



Maldives and Sri Lanka 10.–25. 3. 2025

Jan Ebr, Ivana Ebrová, Eliška Majorová

We went for a week of mostly snorkelling around Maldives followed by another 8 days in Sri Lanka, more focused on mammals. Combining the two countries made sense, since they are quite close to each other, even though the Male-Colombo tickets (which we had to get separately) ended up surprisingly expensive - in particular because I did not understand properly that checked-in luggage was already included with Sri Lankan Airlines and needlessly paid for extra allowance. On the other hand, booking the return tickets from a different airport (Prague-Male + Colombo-Prague) with Flydubai was easy. We saw 32 species: 5 in Maldives, 28 in Sri Lanka (only 1 overlapping), with 24 lifers.

Maldives

While most people probably still imagine Maldives as a chain of expensive resorts, it's actually a very nice country for independent travel between the inhabited (so-called "local") islands. We simply booked nice guesthouses at two islands (Bodufolhudhoo and Ukulhas), both roughly for 120 USD per night per a triple room, and travelled between the islands on the dirt cheap public ferries, which are also pleasantly slow for wildlife watching. The islands are tiny, quiet and surrounded by easily accessible (if completely bleached) coral reefs from all sides; despite the sorry state of the corals, the sea life was absolutely fantastic and we spent most of the time simply snorkelling around the islands. The people are nice and friendly and the fact that it was Ramadan had very little impact on anything; the only drawback is the frankly terrible local food, but simple Malay/Indonesian alternatives are widely available. The only consideration required of western visitors is to avoid exposing too much bare skin, especially when not on the beach - but given the tropical sun, it would be a terrible idea anyway.

From the public ferry in Maldives, we saw **Spinner Dolphins** very close to Male and an unidentified Bottle-nose later during the crossing to Ukulhas. On Ukulhas itself, we regularly watched **Indian Flying Foxes** flying around in streetlights while dining on the terrace of our favorite restaurant. I searched for day roosts around the island to no avail, but then on the last evening, the girls found some bats in trees at the beach active still in a bit of daylight. One evening in the harbor (which is a prime spot for watching sharks and rays), we saw a **Black Rat** running around the stones (there should be no other *Rattus* here). A full-day \$100 pp. boat trip to



Short-finned Pilot Whale



Indian Flying Fox

the southern part of the Ari atoll produced no Whale Sharks despite a lot of searching, but we saw some **Short-finned Pilot Whales** up close and the girls got to swim with a pod of **Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphins**. Those were very hard to keep up with - ironically, Ivana got the best views when she stayed behind the pack of swimmers and the dolphins decided to change course towards her.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is a well-known mammalwatching destination and a lot has been written about it - our experiences agree with the common sentiment that



Indopacific Bottlenose Dolphins

mammals are very easy to find there. Unlike in Maldives, the food in Sri Lanka is fantastic: we have quickly found out that “rice and curry” means a specific dish here and that that is exactly what we want to eat, all the time. The people were again majorly pleasant and there is really very little to fault the country for, except for the rather horrendous traffic conditions.



Purple-faced Langur



Tufted Gray Langur



Toque Macaque

In Sri Lanka, we hired a car from Malkey, a nice little local company, who picked us up at the airport and later delivered back; they also smoothly handled the necessary paperwork for “driving licence endorsement” needed in Sri Lanka on top of the IDL. The first car which they gave us did not have properly working windows, which are crucial to mammalwatching, so we insisted on a replacement, which took some time, but it worked out fine. Driving in Sri Lanka is on the left and not for the faint of heart as on many narrow roads, the oncoming cars seem set on pushing you off the road. This was the first destination ever where Eliška did not want to drive after she tried it for a bit and I frankly don’t blame her. At one point I avoided a crash with a bus that appeared out of nowhere on a tiny back road by literal centimeters. We opted for a sedan, which was a good choice - maybe we could have explored some tracks better with a 4x4, but we were mostly happy to have the smallest car possible, as Sri Lankan

roads are really, really narrow. The car came with a slightly absurd daily allowance of just 90 kms, which we quite overshot even despite the generally super slow progress on Sri Lankan roads, but even with the excess kilometers, the cost was still reasonable.

First we spent two nights in **Sigiriya**, which seemed like the obvious choice: nowhere else on the island are so many sightings reported from an area that is freely accessible, as most national parks and reserves require a guided tour. At first look, there isn’t that much accessible nature in Sigiriya - the forest around the two rocks (Lion rock and Pidurangala) is just 2 kilometers across and then there are a couple of short roads and around 10 kms of B294 to the north to explore. Yet, the area just kept on giving! **Toque Macaques**, **Three-striped Palm Squirrels** and **Sri Lanka Giant Squirrels** were easy to see around our accommodation east of Pidurangala. **Purple-faced Langurs** were hanging around above the dirt road between the rocks and **Tufted Gray Langurs** were literally laying on the main road back towards Sigiriya. When the night fell, we combined driving around with walking on small tracks in the forest between the rocks and some random parts of dirt roads. We soon found out that **Grey Slender Lorises** were



Sri Lanka Giant Squirrel



Grey Slender Loris



White-spotted Chevrotain



Asian Long-tailed Climbing Mouse

pretty common, but the challenge was to actually see more than eyeshine - eventually we even got some pictures, but it wasn't exactly effortless. Surprisingly common around the roads were **White-spotted Chevrotains** - which had me repeatedly excited, because they really tend to look like a cat at first! The forest between the rocks also produced two **Asian Long-tailed Climbing Mice**, a very timid **Small Indian Civet** and much less timid **Chitals**. North of Pidurangala, there is a dirt road which first passes between some ponds and then reaches a few small villages. The pond area had **Indian Hare**, while further west, we found an **Asian Palm Civet** hiding in a bush just next to the road, just a few meters from us. B294 was rather quiet the first night, with the exception of a visibly injured **Round-eared Tube-nosed Bat** hanging just above it from a branch. Just in front of Hotel Sigiriya, across the road, there were several **Indian Gerbils**.



Asian Palm Civet

pty-handed from the first night, we found a lot of dung and footprints in many places during the day, so we were optimistic. At sundown, we started around the dam at 7.989N, 80.790E, which is overall a lovely site - and I indeed heard a lot of noise that clearly must have been an elephant herd there, but got no visual contact. That did not matter for long, because soon after dark we had three separate encounters with **Asian Elephants** at different points along B294. The last addition to our Sigiriya list was a **Sambar** on the track beyond Sigiriya hotel. Sadly, no cats showed up - but that is something we have learned to essentially expect by now.

After sleeping in, we used the daytime to visit the caves at Pidurangala. After passing the ticket office, we visited a small cave temple with a lot of traffic and no bats. Just to the right of it, an old path with stairs climbs up (turning left of the official trail up the rock) - we were discouraged by some locals from going there, so we waited until they left and went anyway. There were two smaller cave dwellings with **Schneider's** and **Cantor's Round-leaf Bats** - and also a marvelous view of the landscape, without having to climb all the way up the rock in the terrible heat. After that we had to face the fact that Eliška has never seen any kind of an elephant in the wild, so we had to deliver some. Even though we came out em-



Small Indian Civet



Round-eared Tube-nosed Bat



Cantor's Roundleaf Bat



Schneider's Roundleaf Bat



Chitals

Next up was a long drive to Ohiya for **Horton Plains**. At 1700 meters above the sea level, Ohiya introduced us to a new concept in Sri Lanka: it was pretty cold there. We booked a cheap option called "Ohiya View Resort" which was, frankly, terrible and it did not correspond to the description in the slightest - we ended up cancelling the planned second night, as there isn't really that much to do here anyway. In the night we drove up to the park gate, only to find some **Sambar** - and that the car was just barely strong enough to make it up the steep grade. The next morning, we were at the gate a little before opening, completely alone, but found nothing of interest. Driving the park up and down brought only a lot more Sambars, so we eventually caved in and went for the "World's End" hike.

Even though there were quite a few people, we saw two **Dusky Palm Squirrels** and the local, visibly different, race of **Purple-faced Langurs**.

Not sure what to do with the extra day, I stumbled on the map upon the area where B528 crosses the NE corner of Udawalwe NP. Google Maps showed some accommodations in nearby **Kalthota**, so we tried our luck and it worked out well. At 6.6090N, 80.9148E, a track turns SW, which could be followed in the sedan for a few kilometers between some beautiful lakes with birds. Soon after sunset, we found a large herd of **elephants** there, which we had to carefully navigate around so that we wouldn't meet them on the narrow dykes. Later while driving the



Soft-furred Metad



Asian Elephant



Indian Hare

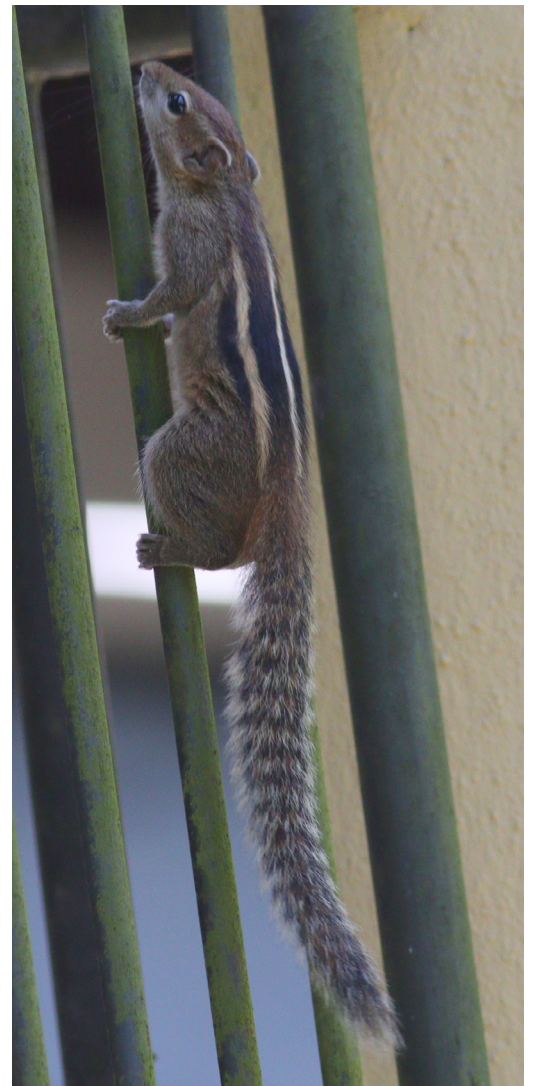


Indian Gerbil

short wild stretch of B528 we saw even more elephants as well as a **Leschenault's Rousette**. The small agricultural roads around produced **Rufous Horseshoe Bat**, **Indian Gerbil** and **Indian Hare**.

We knew that **Sinharaja** could be visited only with a guide, but we decided to try to look for some animals around its outskirts. For this purpose, the northern entrance in Kudawa seemed like the best bet, with some forest accessible outside of the park and the pleasant accommodation option of Blue Magpie lodge. Already on the way, somewhere off B181, we saw an **Indian Brown Mongoose**, but couldn't get a photo. Blue Magpie had a lot of **Three-striped Palm Squirrels** on its premises and in the morning we saw a **Ruddy Mongoose** directly from our balcony.

The most attractive path for a night walk was the track towards Martin's lodge (which would have been an interesting accommodation option in itself, but would not be accessible with our car at all). With the sedan, we were able to get to around 6.4393N, 80.4184E - and even that wasn't without incident, as when I was trying to make room for an oncoming motorbike, my left wheel fell off the elevated concrete road. The bike driver helped us to move the car back up on the road, but injured his foot during the process - I sincerely hope he didn't have any lasting consequences from that! Nevertheless we managed a nice night hike on the track, which brought first a moment of utter confusion about seeing a Kinkajou on the wrong continent, before realising that it was a **Golden Palm Civet**. Later



Three-striped Palm Squirrel



Sambar



Golden Palm Civet

shore we learned that they haven't been seen here in a while and that the main target, along with the ubiquitous **Spinner Dolphins**, will be **Bryde's Whales**, which we indeed saw nicely. That would be a lifer for us, as we only saw whales from the Bryde's complex in the Gulf of Thailand, where there are quite surely only Eden's - but after a lot of research, we have to conclude that both species are possible around Mirissa and that sight identification is essentially impossible. As if to compensate for the mild disappointment of the trip, Ivana noticed a smaller cetacean keeping quite close to the boat, which however mostly showed only its dorsal fin. The unusual shape of that fin made us really curious - and rightfully so as it turned out to be a **Dwarf Sperm Whale**! After the boat trip, we did some more snorkelling (mostly thwarted by waves, thunderstorms and currents) and saw some more **Three-striped Palm Squirrels** at different sites along the SW coast.

on Ivana opened a new spectral window into mammalwatching, when she found a curiously luminescent rodent with her UV torch; Vladimir IDed it from photos as a **Soft-furred Metad**. Close to Martin's lodge there were again some **Sambars**. I also saw some IR signatures following us on that track which looked like ... people. But they had no lights and disappeared somewhere? I am really not sure what that was. Later we also walked a bit upstream from the Kudawa bridge on the northern shore of the river, where we found another **Golden Palm Civet** and an **Asian Palm Civet**.

In **Mirissa** we opted for a whale-watching trip with Raja and the whales, hoping to see some Blue Whales. Already on the



Rufous Horseshoe Bat



Dusky Palm Squirrel



Leschenault's Rousette



Spinner Dolphin



Bryde's/Eden's Whale



Ruddy Mongoose



Dwarf Sperm Whale