brand of excitement: instead of steps directly up into the back seats it was necessary to climb in at the front of the elevated flatbed behind the cab and then negotiate the gap between a swiveling bench seat and the single fixed one on the left of the truck, a procedure fraught with opportunities to hack my shins into bleeding tatters. However, as the shortest member of the team it was easier for me (and Roy, who is not much taller than I am) than the giant Big John or even lanky Steve, who risked concussion whenever they moved about, needing to be bent deeply over for safety under the awning framework.

We travelled first along some of the tracks we'd seen in daylight, and Dulan found us our first Golden Palm Civet. There is some dispute (in Sri Lanka at least) about how many species occur with variations from "Golden Palm Civet" to "Golden Dry Zone/Sri Lankan Brown/Golden Wet Zone Palm Civets". Take your pick, though the more scientific thinking is that they are all the same haplotype and phenotypical variation is well within that seen in all sorts of creatures. If there is such a thing, this one was **Golden Dry Zone Palm Civet**, and it moved too fast for my camera though as usual I was pleasantly surprised by how much you can get on an animal in a very few seconds. It is a long-tailed

lean animal with terrific climbing abilities – almost simian in its movements in trees, despite the darkness. They aren't seen just in palm trees, either.

Dulan spotted roosting bats in a wide crack in a tree and identified them as Pouch-bearing Sheath-tailed Bats. They sat still (as did all the ones we saw subsequently) under illumination and we had a nice photo-opportunity. On again, and we broke into more open country – though throughout Sri Lanka we found they still like hedges at least along main roads, so we were always seeking gaps or tracks leading out into the stubbles and crops. The fields held a few Indian Hares, we had a couple more Jungle Cats at longish ranges at points during the night, and two more Small Indian Civets added to our total for that species as well. The other high point of the drive – well the highest other high point perhaps I should say – was an **Asian Palm Civet**, smaller and very obviously different from the Golden, with dark shaggy fur and an even narrower face. My notebook says I got a shot off, but I haven't found it in the 6600 pictures yet...

We spent some considerable time searching along small canals for Fishing Cats, without success but with our mammal trip list enhanced by an Indian Crested Porcupine that trotted along the far side of one channel for a while before wheeling up the bank and disappearing into woodland. We had a couple of brief views of Brown Fish Owls, mainly disappearing upwards from perches into the wastes of the night sky.

Gradually the track we were following closed in on us and trended uphill. We stopped for Dulan and the driver to investigate recent looking Pangolin diggings and search the area for the animal: no luck. Despite our various successes this was starting to feel like a duff night. Then, after some quite rough lurching over potholes and round banked corners, we parked in a high-canopied forest hall and Dulan invited us to dismount for a walk. Well, I didn't see that coming.... I was right behind Dulan and planned to stay there as being the safest way to wander about the forest at night. This feeling was later reinforced when Dulan showed us a three-foot **Green Pit Viper** hanging head down from a bush waiting for suitable prey to walk below it.

It was sometime early in the morning and I was definitely not at my best, so when, after some considerable time of wandering about seeing mainly frogs (and some more recent Pangolin sign but no animal) Dulan proposed a search off tracks through the wilderness, I balked. Roy seemed also to have had enough and we opted to wait where we were while the search proceeded. Soon we couldn't even see the glow of torches wherever the team had got to and I began to feel uneasy. In my tiredness I even suspected we had been abandoned, but fortunately Roy talked me out of that particular fantasy. As the lights reappeared I thought with relief that our wait was over but they moved past us to look in another bit of jungle. I had got over the worry that we were about to be sprung upon by a Leopard or trampled by an elephant but this was getting beyond a joke.... When our friends did rejoin us Steve quietly apologised to me for the length of time they had been away. Back at the truck we had coffee (apart from Roy who doesn't drink it) and cakes of which all partook. Once I'd settled down I realised the main issue was simply Dulan's enthusiasm for showing people wildlife, and it's very difficult to fault that in a guide.

Then – blow me – it was time for a short walk back along the track we'd driven up, which Dulan said was often good for flying squirrels! Oh well, I thought and away we went. We found more frogs but no flying squirrels, and Dulan suddenly halted and said this was far enough, it's not good after this. He went on to say something else and I didn't catch it, so I asked why it wasn't good beyond the place where we stood. "Elephant," he replied with brevity. Now you tell me.... Here we are walking quickly away! This time I was definitely glad to be back in the truck.

Heading back down the track one of the thermal imager wielders spotted a roosting bird on our right: it was a **Slaty-legged Crane** halfway up a hedge, it was a tick and it sat there allowing photos. A good finish to an interesting night out!

Day 5: 7 April

We had the morning off and squandered it on a walk round the resort, hoping for a bird bonanza after our productive but brief session the previous afternoon. No such luck, everything seemed to have disappeared! Best of the morning was Brown-headed Barbet. We should probably have used the time

to get some sleep. We were however delighted to watch the local Toque Macaque troop playing in and around one of the ponds, with younger members competing to leap into the water from higher and higher perches on the built up rock face behind the pool or even the overhanging tree branches. The action was very fast and difficult to photograph though!

In the afternoon we drove to a temple atop a small inselberg, which offered a good though distant view of Sigirya Rock across intervening woodland and rather more importantly for us had a couple of bat roosts in caves and boulder piles at its foot. In one of these we found Schneider's Leaf-nosed Bats in profusion and a more natural setting than the house we'd been in at Wilpattu; in the other **Black-bearded Tomb Bats** clung to the vertical walls of a crevice between boulders. The rocky hillside's bushes and the sky above the hill yielded up **Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike**, Black Drongo, a few **Sri Lanka Swallows** and a Sri Lanka Green Pigeon in better light than previous views. Brahminy Kites floated beyond camera reach and distantly by the shore of a lake a small flock of Lesser Whistling Ducks idled.

From there we made our way to another temple, this time cut into rock and accessed via steep stairs. Jungle Crows and House Swifts were around the road below it. Accompanied by the local dogs which seemed to provide the same attendant service (= getting under the feet on the steepest bits) to all visitors, we made our way to a terrace on which a single tree bore a Hump-nosed Viper on the lowest part of its sloping trunk, bent into an ambush for any rodent running down the tree towards it. At the inward edge of the terrace rooms were cut into the rock and these held yet more Schneider's Leaf-nosed Bats including some of the rufous form. After photographing those and the viper we returned to the minibus and spotlighted into the dusk. It wasn't a very good vehicle for this but we did manage to see a **White-spotted Chevrotain** before returning to base for dinner.

There was a night drive scheduled but Roy said he was absolutely on his uppers and had to get some sleep, so he'd have to just hope not to miss anything significant. We all knew how he felt: at some point each of us had a moment of desperate weariness during the trip. Steve was trying to recover from a cold that had struck as we came away, John was just going down with it, I'd had my bad time the night before and consequently was determined not to show further weakness. So we accepted his need and wished him a good night's sleep before mounting up and setting off.

One of the glorious things about the night drives was the wind over the skin: it brought the perceived temperature down to something really quite enjoyable. So I was pleased to be on the move again, standing up and gripping tightly onto the awning frame with left hand and a couple of right fingers while my night-rigged camera bounced bruisingly about on my forearms, held lightly in the rest of my right hand.

Our first mammals nevertheless eluded us photographically: a Small Indian Civet, Indian Hares in some numbers, a Jungle Cat and a Golden Jackal were all too far away for my camera to take advantage of their spotlight visibility. It was good to get more views of all these animals though.

Tonight as last night we spent a lot of time following various canals, streams and wide ditches in the hope of finding Fishing Cats and this time it worked because we found two together and had them in the open, point blank, for about half an hour. The **Fishing Cats** played with each other, sat and studied the water, pounced on unseen small things in the grass along the bank and prowled one after the other along the water's edge. Pure magic! Absolutely fabulous prolonged close views of two extremely charismatic cats – now that's what I'm talking about! I love night drives.

With the exhilaration of this warming the cockles of our hearts we made our way towards the forest destination of the previous night, and I don't mind admitting my heart sank just the very tiniest bit at the prospect of another session there. However I was determined that this time I was up for anything everyone else was going to do, and no messing. We arrived at the parking place and set off up the track towards where Roy and I had waited for the gang the previous night. Just as we reached the clearing Dulan and our driver both hit the afterburners and disappeared round a clump of trees at max chat! Dulan actually tripped on a root or rock – I heard his boot clip it – how he didn't faceplant I've no idea but he managed to keep his balance and keep going.

By the time we reacted and followed the pair they had an **Indian Pangolin** cornered for us: in fact it had curled itself into a ball and we had to wait a little while in dead silence for it to gain the confidence to uncurl and give us the most mind-blowing close views of a truly magical animal (and I don't mean for Chinese quackery, either). It was a lot bigger than I expected, well over three feet of scaly armoured beast but with that little round Clanger-like snout, just entirely cute. The overlapping scales fitted together so well, sliding over each other at the unattached end without ever revealing gaps between them. After it had adopted its boxing pose (showing those long thick talons that enable it to rip termite mounds apart and dig like a JCB) and then shambled about a bit the Pangolin made off and the supreme mammal moment of the whole trip was over. We were fizzing!

With Dulan, no time for celebration, however: we traipsed round the paths we'd covered the previous night, finding another Green Pit Viper (voted unanimously "Herp of the Trip" on the last evening) and a **Common Lanka Skink** which I think was the only one of the trip, but thankfully the team skipped the big forest search. I think it might have been around now that we had a Black Rat in the woodland. Back at the truck it was coffee and cake time before I decided to also skip a second trip down the track. I felt we might be pushing our luck, which had been considerable to that point. Of course once I was completely alone and wondering whether to use my torch to scan the nearby woodland or keep it off and sit silent to avoid detection, it didn't seem such a great idea to be on my own even in the truck.... You pays your money and makes your choice. The guys were back fairly quickly and I was glad to see them.

We spent the rest of the night spotlighting from the truck, which I enjoyed. We had a brief view of another Fishing Cat but it didn't hang about: we had a couple of White-spotted Chevrotains as well and although they paced slowly through the bushes they were also very much for watching rather than photographing. However, the next highlight was another roosting Indian Pitta found with a thermal imager, this time some 25 feet up a tree outside a house with some very loud dogs. It was facing us so we got a view of the pale breast while Dulan explained to the householders brought out by the noise of their dogs, what we were doing.

Roy took the news with dignity.

Day 6: 8 April

We had the morning off again and this time made sure we did get some extra sleep (seven hour night drives take it out of you) also sorting out a few battery recharges, washing a shirt or two, downloading pictures to my tablet (I'd been doing that at Wilpattu as well as I was sure to run out of SD card space if I didn't) and generally preparing for the next couple of days.

Roy and I still managed a few bits on a slow walk to the dining room including a cracking Sri Lanka Giant Squirrel and excellent views of Tufted Grey Langurs at short range.

After lunch we were into the minibus and away to Hurulu Eco Park with the specific target of daylight pictures of Asian Elephants. Once there we transferred to a safari truck and set off into the reserve. It was a bit of a bunfight with over twenty vehicles congregating around any single elephant and even more when a family group was located. I must say we enjoyed the sight of a couple of drivers ditching their 4WD vehicles in deep ditches and having to be pushed or even towed out.... At one point with the family group a driver "suddenly noticed" a side track enabling him to (a) drive right up to the elephants and (b) block the line of fire for us and several other truckloads that had chosen to stand off – actually even with zoom lenses we needed to be some way back to fit the huge animals in. I know I made eye contact with this bloke and he suddenly moved off again without reference to his passengers, so goodness knows what my expression looked like. The family group of elephants was good value despite the elephant jam around it, with sizes from quite small hairy-backed juvenile right up to mud-plastered matriarch. A young bull had small tusks.

We were looking for birds and mammals as well as elephants, and found Green Imperial Pigeons (eventually we had one sitting up for pix as well); Roy spotted two Barred Buttonquails briefly in the open, and a **Yellow-eyed Babbler** swung back and forth on elephant grass stems for a tricky photo at some distance. A small rat bounding around a scooped out depression on the right side of the track was eventually identified from photographs as **Indian Bush Rat**. Leaving the other elephant admirers

behind, we found our show-off pigeons, not just Green Imperial but a smart Orange-breasted Green Pigeon. Along the highway, as we made our way back to the reserve centre, a Crested Hawk Eagle was surveying the ground from a power line.

Back in our own minibus, we had an afternoon drive which at last included a pair of Golden Jackals in good condition that lazed and stood about in the sunshine while I took some much desired and vastly appreciated photos of them through an opened sliding window past Big John, both of us straining to work effectively in the confined space. We had a stop for king coconut juice soon after which was also much appreciated.

For the end of daylight we visited some monuments among trees, at which cicadas were emerging which was good to see, and we also found Sri Lanka Bronze Skink (which looks like almost very common skink everywhere) the unusually handsome Tammanna Skink as well as a Common Hourglass Tree Frog.

We tried really hard to find Fishing Cat and Pangolin for Roy on the night drive but it wasn't to be. In the course of doing so we had a **Greater Short-nosed Fruit Bat** feeding in streamside bushes, another Pouch-winged Sheath-tailed Bat in a tree crack and a White-spotted Chevrotain that allowed me to photograph bits of it through the dense vegetation in which it was lurking, not to mention a Long-nosed Whip Snake that put on a really great show for us. However, it took Roy about three or four repetitions of "Elephant" to drive into Dulan and the driver that there was one on the road ahead of us. It was a bull and the musth secretions dribbling down the sides of its head could be seen clearly, which meant it was off its head on testosterone and to be treated warily. Naturally it was coming towards us. I was OK with this, especially as our driver reversed away from it – until the engine suddenly began to rev wildly, unaccompanied by further movement of our truck. I immediately assumed the drive had malfunctioned (so this is it, we're going to die) but it turned out that the driver was simply attempting to intimidate the elephant. It turned off before reaching us so maybe it worked.

We saw Night Herons on all our night drives around Sigirya – they were feeding or roosting along all the canals and so on. We usually saw Brown Fish Owls, too, though most of those flew off (four out of five on this particular drive). On this one we were lucky enough to find one away from water that sat up and permitted a really nice photo session. That find was followed in fairly short order by a Crested Hawk Eagle that also stayed put for us! The usual nightjars put in appearances from time to time and once in a while the screeching of a Red-wattled Lapwing shattered the night from above us. This was the first night that we heard Brown Wood Owl but we never saw it on this or the two ensuing nights on which we also heard it. I don't do lifers on call, sadly.

Day 7: 9 April

We slept late having been out nearly all night again. When I rose I immediately started my latest download from the camera to the tablet, and walked into the bathroom. There was a scorpion making its way along the far wall near the sink. I called Roy and he got a look but it went out of sight behind the bin and only then did we dive for cameras (I had to seek out my spare body and short lens as my R7 was tethered to the tablet of course!) When we returned we couldn't find it. The only place it could have gone was down the drain in the corner of the room, which was slightly unnerving as that meant it could subsequently come back up it. On subsequent visits to the bathroom both of us were assiduous in checking for errant scorpions, and for that matter there was no question of putting foot to floor (from bed) until the light was on and the area scrutinised. We should have been doing this stuff anyway and I would like to think we were sufficiently alert not to have trodden on it barefoot.....

Dulan had been communicating with friends and wildlife workers in the area and during the morning he drove to collect two cat snakes that had been rescued from inappropriate places they'd got into. A bit canned hunting but he provided us with views and photo-ops with both Sri Lankan and Forster's Cat Snakes in the gardens of the resort before returning them to their individual locations for release. Smart reptiles to see reasonably up close. Both are rear-fanged mildly venomous snakes which just shows you should always look these things up: I had thought cat snakes were non-venomous. Live and learn, if you're lucky.

In the afternoon we returned to the underground temple we'd visited the previous day in search of a particular black-and-white striped skink, but dipped. We looked on the tree for the Hump-nosed Viper but it wasn't there. OK, where is it then? I kept an even closer eye on where I was putting my feet.

From there we returned to the Sigirya moat for a late afternoon bird walk on a slightly different stretch than where we had encountered the elephant. This area had a woodpecker nest which we staked out from a respectful distance, waiting for the **Crimson-backed Flameback** pair to attend – which they did. We also got better views of Sri Lankan Grey Hornbill and really excellent views of a pair of Malabar Pied Hornbills. A few Chital flitted through the woods inside the ring of the moat. Indian Flying Foxes were beginning to fly out to feed as we returned to base for dinner before our next night drive.

With another cross-country move on the morrow we started earlier than usual and it was barely dark as we stopped by a bridge we recognised from previous drives and hopped out to try to photograph Indian Flying Foxes in flight. I found very quickly that with the zoom pulled fairly well back I didn't need to sight at all, I could use the boresighted spotlight to find targets and the autofocus was up to grabbing onto the bats thus illuminated. Mind you what works on big fruit bats won't work on insect-hunting microbats!

Our stop was actually for Giant Indian Flying Squirrel and we scored, with views of one bounding up a tree and then launching into the night. I got a record shot as it threw itself into the air. We went on to one more shot at small cats, scouring fields and canals but finding only a Eurasian Otter not far from where the Fishing Cats had been.

Elsewhere we briefly saw a bunch of Chital fleeing through a plantation and a Dry Zone Golden Palm Civet that twisted in and out of branches in a big tree overhanging a lakeside bund we were tiptoeing along in the truck, ducking and weaving as leaves and twigs lunged at us out of the dark. A couple more White-spotted Chevrotains gave us views of bits of them at a time at forest edges, and another Pouch-bearing Sheath-tailed Bat showed the white patches on its back better than the others had. I got a record shot of Indian Gerbil after the others got some really nice pictures – my own fault for not getting up more briskly, I was lazily spotlighting from my seat for a while. A Long-nosed Whip Snake also gave us a repeat view of a good-looking animal. Overall it was a good night out but lacking that real star item.

Day 8: 10 April

Today was a transit day, moving from Sigirya to Kitulgala, in the upland wet zone. We could expect higher humidity to go with the already high temperatures. For most of the journey we saw only those really obvious species that frequent fields and paddies – ibises, egrets and the odd stork.

We revisited the temple to have a last go for the funky stripey skink but again dipped out. Apparently there had been a Russell's Viper there earlier but we dipped that too – though once told of its presence I kept a very keen eye out for snakes.

However, not long into the journey we had a planned stop to visit two bat roosts at a single site, for two species we hadn't yet met. Anticipation was high! The NIFS Popham Arboretum at Dambulla is a small sanctuary set up by a British expat, Mr Popham, who gifted it to the NIFS and now runs it as a reserve with educational and wildlife watching activities. We visited both bat roosts and to our delight one held a single **Lesser False Vampire**, a really cool-looking bat with long ears and one of those crumpled faces that hold your attention. The other had a colony of **Rufous Horseshoe Bats** which were also a tick and nice to see but not quite as arresting in looks. To minimise disturbance we took our photos quickly, didn't linger and moved quietly without conversation. The Lesser False Vampire was my bat of the trip, a real cracker regarding us with a bright intelligent expression that is most likely completely misleading anthropomorphism on my part.

As the journey continued we left the flat lowlands and began to wind up into the hills. Speaking of winding up, steep slopes and long drops often set off my fear of heights, but the roads we took in Sri Lanka were so protected by route, thick woodland and where necessary, substantial barriers, that I had no qualms at all. Having heard me screaming in the past no doubt Steve at least was relieved. I certainly was. I wasn't so chuffed with various bus drivers driving right onto the back of our minibus

and then honking continuously until they got past, often overtaking on blind bends.... I formed the opinion that all Sri Lanka bus drivers are stark raving mad. The drive had been estimated at two and a half hours but heavy traffic associated with the build up towards Sri Lanka's New Year celebrations turned that into five.

As the evening began to close in suddenly our driver indicated right and turned across the traffic (Sri Lanka drives on the left in case I haven't mentioned it, maybe that familiarity helps with accepting the driving conditions?) into the entrance driveway of the Kitulgala Rest House, stopping under a canopy that stretched to the wide eaves of the rest house itself – which had a colonial government building look about it but was none the worse for that, solidly built with good ventilation.

Our rooms were allocated and we headed off to them, quickly finding that they were actually below the lobby and dining area, set into the hillside with windows facing out over a lawn beyond which the land dropped steeply for about seventy feet to the river Kelani. Before that we had to negotiate the staircase down to room level which would have been a non-event except for the number of giant honeybees buzzing fairly bad-temperedly in the stair well, with numerous casualties and corpses spread across the actual stairs. Not ideal but we made it without untoward incident.

Once in the room Roy and I had our next invertebrate encounter, this time with a two-inch cockroach shimmying around the edges of first the bathroom and then the living room floor. Roy formed the opinion that they were roosting inside the somewhat broken hollow wooden door. I formed the opinion that I wasn't putting up with it and tested the saying "hard to kill as a cockroach" with the heel of my discarded trainer. Not so hard then..... A second one went the same way very soon after appearing and happily we saw no more during our stay at the Rest House. I suppose I should have photographed them before hitting them.

We dined on a new variant of chicken curry and rice before sorting out our gear for a night walk in the rainforest. Oh yes. New site, new game: we had to take a small man-powered ferry across the river for a venture into proper jungle. On foot. At night. We were issued leech socks and advice to spray a ring of heavily DEET-laden insect repellent round them to keep leeches at bay. Thanks to the leech socks – long stemmed foot shapes of ripstock nylon with laces at the top, intended to be tied firmly above the bulge of calf muscles and indeed so worn by all members of the party except me – being non-stretch, they wouldn't go over my Conan-like calves: so instead of looking an elegant expedition-ready male model I set out with a crumpled mess of nylon not far above my ankles. They were very heavily soaked in DEET though!

The ferry was a pair of small plastic canoes bolted in catamaran fashion to an aluminium deck with handrails. The ferryman sat in the stern of one of the canoes with a paddle and propelled us across the fairly substantial river. Bats skimmed the surface just like Daubenton's back home: Dulan said these would be **Brown Bats** (*Myotis hasseltii*) whose habits are just as described. Not knowing whether Muggers lurked in the river I leapt promptly up the steps away from it before pausing to look around. Above us the concrete track led steeply up the hillside towards the lights of a village: back across the river were the welcome lights of home. Dulan led us off up the hill and the climate began to bite.

It was so humid there was a hint of mist: just about enough to be a promise of it rather than the thing itself. The temperature seemed to have barely dropped from daytime. Within a few yards we were sweating and before the path levelled just a little, I at least was wringing wet right through. Even my t-shirt was so wet that it could not absorb more: wiping my forehead with my hand (mainly to prevent insect repellent slipping down into my eyes) I then couldn't wipe it dry again on that or any other part of my clothing.

We spent the next several hours searching the jungle for owls, night mammal targets and herps. We couldn't get any wetter and most of the time we were at least on tracks rather than in virgin forest – though once in a while we had to move off the path to see something located by light or thermal imager. Now and again Dulan would ask us to turn our lights off and wait in darkness for sound or sign of something. When the lights were on we could see, every time we stopped, dozens of leeches looping their way across the forest floor towards us from all directions. Not being able to even see

them created near frenzy when the lights came back on, with queries of “anything on me where I can’t see?” and suchlike. Once I caught the tip of my foot on a low branch we were stepping over and crashed to the ground, twisting as usual to keep my optics safe. I’d no means of knowing what I was falling onto and I’ve never come back up so quickly from a fall, then dusting my hands together to knock off any undesirable wildlife and swishing torch around to check for larger game like snakes before a quick leech check from earth-blackened knees downwards....

With my interest in military history and the Chindit field commander John Masters as one of my personal heroes I was fascinated to experience even in a mild way this Asian rainforest. How in hell’s name could Chindits move in total darkness: not on trails, having to cut their way through thick jungle, no torches, no thermal imagers to see what’s out there, just total darkness and a column of men to bang into, branches to fall over, snakes, scorpions, spiders (we found some real corkers including a huge hairy bird-eating spider sp with a leg spread of over ten inches) elephants and so on – plus of course somewhere the Japanese looking for them.... The thing is quite impossible. My admiration for those soldiers rose several new notches with new understanding, there’s all the difference in the world between reading about it and trying it.

Anyway, we did also actually see some really great wildlife, and if I couldn’t understand how Chindits could move and fight in the jungle I had no idea whatsoever how Dulan kept track of where he was and memorised routes to and positions of particular trees so he could tell us to stop and confidently say this was a spot for flying squirrel, palm civet, whatever.... But so he did, and we had a **Travancore Flying Squirrel** (the smaller of the two species in Sri Lanka) sitting up high in the canopy peering down at us from its transverse perch on a branch.

Herp of the night was a **Sri Lanka Wolf Snake** which was however one of those irritating individuals that won’t give you a good look at its head. The amount of variation among the frogs and toads, and for that matter lizards, was amazing. Neither have previously been my thing but we saw so many different species that I found them very interesting. Lizards that gave themselves up during the walk were the familiar Green Forest Lizard plus a couple of ticks: **Sri Lankan Kangaroo Lizard** and **Whistling Lizard**.

As for amphibians, they were everywhere: roosting on leaves, on tree branches, on rocks, in pools and streams, making their way across damp ground. A few names from this walk: **Asian Common Toad, Hollow-snouted Shrub Frog, Gunther’s Golden-backed Tree Frog, Kelaart’s Dwarf Toad, Kotagama’s Dwarf Toad, Sri Lanka Wood Frog**. Some of them looked ordinary, but some were very colourful and almost elegant. Former princes?

Late in the walk Dulan proposed a side route up to another of his favourite spots. I don’t think we scored there but we did find a roosting **Spot-winged Thrush** on a branch that was a tick and an interesting photo subject in the deep forest night. On the homeward leg we had an Asian Palm Civet in a palm tree by the village. We heard but didn’t see Serendib Scops Owl, discovered some years previously by Dulan’s colleague Deepal. No ticks on call I’m afraid.

Back at the river we were surprised to find that the level had fallen quite a lot. It appears the level is subject to the demands of a hydro-electricity project upstream that stores water when “nobody needs it” – overnight – and releases it for power at peak times during the day. As a result the river was now so shallow we had to be ferried over in two batches. Steve and Big John went first and I took the chance to photograph the ferry in action at night while Roy and I waited our turn.

Back in the room Roy and I stripped off and checked each other for leeches. I’d got away with it but Roy had been had and the offending beast was curled up (not attached) in his navel. It came to a sticky end shortly after discovery. I’d seen earlier that Steve had also suffered and had a huge bloody patch on the back of his shirt, between the shoulderblades.

Day 9: 11 April

Not an early start, rather a leisurely one sorting out gear, in particular counting shirts against days to do, especially since here every time we went out we were going to get soaking wet with sweat.... Also a chance to sit out on the veranda and watch the river, now babbling cheerfully with water level

restored to what it had been when we arrived. Just sitting, not moving about and getting sweaty, seemed a great idea but there were a few birds about and I did prowl the lawn a couple of times, not to much effect. I got more from scanning the river with bins, spotting two large swimming reptiles with tails swishing back and forth as they swam... not Muggers but big Water Monitors, perhaps five feet long or so. It seemed one was encroaching on the other's territory because there was a definite chase in progress with the one behind very much pursuing the other and at one point taking a sprint short cut across a sandbank. It drove off the interloper and then returned to bask on the far bank for a while.

Nearer to me an immature White-bellied Sea Eagle appeared seemingly from nowhere quite low and I fired off a sequence of pictures as it flapped heavily past me. Brilliant – the first two we saw were miles away. Little Cormorants were fishing in the river and occasionally hauling out on the rocks that stuck up from the water in various places.

After lunch we had our first jungle walk of the day. Across the ferry in daylight (a pair of adult White-breasted Water-hens were a nice bonus in the backwater next to the ferry landing on the Rest House side of the river, and I got some pictures of the Little Cormorants) and off up the hill to the village, where we had a conducted tour of all the spots where Dulan thought we might find our target squirrel. We didn't, but we did add **Chestnut-backed Owlet, Layard's Parakeet, Yellow-browed Bulbul, Square-tailed (Black) Bulbul** and **Crested Drongo** to the trip and tick lists. Some of them even sat for photos, though branches kept getting in the way and some were straight up with the light behind them. If I think of more excuses I'll deploy them! We then made our way to a paddy cleared out of the woods, above which a **Lesser Hill Myna** was singing from the top of a tree.

Dulan left us at the edge of the paddy while he went to search the woodland beyond it and eventually he returned in high excitement: he'd found a **Serendib Scops Owl** roosting in a thick bush and would take us in one at a time to see it. This, a recently discovered species as I think I've already said, was pretty much at the top of our bird target list (yes, I know it's a mammal trip) and we were in a fever of anticipation as we followed him to the neighbourhood of the roost site. Each in turn we accompanied Dulan into the woods and were pointed at where the small owl sat quietly among broad leaves in a very dark bush indeed. I ran into real trouble with the electronic viewfinder and could hardly see the bird let alone focus and shoot at it (I should mention I could see it just fine with my bins). Dulan went back in with my camera after everyone had seen it and somehow managed to make it take something I could turn into a record shot. But wow what a bird. The illustration in the Sri Lanka guide really does not do it justice, barely showing what are really prominent feather horns on its head or its intensely chestnut plumage. Fantastic! When we left it was still roosting quietly, unworried by our visit.

Getting a massive target like that takes a lot of pressure off and it was a relieved and happy crew that returned to the Rest House to have dinner and prepare for another night walk in the forest – in fact the last effort of the Bird and Wildlife Team part of our tour and consequently a sign that our time was coming to an end. We all felt this to an extent: the tour had been hard work but by thunder it had delivered, and we were once again heading for discomfort and possible blood-letting with considerable optimism that we might manage one more big score before relaxing into our last couple of days in Sri Lanka.

I was hoping to have a bash at the Brown Bats as we crossed on the ferry but there was real mist over the river this evening (thankfully it didn't extend into the forest, though every tree and leaf was dripping) and the bats weaved in and out of the tendrils of mist which picked up the torchlight and left my camera unable to lock onto them by the time we reached the forest side of the voyage to once again jump ashore and up the steps away from the landing place.

Up past the village we went, our first stop being by the huge flower at the base of a banana bunch. Fulvous Fruit Bats were flying up, nectaring and dropping away again, quick but not impossibly so. Next we found ourselves pausing by a pool in front of one building when Dulan pointed out a Sri Lanka Rock Frog. I stepped up onto a wall to get a decent angle and having taken my picture of the frog found it a little difficult to make the long step back down.... My muscles are less elastic in stretching and for jumping purposes, have no absorbent resilience at all these days!

We carried on and I have a vague feeling we'd been up one path and back down it before someone picked up a moth in their light, hanging from a branch a few yards off the path. It was an Oleander Hawk Moth and we all took turns trooping through the forest margin to photograph it and enjoy its subtle colours merging and fading one into another.

Next up was a Sri Lanka Wolf Snake by the path. It curled its head first underneath itself and then under a wide leaf. Dulan removed this, drawing his hand back briskly as the snake struck at it: no venom but reputedly a hard bite that he just avoided! Thus exposed the snake came in my direction and to a general shot of its coils I now added a couple of portrait shots. An improvement on the previous night's encounter. This was followed by a new and different enormous spider, over eight inches across its leg span but thinner and racier than the bird-eating tarantula of the previous night.

Perhaps unsurprisingly Dulan led us back to the rice paddy we'd investigated during the afternoon, and as we made our way along its margin an Indian Crested Porcupine rushed towards us with its quills rattling as it came. It definitely knew we were there because every light was upon it but it kept coming: just as we began to wonder about getting stuck by its weaponry Dulan calmly put up a foot and brought it to a brief and not ungentle halt with a boot sole on its forehead for a brake. With little pause, it gathered itself, went by us inches away between us and the fence, then launched itself up the bank and under the strands of wire to disappear between the trees. There was a brief buzz of conversation and relieved laughter. We were then properly startled at the far corner of the field by the sound of a Wild Boar erupting from the vegetation away from us up the same bank and across the fence into the forest! Later we saw probably the same Porcupine ambling along the forest floor as we looked down a tall and very steep bank.

We carried on but found only frogs and toads including an **Orange-canthal Shrub Frog**, before retracing our steps and heading uphill once more into the rainforest. Time for a biggie.... The forest delivered, with a **Brown Palm Civet** climbing a naked sapling trunk and pausing part way up lit by our torches and in a perfect position for a photograph. It stayed long enough for us to watch it properly, enjoying its chestnut-brown fur, foxy/bear-like face with big round ears and its obvious arboreal agility. Just phenomenal. Strangely, having now seen more than one of the options we inclined more to the splitting view....

It kept getting better: Dulan found us a **Red Slender Loris** and though the views were difficult through a narrow gap between trees they were definite and lasted for a good bit more than a few seconds. Then he began finding **Yellow-spotted Chevrotains** along the line of a stream wending its way down the hill: we saw two or three in a fairly small area and short time. Mind you they didn't really hang about, fading back away from us into the undergrowth. He suggested waiting a while but for some reason we preferred to get on. In retrospect I think that may have been a mistake. But maybe not, because all wildlife watching is about coincidences of space, time and beings meeting, and we weren't finished yet....

Big John spotted something sitting up in a tree, not too far, maybe fifteen feet: he thought a roosting bird and he was right because it was a **Sri Lanka Frogmouth**. I'd never seen any frogmouth so this was a big deal for me, and it was absolutely calm as we manoeuvred around it to take our pictures. Lovely lovely lovely.

The **Anthropogenic Shrub Frog** that followed wasn't quite the same quality for my money but it had a certain je ne sais quoi all the same and fitted the pan-species nature of the walk very well.

I remember Dulan suggesting at one point that anyone who wanted to could head home: Big John was definitely suffering with Mr Babbs's cold by now and we'd had a load of target species. He said we could pay the ferryman – no more than 1500 rupees – and I commented “not till he gets you to the other side” – unable as ever to resist a cheap joke. But nobody wanted to stop, we all wanted the last bits and pieces from the trip. Not everything we saw was amenable to being photographed and that seemed to increase as the night wore on: perhaps our reactions (well mine) slowed down as tiredness set in: so we now added some species I can't show you with pictures. A **Bi-colored Rat** in particular that Dulan called, ran down a tree branch right in front of me in the open but was just too fast for me – or perhaps my camera arm froze and I opted to just watch instead. Back at the edge of the village

Dulan spotted an **Eastern House Mouse** in the rafters of an open storage shelter and it took me quite a while to get a not very good view of it. I did manage to get my bins on it in the end and it was just as exciting as you would imagine.

At last we all made our way down to the ferry and crossed the unexpectedly still high river together before heading for our respective rooms, a leech check (I had got away with it again but Roy had been had on his upper chest, goodness knows how) and finally the delight of extinction as our heads hit our respective pillows.

Day 10: April 12

Final day with Dulan, travelling back to Colombo starting at lunchtime. He'd offered us one last forest walk, especially to try once more for the squirrel we were lacking, but only Roy took him up on it: I had simply no appetite for an 0730 start after an all-night walk and indeed I had barely any wearable clothes left for the coming days: I really didn't fancy putting my icky stuff from the previous night back on!

Roy had a good morning, seeing several new birds and adding Brown Mongoose to his life list and the overall trip list. I had a good morning drying out some clothes in the sun and taking opportunities to photograph some common stuff that had been evading my lenses: Palm Squirrel, Red-vented Bulbul and White-browed Fantail all finally went into the can while I lazed in an armchair on the veranda and occasionally rearranged the shirts and stuff to catch the sun as well as possible.

The big Water Monitor was basking in a clearing across the river and I called Big John from his room to tick it.

Down on the river the ferryman was augmenting his income by taking some tourists on a trip round the backwaters of the stretch he works on. I thought he might disturb some birds from the forested banks and kept an eye on the area he was paddling through. This proved a good move when a **Stork-billed Kingfisher** zipped out from under the leafy branches and headed off to another less disturbed backwater. This was the other thing my non-birding family had got over me in India and a doubly welcome lifer, also quite satisfying as a genuine armchair tick!

My last lifer at Kitulgala was a **Red-backed Flameback** in the front garden of the Rest House as we were waiting to board the minibus. Brief but very nice!

It was past midday when we finally left Kitulgala for the run down to Colombo. It was an uneventful run that took less time than the difficult journey to Kitulgala had made me worry about: when we reached the city we had one last treat with a visit to Dulan's still being improved home for a home-cooked meal of savouries and pastries plus a few wildlife bits in and around his house and garden! Teetering up an iron ladder to a balcony under construction, we got views in a crevice of **Pygmy Pipistrelle** (stepping back far enough for a picture would have involved a cry and thud as we fell to earth, so no pix!) and then his shy son was encouraged by his father to fetch a small keeping tube in which he had secured a Caecilian snake (**Typhlops sp**) – apparently they are common in his garden! The tiny pink ribbon (the size of a normal earthworm but with a recognizable face and scales) was let out on the soil surface for us to see properly and photograph – I don't think any of us had seen such a thing before, it really was a marvellous surprise.

And that was it for our time with Dulan. He'd been a really great guide, shown us a boatload of amazing wildlife and if he'd run us into the ground in the process it was absolutely worth it.

However, we had one major wildlife effort left and for that we had to drive South to Mirissa on the South-western corner of Sri Lanka, where we had a pelagic trip booked on the following morning. Having not originally booked transport there, we had discovered during the trip that our driver for the main period was free afterwards and it was pretty much unanimous that engaging him to head down to Mirissa and back was the way forward. Accordingly we didn't even have to transfer our bags from the bus and after sincere thanks and farewells away we went.

Unlike most of the roads in Sri Lanka that from Colombo to Mirissa is a dual carriageway and with little traffic the journey went pretty quickly. At speed wildlife watching is difficult and we didn't record

much on the way down. Unfortunately by the time we reached a planned stop for Brown Mongoose it was already dark and although we did see eyeshine during a walk round we couldn't pin it down. Once at Mirissa it took a little while to find our guesthouse but once there we were quickly sorted and settled, and we headed off to find a restaurant for dinner and beers, as for the first time in a week we had no night wildlife activity planned. I never expected to find that such a relief..... We ate pizza with enjoyment (it wasn't chicken curry!) at tables on the beach with the soft sussuration of the surf as a soundtrack and sank a few cold lagers amid increasing hilarity before trudging back to fall quickly asleep in our new beds.

Day 11: 12 April

Another day, another early alarm going off: we were to be picked up from the guesthouse at 0545 so it was 0500 up and sort out gear for the pelagic trip. No worries about insects but sunscreen a must and plenty of water to drink.

Next issue was getting out of the guesthouse – the gate was padlocked and the top was, lets say, burglar protected. Our hosts had thought of this, its just that they were prepared to cut it a bit finer than we were used to... when the tuk-tuk arrived to take the first two of us down to the whale watch company office the gate had been opened and beaming smiles were in evidence all round. In addition our host had agreed we could leave our bags in our rooms during the pelagic as there were no incoming guests. This was definitely a help.

Roy and I had a bit of a wait but soon enough we were also in a tuk-tuk and pattering down to the "Raja and the Whales" office to pay our fee and join the crowd walking down to the boat. Ship. Boat. I dunno. Bigger than a cabin cruiser but a lot smaller than the Scillonian. Chalice size maybe. It had two passenger decks with most people including us choosing the uppermost for its better view over the sea: it was a single continuous deck over most of the ship except the bow, with an awning high enough not to be in the way and low enough to cut out most of the sun's glare. Good. Not likely to get burnt to a frazzle then.

The skipper, the "Raja" of the company title (I wonder if this is a nom de guerre) was a robustly muscled bearded Sri Lankan with long hair tied up out of the way, a jovial boom to his voice and a nice line in patter about the forthcoming trip which included a safety brief that for the first time I've heard on a tourist vessel included the phrase "one hand for the ship and one for yourself" which is good sense. I was encouraged. His boat handling seemed efficient and effective getting away from the very crowded quay area first into the harbour and then the open sea. As we left I discovered that sitting in the back meant sitting over what seemed to be a very vibratory engine, but as the ship (for the sake of argument) gathered way over what was thankfully a near flat Indian Ocean, this subsided to a sensible level and my eyeballs stopped rattling in sympathy.

The harbour was frequented mainly by Whiskered Terns with a couple of larger birds that I didn't get a good look at: later I realised they must have been Great Crested Terns. No gulls, which felt weird in a mainly fishing harbour.

The East point of the bay, which we passed on our way South-east towards our hunting grounds along the coast, was a substantial rocky affair guarded by quite high vertical rocks at the landward end, with the result that local Peafowl had adopted it as a roost and a number were posed on the ridge – not what you expect to see at the start of a pelagic!

After a while and only a couple of miles out if that, we encountered our first pod of dolphins – I found it difficult not to think it a bit of a let-down as they were Bottlenoses. In theory this could have made them Indo-Pacific but in practice they looked exactly like normal Common Bottlenose Dolphin to us and Raja and his spotters weren't suggesting anything different. All dolphins are nice to see anyway and it meant we were off the mark for the day.... Attention sharpened somewhat.

We passed individual fishing boats and one or two small groups of them. We didn't deviate from our course to go nearer them so the birds round the first few went unidentified but eventually we passed close by a boat with a flock of Great Crested Terns loitering around it and I even got a shot or two of them. This kept the interest going until we found a fair-sized pod of Spinner Dolphins, a tick and a

species I'd really wanted to see. Unfortunately only one youngish individual decided to give us a display of spinning but interestingly that individual had a large pale blue remora attached to the underside of its jaw. I suppose remoras do attach to cetaceans as well as sharks but I had no idea they could be that colour!

Although they weren't spinning the **Long-snouted Spinner Dolphins** were occasionally breaching as they travelled and even those not doing that were sticking their heads well out. One or two family groups came over to our ship and rode the bow for a bit though I didn't try to scuttle down the stairs to the main deck and then forward to look down on them. A great sighting (and of course a tick!)

We were not by any means the only whale watching ship in the area and one in particular, a mere speed boat with only about four passengers, began to be an irritation as it drove straight to the best action at speed, probably risking the dolphins somewhat and certainly tending to make them move on or away, not exactly enhancing everyone else's experience. Unfortunately these idiots continued their practice throughout the day... but I'm getting a little ahead of myself.

Eventually we reached what Raja had reckoned was the most likely area for great whales (by the way we had been fed a fairly substantial breakfast on the way, within the trip fee: much appreciated). By then we had seen several **Flying Fish** zipping out of waves and gliding over the sea before dropping back in. Proper tropical ocean stuff! Sightings over the previous week had involved Fin Whales (not a tick though definitely something worth seeing, being the second biggest cetacean species) and it was not only really late in the Blue Whale season but there hadn't been the numbers seen this year as a few years previously. So we might not be on a winner....

The little fleet of whale watching boats drifted gently on the almost non-existent swell. Suddenly everyone else's boats opened the throttles and after a few seconds we could work out which way they were going (so which way to look for the whale). I saw nothing. We all waited, after the animal dived to feed, for over fifteen minutes until it surfaced, and as the spotting boat hit the burners so did everyone else, again. I saw nothing, again, before it commenced its next long dive. Raja moseyed on over to the fleet and manoeuvred around its fringes, telling us he (a) didn't trust the other skippers not to hit him in their eagerness to get to a surfacing whale and (b) wasn't going to compromise his ethical practice to try to beat them to the draw.

After another round of not seeing the huge beast at the surface (which was agreed by those who'd had views to be not a Fin but a Blue Whale, just to ratchet the tension up a few more notches) I was ready to sell my soul to the devil for a look at it, let alone act just a bit unethically: luckily I wasn't driving. Helming. Whatever.

Raja continued explaining what he was doing: timing each dive and noting the whale's movements, getting a feel for what it was doing. He advised us on each occasion as time got towards its likely surfacing time, so we could relax to some extent (ha!) between surfacings. He reckoned sooner or later this must give us an advantage in getting views. He also remarked that since the weather was good, everyone seemed happy and nobody was seasick, we could stay with it for a while longer than usual, which certainly relieved some of my worries about not actually seeing the thing before we headed homewards. I do get twangingly tense on these occasions... can't help it.

Anyway, as I scanned between two of the other boats and their screws began to churn the water I saw a tall blow go up and there was a broad, shining wet, ocean blue back rolling up to which I gave an uncontrolled roar of "she blows!" – followed by not too incoherent directions, and **Blue Whale**, the largest species of animal that ever lived on Planet Earth, finally arrived on my list.

Over at least the next hour (because there were definitely at least four appearances by the whale involved) we got better and better views, hampered only by that speedboat thundering up to the whale and quite plainly causing it to dive prematurely on more than one occasion. Eventually the boat headed off towards the coast, presumably at the end of its hire or perhaps to pick up more passengers. We had definitely had a more than adequate performance from the great beast by then. Really wonderful and the icing on an already amazing cake.

Lunch was served on the way back to Mirissa and that was the main cause of me not getting a good look at a shearwater that went past our vessel as if it was standing still. I shouted but the others didn't get much on it either: the few photos I attempted once I'd put my plate safely somewhere showed only razorblade end-on views. I wasn't all that bothered. I was even less bothered as we rounded the Eastern point masking Mirissa harbour and found there was a **Brown Noddy** fishing by the wave-splashed rocks at its outer end.

I got some pictures of that, and of a Whiskered Tern perched on a post as we drew in through the densely packed moored boats towards our own jetty. Then we effusively thanked Raja and his team for a fab experience and were whisked back to our guesthouse by a pair of tuk-tuks to meet up with our driver, hoik the cases into the minibus and, with another pause at the nearby Brown Mongoose site (and another dip, though we had nice views of a different race of Purple-faced Leaf Monkey, a pair of White-breasted Kingfishers and a **Chocolate Soldier** butterfly), onto the autoroute back to Colombo.

This was really starting to be the last knockings now and I don't think I was the only one already looking forward to getting home. However, we had one more night in Sri Lanka and it was at the Climax Guesthouse in accommodation that was air-conditioned wriggly tin boxes (very comfortable mind you) with a central open office/dining area/lobby. Our driver dropped us there amid more farewells and thanks for his efforts during our stay and then we were offered welcome drinks. We'd been drinking the local Lion Lager since our arrival (well, a bottle with dinner occasionally if we didn't think it would put us straight to sleep....) but the tall bottles with which we were presented were Lion Strong which was 8.8%! Handle with care...

Actually it slid down quite nicely, I should say very dangerous stuff that didn't drink at all like its strength should imply. Dinner was, as a special farewell to Sri Lanka – chicken curry! After that Big John went to bed with his cold at its worst so just Steve, Roy and I sat up for a few more beers, Roy on Sprite as he usually avoids alcohol.

It was New Year's Eve in Sri Lanka so our relaxed celebration was occasionally punctuated by the heart-stopping detonation of nearby fireworks. I expect they continued and increased as the clock ticked past midnight but by then we'd run out of steam and collapsed into our respective beds, a room each to ensure sound sleep before tomorrow's long flight.

Day 12: 13 April

Not much more to say really. Sitting quietly in a chair on the veranda of my tin hut I had White-browed Fantail, House Crows that wouldn't sit for pictures and a Common Myna likewise. Most of the morning was waiting around for things to happen, queuing at the airport and finally boarding the A330 for an eleven hour flight to Heathrow. During that I managed to watch all three of the last Star Wars trilogy films plus most of Return of the King, got outside a couple of G&Ts and ate... airline curried chicken (you couldn't make it up!)

Roy drove me back to Farnborough before setting off home: perhaps inevitably the M25/M3 westbound slip was shut so we had to use the A30 but on his return trip he was fine with the motorway route. That's all folks!

Species Name	Scientific Name
Asian Elephant	<i>Elephas maximus</i>
Grey Slender Loris	<i>Loris lydekkerianus</i>
Red Slender Loris	<i>Loris tardigradus</i>
Toque Macaque	<i>Macaca sinica</i>
Tufted Grey Langur	<i>Semnopithecus priam</i>
Purple-faced Langur	<i>Semnopithecus vetulus</i>
Indian Hare	<i>Lepus nigricollis</i>
Indian Gerbil	<i>Tatera indica</i>
Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>
Roof Rat	<i>Rattus rattus</i>
Indian Bush Rat	<i>Golunda ellioti</i>
Asiatic Long-tailed Climbing Mouse	<i>Vandeleuria oleracea</i>
House Mouse	<i>Mus musculus</i>
Indian Crested Porcupine	<i>Hystrix indica</i>
Sri Lankan Giant Squirrel	<i>Ratufa macroura</i>
Indian Palm Squirrel	<i>Funambulus palmarum</i>
Travancore Flying Squirrel	<i>Petinomys fuscocapillus</i>
Indian Giant Flying Squirrel	<i>Petaurista philippensis</i>
Lesser Short-nosed Fruit Bat	<i>Cynopterus brachyotis</i>
Leschenault's Rousette (Fulvous Fruit Bat)	<i>Rousettus leschenaultii</i>
Indian Flying Fox	<i>Pteropus medius</i>
Lesser False Vampire Bat	<i>Megaderma spasma</i>
Schneider's Leaf-nosed Bat	<i>Hipposideros speoris</i>
Rufous Horseshoe Bat	<i>Rhinolophus rouxii</i>
Black-bearded Tomb Bat	<i>Taphozous melanopogon</i>
Naked-rumped Pouched Bat	<i>Saccolaimus saccolaimus</i>
Lesser Large-footed Myotis (Brown Bat)	<i>Myotis hasseltii</i>
Blue Whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>
Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>
Spinner Dolphin	<i>Stenella longirostris</i>
White-spotted Chevrotain	<i>Moschiola meminna</i>
Yellow-spotted Chevrotain	<i>Moschiola kathygre</i>
Red (Indian) Muntjac	<i>Muntiacus malabaricus</i>
Chital	<i>Axis axis</i>
Sambar	<i>Rusa unicolor</i>
Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>
Indian Pangolin	<i>Manis crassicaudata</i>
Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus</i>
Fishing Cat	<i>Prionailurus viverrinus</i>
Jungle Cat	<i>Felis chaus</i>
Small Indian Civet	<i>Viverricula indica</i>
Northern Palm Civet	<i>Paradoxurus hermaphroditus</i>
Golden Palm Civet (but see report text)	<i>Paradoxurus zeylonensis</i>
Ruddy Mongoose	<i>Urva smithii</i>
Indian Brown Mongoose	<i>Urva fusca</i>
Indian Grey Mongoose	<i>Urva edwardsii</i>

Golden Jackal
Sloth Bear
European Otter

Canis aureus
Melursus ursinus
Lutra lutra

Photo Gallery

Sri Lankan Dry Zone Giant Squirrel



Ruddy Mongoose



Indian Hare



Asiatic Long-tailed Climbing Mouse



Indian Muntjac



Toque Macaque



Leopard



Chital



Small Indian Civet



Schneider's Leaf-nosed Bat



Fishing Cat



Indian Pangolin



Tufted Grey Langur



Asian Elephant



Golden Jackal



Indian Flying Fox



Lesser False Vampire Bat



Indian Crested Porcupine



Sri Lankan Brown Palm Civet



Indian Palm Squirrel



Long-snouted Spinner Dolphin



Blue Whale

