



Fishing cat near Sigiriya.

SRI LANKA

Eduardo Ruiz_22-28 June 2026

In Summer 2026, I had the opportunity to organize a quick 6-night escape from parenting duties in late June. We were visiting family in Kuala Lumpur for a month and I wanted to travel somewhere a short flight distance to see as many mammal lifers as possible.

My first option was travelling to Kaeng Krachan in Thailand to try to see a Sun bear and test my luck with the Black leopard. However, I wasn't convinced about the timing in June due to being rainy season. A quick exchange of e-mails with Chinthaka de Silva (wildlifeteam@sltnet.lk), a reasonable price due to being low-season and the potential of adding around 30 lifers, including possibly a pangolin, a bear, 2 slow lorises and 4 cats in a short visit, convinced me to go with him on this adventure. A great trip report from Samuel Marlin from 2024 selling June as a good month for mammalwatching in Sri Lanka sealed the deal.

The itinerary was straightforward: the first night in Kitulgala to target the Red slender slow loris, followed by 3 nights in Sigiriya to visit the Indian pangolin site and search for Jungle cats, Fishing cats, and others at night, ending with 2 nights in Wilpattu National Park focused on Sloth bears and Leopards during the day and the smaller cats at night, specifically the Rusty-spotted cat. I would like to add that Chinthaka recommends spending at least 2–3 nights in Kitulgala for the Red slender slow loris and at least 5 nights in Sigiriya for a better chance at seeing the Indian Pangolin, but we planned the trip around the limited time that we had available.

Kitulgala

I arrived to Colombo airport at 10 in the morning, quickly passed through immigration, and collected my bag to meet Chinthaka and his driver/aspiring wildlife guide, Chaminda. They were extremely friendly from the start, great people to hang out with, respectful, and possessed good eyes for spotting animals. After a quick stop for lunch, we reached Kitulgala around 1 pm where we stayed at Seravelle Kitulgala, as the Kitulgala Rest House was undergoing refurbishment. The accommodation and food were basic, and there was no hot water during my stay, but since we only spent one night there, I was totally fine with it.

It was raining non-stop all afternoon. We visited Makandawa Forest in the heavy rain, where Chinthaka's local contacts guided us to a pair of **Serendib Scops Owls**. Unfortunately, the constant rain and camera lens fogging prevented us from taking good photos.



Very wet Serendib Scops Owl.



Red slender slow loris in Makandawa Forest, Kitulgala.

Makandawa Forest was leech central. I have encountered leeches on previous trips, but I had never experienced a situation where every single second I stopped moving, I could see 3 to 4 leeches climbing up my trousers or sticking to my hands and neck. It was relentless. After we reached the accommodation and took a shower two fat leeches fell from my scalp to the towel, while new ones kept crawling out of my backpack and shoes.

We were scheduled to leave for our night walk at 10 pm, but due to the rain, we postponed it to 11 pm, when it eased to a light drizzle. We crossed the river once more in front of Kitulgala Rest House, and Chinthaka meticulously scanned both sides of the path for a Red slender slow loris. He mentioned that he usually spots them on dry nights and didn't seem very optimistic, but I noted that in my experience, after light rain slow lorises come out to feed on insects and are easier to see.

We spent about 2 hours walking slowly uphill and scanning both sides of the path, seeing only a couple of **Sri Lankan Yellow-striped chevrotains**. Suddenly, two tiny, brilliant eyes lit up in the top left corner of the canopy. We struggled to get further views at first, but it was clearly a **Red slender slow loris**. We waited a minute to see if it would show itself again, and I remembered this was my first trip bringing my own thermal scope. We stepped off the path, walked between the trees, and spotted a faint heat signature in the canopy. After maneuvering between trees and branches, I found a clear view: there it was, frozen on a branch, looking down at us. We spent about 5 minutes admiring it and taking photos while it stayed motionless before heading back to the accommodation.

Our single night in Kitulgala was a complete success, yielding great record shots. Having seen multiple Philippine and Sunda slow lorises in the past, taking good photos of them has always been one of my nemesis. They aren't particularly slow, so this was a great success for us.

I was thrilled with how our gamble on a single night in Kitulgala paid off. Upon returning to the room, I found a few more leeches attached to my neck and my backpack.

The next morning, we woke up for breakfast to find a group of **Wet-zone Purple-faced leaf langurs** above my room, though they moved quickly and refused to pose for photos. We then visited a neighbouring property owned by a friend of Chinthaka who runs river rafting trips. First, we checked a tree where a group of **Kelaart's pipistrelles** was roosting.

Next, we went to an area of the property where a Brown mongoose nests and is regularly seen. However, the owner warned us that on rainy days they get lazy and stay inside; sure enough, we missed it. The only other mammal we spotted was a few **Wet-zone Grizzled giant squirrel** and **Indian palm squirrels**. On the way back to the accommodation, Chaminda spotted an endemic **Chestnut-backed owlet**.



Wet-zone Grizzled giant squirrel eating rambutan.

We then packed our bags and drove toward Sigiriya. On the way out of Kitulgala, we observed a group of **Wet-zone Purple-faced leaf langurs** across the river in the distance. Halfway through the drive, we saw a group of **Wet-zone Toque macaques**, which feature a distinct hairstyle compared to their dry-zone counterparts.

Sigiriya

We then reached our accommodation in Sigiriya for the next 3 nights: Fresco Water Villa. The rooms were quite comfortable and the food was decent, but the main highlight was the large number of **Indian grey mongooses** roaming the garden. I saw 3 to 4 of them wandering around between noon and 4 pm every day. In the afternoon, we visited the forest area near Pidurangala, where we saw our first group of **Tufted gray langurs**—which were easy to see and photograph—along with numerous **Dry-zone Toque macaques**. Chinthaka explained that recent roadwork in the area had made the Dry-zone Purple-faced leaf langurs shy and elusive, and we didn't manage to see them that day.

At night, we met Shantha, the local guide who knows the pangolin site inside out. Every night, we went out from 10 pm until around 2:30 am. On our first night, we went straight to the Indian pangolin site. En route, we saw a Jungle cat/house cat hybrid, several distant **Golden jackals**, and multiple **Black-naped hares**.

Shortly after arriving at the pangolin site, we found a **Golden palm civet** at close range. It almost felt as though it was laughing at me: the moment we spotted it, my camera malfunctioned, lost all its settings, and shut off instantly. It took me about 20 minutes to restore the settings and replace the battery. Despite the technical glitch, it was a great sighting, even if the civet got a laugh at my expense.

All three nights, we scanned the pangolin site for about 1.5 hours. Near the end of our first visit, we saw a **Sri Lankan Brown palm civet** and a group of **Schneider's roundleaf bats** around the rock formations. On the drive back, we explored the dam area and surrounding farmland, but our only other sighting was an **Asian palm civet** near our hotel.

Left to right:

Dry-zone Tufted gray langur and Wet-zone Toque Macaque



Top to bottom: Kelaart's pipistrelle, Wet-zone Purple-faced leaf langur and Indian grey mongoose.



On the second day, we rested in the morning and met at 3 pm to search for bats in Pidurangala. This was my first mammal-watching trip with a dedicated focus on bats, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I suspect I might have enjoyed it less had heavy amounts of guano been involved as I read in some trip reports.

The species we identified were **Schneider's roundleaf bat** and **Sri Lankan roundleaf bat**. Thanks to Sri lankan bat expert Dr. Tharaka Kusuminda for helping with the IDs.

Before sunset, we drove to Popham's Arboretum to try to view and photograph the Grey slender slow loris. We saw a roosting group of **Lesser false vampire bats** inside one building and multiple **Rufous woolly horseshoe bats** in another. We also saw multiple **Dry-zone Grizzled Giant Squirrel**.

Once night fell, a local guide took us out to search for the loris. I was quite disappointed with the experience. Numerous tourists and guides were walking around, and visitors were constantly passed between different guides. It felt as though everyone was rushing just to get a quick, poor view of a loris before sending people on their way, despite the activity being advertised as a 3-hour walk.

While being jostled around by other visitors, we saw a single distant loris in dense foliage at the top of the canopy before our tour was abruptly ended after just 25 minutes. I felt frustrated, as it felt like a tourist trap and fell far short of what we had been told. We also saw our first **Chital** in the Arboretum.

We drove back to the accommodation, had dinner, and met Shantha again at 10 pm to search for the Indian pangolin and wild cats. That night, we checked the dam and farm fields first before visiting the pangolin site later on. The night was quiet: we saw a few **Sambar deer**, a **Small Indian civet**, a couple of **Grey slender slow lorises**, a **Brown fish owl**, and a few distant **Golden jackals**.



Lesser false vampire bats.



Top to bottom:
Schneider's roundleaf bat, Sri Lankan roundleaf bat and
Rufous woolly horseshoe bat.



Left to right:
Dry-zone Purple-faced leaf langur and Brown fish owl

On our third day, we revisited the temple area in the afternoon and finally secured fantastic views of a group of **Dry-zone Purple-faced leaf langur**. After buying some souvenirs for the family, we agreed to give Popham's Arboretum another try to get better views and photos of the **Grey slender slow lorises**.

Chinthaka had spoken with the manager, who agreed to guide us personally and allow us enough time to observe several individuals and try to take photos. On this second night, we spent about 45 minutes walking around the Arboretum, found about 5 slow lorises, captured some good record shots, and left much more satisfied.

After dinner, we met Shantha for what turned out to be the best night of the trip.

Shortly after departing, we had a fantastic **Jungle cat** sighting in the fields near the dam. Unlike the hybrid that we saw earlier in trip, this looked like a pure individual; we watched its body and face clearly as it moved around and stared at us for about 5 minutes.

We then drove to the dam area, where Shantha spotted a **Fishing cat** walking below parallel to the road. The Fishing cat climbed up and followed zig-zag inspection paths along the grassy slope, offering us incredible views and photo opportunities. After about 20 minutes, it laid down and remained motionless for nearly an hour until we decided to head to the pangolin site and leave it in peace. This was one of the main highlights of the trip and one of the most memorable sightings of my life.

We then drove to the Indian pangolin site, but our luck ran out and we saw no other mammals. As mentioned earlier, Chinthaka recommends spending at least 5 nights for a reasonable chance at seeing an Indian pangolin. Our friend Cory Cravatta spent 5 nights there with Marc Bozon the following week without seeing one, so if the Indian pangolin is your primary target, allow as many nights as possible in the Sigiriya area. Chinthaka also noted that he believes that daytime rain makes pangolins more likely to roam at night, so it may be worth checking if specific months offer more favourable weather in that regard (we had no rain outside of Kitulgala).

On the way back from the pangolin site, we enjoyed our best views of a **Golden jackal** group as well as a **Small Indian civet** and our first **Asian elephant**.



Top to bottom:
Grey slender slow loris showing off its slenderness and Jungle cat



Fishing cat near Sigiriya.

Wilpattu National Park

The next day, we drove to Wilpattu National Park and checked into the Wilpattu Tree House. The accommodation was very comfortable and the food the best of the trip. Throughout our stay, we saw **Indian grey mongooses** and **Ruddy mongooses** around the hotel grounds, along with **Malabar pied hornbills**.

During our first afternoon game drive, shortly after entering the park at 3 pm, we received a hot tip that a **Leopard** was sleeping in a tree nearby. When we arrived, the path was blocked by a long queue of vehicles. Leaves obscured much of the Leopard, but I managed to snap a few record shots. We then drove toward the most productive sloth bear area, as the bear was my primary target for the park. Along the way, a **Ruddy mongoose** posed nicely in front of us, and we encountered common species in the park including **Wild water buffalo**, **Sri Lankan Wild boar**, **Chital**, and **Asian elephants**. We then had to exit the park before 6 pm.

After dinner, we drove about 40 minutes to a different section of the Wilpattu buffer zone than the area typically used for night drives. We met a local team that regularly works with Chinthaka and set off. The night drive was mostly quiet: we saw 4 **Grey slender slow lorises** that didn't stay still for photos, a **Sri Lankan Brown palm civet** playing hide-and-seek inside a tree, an **Indian gerbil** darting across the road, and a distant pack of **Golden jackals**.

On the return drive, we picked up a bright, low-level eye-shine in the roadside bushes. Looking through his binoculars, Chinthaka identified it as a **Rusty-spotted cat**. Unfortunately, we didn't get a clear view before it quickly darted away. Shortly afterward, we encountered another Jungle cat/house cat hybrid. The only other wildlife spotted were a **Brown fish owl**, several **Green vine snakes**, and a **Schokar's bronzeback snake**.

The following day was our only full day in Wilpattu NP. The plan was to stay out from 6 am to 6 pm. We had a new driver who remained with us for the rest of the trip, Hemantha; he was fantastic and possessed exceptional spotting skills, the driver we had the first day didn't seem to be looking for wildlife.

The morning was very quiet, with the only new mammals being a pair of **Southern red muntjacs** that were quickly spooked by other vehicles, alongside a few **Sambar deer**.

Around 10 in the morning, we pulled over in an area where a leopard had recently been reported. Chinthaka and Hemantha explained that mammal activity is rare between 10 am and 3 pm and since we were all very tired from the consecutive days of long nights and early mornings, we went to the hotel until 3 pm even though it meant paying the park entrance fee again but this ensured we had the energy needed for the afternoon and night drives.

We re-entered the park at 3 pm and returned to the main sloth bear area. At around 4 pm, we came across three parked vehicles. The driver of the last car called out "*Valaha*" to Chinthaka—the Sinhala word for bear.

Left to right: Ruddy Mongoose and Leopard



Seconds later, a **Sloth bear** emerged from the bushes right beside the road and walked parallel to us for about 5 minutes, at times coming very close to our vehicle. As more cars gathered behind and in front of us, the bear crossed the road and sat down directly in the middle of the track. Hemantha skillfully pulled off to the side, giving us an incredible front-row view just a few meters away as the bear sat calmly minding its own business. Alongside the Fishing cat, this was the absolute highlight of the trip for me, as the Sloth bear was my most-wanted target after the Indian pangolin.

Thrilled by the encounter, we spent the remaining time searching for leopards. About 30 minutes later, while scanning good leopard habitat, we spotted three cars pulled over and soon enjoyed fantastic views of a **Leopard** sitting roughly 60 meters away—a great finish to the afternoon drive.

After a celebratory dinner, we embarked on our last night drive in the Wilpattu buffer zone closer to our accommodation. Shortly after starting, the driver spotted a low-level eye-shine beside the road. Chinthaka confirmed it was another **Rusty-spotted cat**. We waited for a few minutes, but the cat remained stationary in the bush and bolted as soon as we tried to maneuver closer for a direct view.

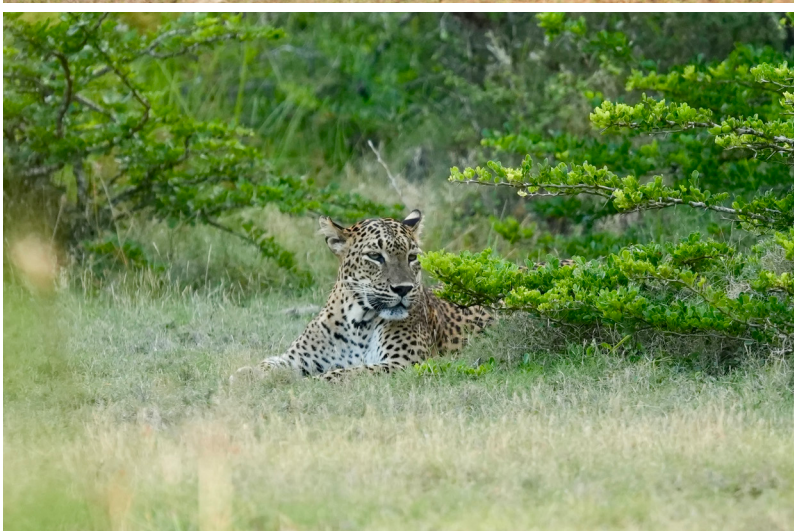
Over the course of the night drive, we logged at least 10 **Grey slender slow lorises** and several **Sambar deer**. The only new mammal species was a large **Indian flying fox** near our accommodation at the end of the night.

On our final morning before heading to the airport, we took a relaxed drive through Wilpattu's most productive leopard area. Our last sighting of the trip was a female **Leopard** standing in plain view in the middle of a narrow path just a few meters ahead of our car. She quickly bounded into the thick vegetation and disappeared.

We then drove over four and a half hours to the airport outside Colombo to conclude the journey.

For a 7-day, 6-night trip, I was extremely pleased with our total of 34 mammal species—most of which were lifers for me, as I had never visited India or Sri Lanka before. The sightings of the Fishing cat and Sloth bear were particularly special.

Right: Sloth bear. Bottom: Leopard



Stuff we missed were the Indian crested porcupine, Eurasian otter, and Indian pangolin in Sigiriya, along with failing to get a clear, unobstructed view of a Rusty-spotted cat in Wilpattu. I had specially very high hopes on seeing the porcupine since it is commonly reported there.

If I return to Sri Lanka in the near future, I would spend about 5 nights in Sigiriya to focus on the Indian pangolin while having additional chances for the Indian crested porcupine and better Jungle cat views. I would also add a full day in Horton Plains for a better chance at the Eurasian otter and to target the Stripe-necked mongoose, which is common there. I probably wouldn't return to Wilpattu specifically for the Rusty-spotted cat, as I found the buffer-zone night drives somewhat limited and unproductive, and would instead look into parts of India for that species in the future.

Special thanks to Chinthaka for organizing this short trip so efficiently and being a great host and to my wife for taking care of our two-year-old son on her own while I was off chasing Indian pangolins in another country!

List of Species

Common Name	Scientific Name	KI	SI	WP
1. Red Slender Slow Loris	<i>Loris tardigradus</i>	X		
2. Grey Slender Slow Loris	<i>Loris lydekkerianus</i>		X	X
3. Jungle Cat	<i>Felis chaus</i>		X	
4. Fishing Cat	<i>Prionailurus viverrinus</i>		X	
5. Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus</i>			X
6. Rusty-spotted Cat*	<i>Prionailurus rubiginosus</i>			X
7. Golden Palm Civet	<i>Paradoxurus zeylonensis</i>		X	
8. Sri Lankan Brown Palm Civet	<i>Paradoxurus montanus</i>		X	X
9. Asian Palm Civet	<i>Paradoxurus hermaphroditus</i>		X	
10. Small Indian Civet	<i>Viverricula indica</i>		X	
11. Toque Macaque	<i>Macaca sinica</i>		X	X
12. Purple-faced Leaf Langur	<i>Semnopithecus vetulus</i>	X	X	
13. Tufted Grey Langur	<i>Semnopithecus priam</i>		X	X
14. Sloth Bear	<i>Melursus ursinus</i>			X
15. Golden Jackal	<i>Canis aureus</i>		X	X
16. Yellow-striped Chevrotain	<i>Moschiola kathygre</i>	X		
17. Chital	<i>Axis axis</i>		X	X
18. Sambar Deer	<i>Rusa unicolor</i>		X	X
19. Southern Red Muntjac	<i>Muntiacus muntjak</i>			X
20. Indian Grey Mongoose	<i>Herpestes edwardsi</i>		X	X
21. Ruddy Mongoose	<i>Herpestes smithi</i>			X
22. Grizzled Giant Squirrel	<i>Ratufa macroura</i>	X	X	
23. Indian Palm Squirrel	<i>Funambulus palmarum</i>	X	X	
24. Black-naped Hare	<i>Lepus nigricollis</i>		X	
25. Indian Gerbil	<i>Tatera indica</i>			X
26. Asian Elephant	<i>Elephas maximus</i>		X	X
27. Wild Water Buffalo	<i>Bubalus bubalis</i>			X
28. Sri Lankan Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>			X
29. Kelaart's Pipistrelle	<i>Pipistrellus ceylonicus</i>	X		
30. Schneider's Roundleaf bat	<i>Hipposideros speeri</i>		X	
31. Sri Lankan Roundleaf Bat	<i>Hipposideros srilankaensis</i>		X	
32. Rufous Horseshoe Bat	<i>Rhinolophus rouxi</i>		X	
33. Lesser False Vampire Bat	<i>Megaderma spasma</i>		X	
34. Indian Flying Fox	<i>Pteropus medius</i>			X

KI: Kitulgala; SI: Sigiriya; WP: Wilpattu NP and buffer zone

*: eyeshine only



Top to bottom:

Ruddy mongoose, Indian grey mongoose, Chital and Asian Elephant.