

Sri Lanka Trip Report

By Travyn Rhall

Instagram : @travyn_r

Facebook : Travyn Rhall

First trip report and like several others Sri Lanka is the first. Originally, I was going on a Fiji cruise with my wife in September, but the ship ran aground and that trip was scuttled! So rather than twiddle my thumbs in September I looked for an alternative. After reading several excellent Sri Lanka trip reports on mammalwatching.com, I contacted **Chinthaka** (wildlifeteam@sltnet.lk, WhatsApp +94 77 348 4828) to organise a program focused on specific mammals and birds, with the aim of photographing all the key targets. He responded quickly and together we built a full, wildlife-focused itinerary.

Program

Program Overview

Day 1 – Drive straight from the airport to Thissamaharama

Day 2 – Full day in Yala National Park; night drive for nocturnal mammals

Day 3 – Morning drive to Kitulgala; afternoon birding; night walk for nocturnals

Day 4 – Full day at Kitulgala (birding + night walk planned, but heavy rain cancelled the evening walk)

Day 5 – Drive to Sigiriya; afternoon birding/mammals; night drive

Day 6–8 – Morning/afternoon birding and mammal watching around Sigiriya Forest; night drives

Day 9 – Drive to Wilpattu; afternoon visit to Wilpattu NP; night drive

Day 10–11 – Full days in Wilpattu NP; night drives

Day 12 – Morning in Wilpattu NP; return to Colombo

General Impressions

The program was relentless — mammals and birds during the day, nocturnal mammals at night — but extremely productive. We missed only two targets: **Indian Pangolin** and one bird species, the **Chestnut-headed Bee-eater**. Annoying, but still an excellent outcome. A **rusty-spotted cat** proved impossible to photograph, even after finding one and then spending more than 30 minutes searching on foot. It vanished into holes and undergrowth with incredible speed.

Hotels and food throughout the trip were excellent.

For night walks and drives we used a combination of **spotlights and thermal imaging**, which worked very well. Some species were picked up only on thermal, others only on spotlight — a good reminder that both tools have their place.

Overall Sightings

- **40 mammal species seen**
- **29 mammals photographed and kept**
- Focus was on larger mammals; we didn't target bats, rats, or marine mammals
- **129 bird species seen**
- **94 bird species photographed and kept**
- Didn't attempt swifts or swallows. Also some birds, like egrets I already have very good photos of and better opportunities didn't arise. The bird total was a very good outcome

Mammals

Lorises Loridae

We had only **one sighting of the Red Slender Loris** in the Kitulgala forest. Conditions were quite wet, so we were lucky — this individual stayed still long enough for proper viewing before scurrying up the tree and disappearing into the canopy.

In contrast, we had **seven sightings of the Gray Slender Loris**, though none of them lingered for long. They tended to move quickly and melt back into the vegetation, giving us only brief windows for observation.



Sri Lanka Red Slender Loris – *Loris tardigradus* –
Kitulgala



Gray slender Loris – *Loris lydekkerianus* – Sigiriya

Monkeys Cercopithecidae

We saw plenty of **Tufted Grey Langurs** and **Toque Macaques** throughout the trip — both species were common and usually easy to observe.

In contrast, we encountered only a few **Purple-faced Langurs**, and most of those sightings were high in the canopy. They tended to stay well above eye level, offering only brief views before moving deeper into the trees.



Tufted Grey Langur – *Semnopithecus priam* – Yala

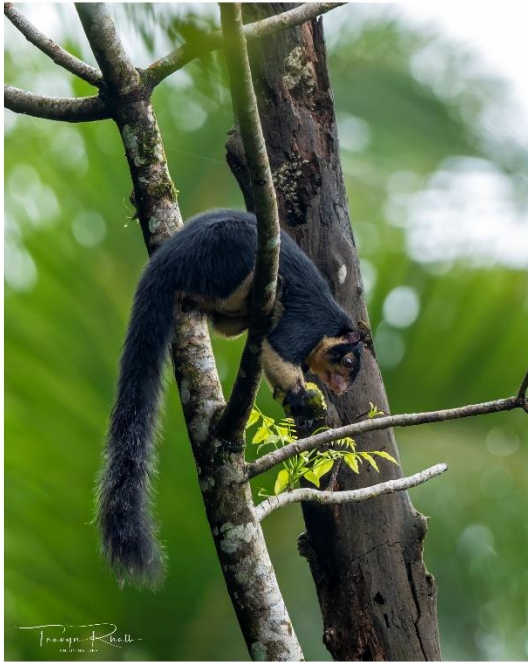


Purple-faced Langur – *Semnopithecus vetulus* –
Sigiriya

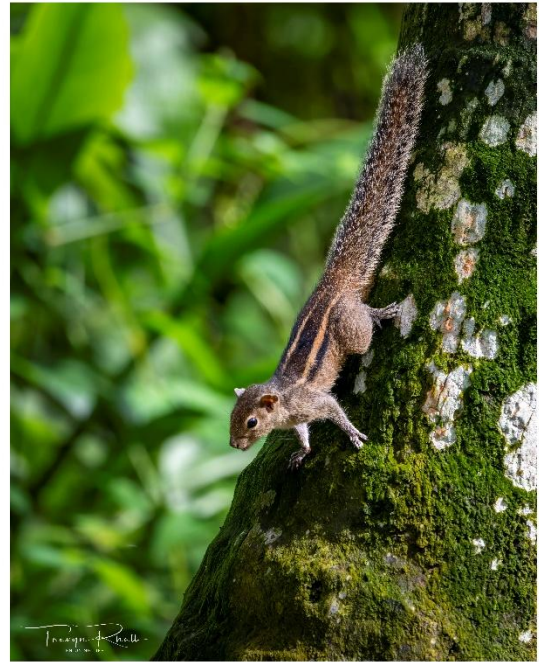


Toque Macaque – *Macaca sinica* – Wilpattu

Squirrels Sciuridae



Sri Lanka Giant Squirrel – *Ratufa macroura* – Kitulga



Palm Squirrel – *Funambulus palmarum* – Kitulga

Hares Leporidae

We had many sightings of **Indian Hares**, particularly during the night drives. One individual stood out — it was on high alert, having just bolted out of an area where a leopard had been seen moments earlier. It paused for a while, clearly unsettled, before slipping back into cover.



Black-naped/Indian Hare – *Lepus nigricollis* – Yala

Bats

We recorded **five bat species**, even though we didn't specifically target them. **Indian Flying Foxes** were seen at a range of locations and were by far the most conspicuous.

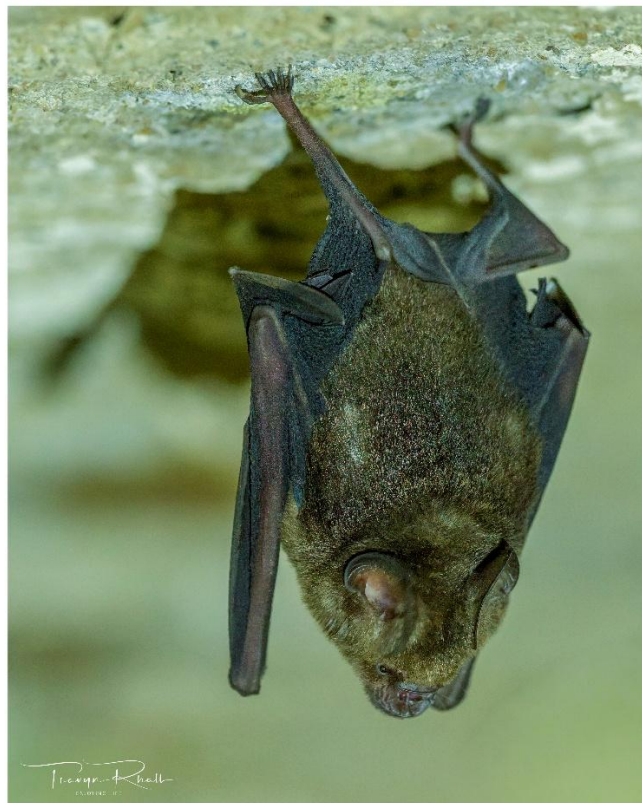
I managed to photograph both the **Long-eared False Vampire Bat** and **Beddome's Woolly Horseshoe Bat**, while we also had sightings of Indian Pipistrelle and Pygmy/Least Pipistrelle. The pipistrelles were brief, fast-moving encounters on the night drives, but still good additions to the overall mammal list.



Indian Flying Fox – *Pteropus medius* – Wilpattu



Long-eared False Vampire Bat – *Megaderma spasma* – Sigiriya



Beddome's Woolly Horseshoe Bat – *Rhinolophus beddomei* – Sigiriya

Cats Felidae

A key target was to photograph all three small cat species. We managed two, with the rusty-spotted cat being the only one that refused a photo. The leopard was a nice addition.

- **Fishing Cat:** 1
- **Jungle Cat:** 11 sightings
- **Leopard:** 5 sightings (with many more available in Wilpattu had we focused on them)

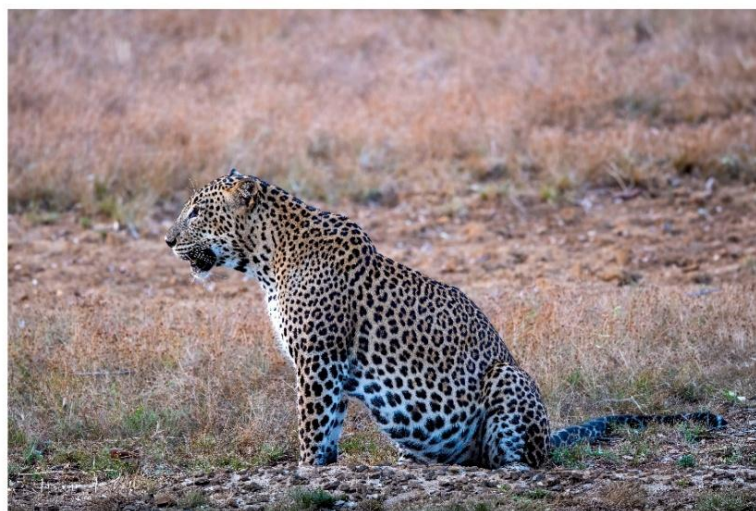
The jungle cats were typically 20–30 metres from the vehicle and tended to walk or run off quickly, making photography challenging. We saw them at every night-drive location.



Fishing Cat – *Prionailurus viverrinus* – Sigiriya



Jungle Cat – *Felis chaus* – Sigiriya



Leopard – *Panthera pardus* – Wilpattu

Civets and Mongooses

We saw **three civet species** on the night drives: **Small Indian Civet**, **Common Palm Civet**, and **Sri Lanka Brown Palm Civet**. All tended to disappear quickly once spotted. I only managed to get a photograph of the **Sri Lanka Brown Palm Civet**, as the other two species were far more fleeting.

Ruddy Mongooses were seen at several locations, usually trotting across tracks or foraging at the edges of the road. The **Indian Grey Mongoose** was much less common — we only saw it around **Sigiriya**.



Sri Lanka Brown PalmCivet – *Paradoxurus montanus* – Sigiriya



Indian Grey Mongoose – *Urva edwardsii* – Sigiriya



Ruddy Mongooses – *Urva smithii* – Yala

Dogs Canidae

Only one species in Sri Lanka, and we saw **13 Golden Jackals** in total, with sightings both during the night drives and in daylight at Wilpattu. The adults appeared noticeably smaller than the individuals I photographed in India earlier in the year, although — according to published sources — Sri Lankan Golden Jackals are actually slightly larger on average than their Indian counterparts!



Golden Jackal – *Canis aureus*– Wilpattu

Bears Ursidae

I'm particularly interested in photographing bear subspecies, so Wilpattu was a major focus — it's renowned for its **Sloth Bear**, a distinctive subspecies. Unfortunately, the reality didn't match the reputation while we were there. Despite many hours of searching across multiple days, we found only one individual, and that was on the very last morning.

It rushed off almost immediately, leaving me with just an *okay* shot. At least I now have an *okay* photo of the Sri Lankan subspecies to sit alongside the *okay* shot of the Indian subspecies I photographed many years ago. Not the result I'd hoped for, but still satisfying to add to the bear album. I now have photos of both subspecies of the Sloth Bear.



Sloth Bear – *Melursus ursinus* – Wilpattu

Ungulates

By far the most common ungulate we saw was the **Spotted Deer** — they were present at every site, bar the wetzone, and in good numbers. We managed to see **both chevrotain species**, though I only obtained a photograph of the **White-spotted Chevrotain**. The **Hog Deer** was the only deer species we missed.

We also saw **Wild Boar**, and I managed photos of it, along with **two of the three** buffalo species encountered during the trip.



White-spotted Chevrotain – *Moschiola meminna* –
Sigiriya



Malabar Red Muntjac – *Muntiacus malabaricus* –
Wilpattu



Spotted Deer – *Axis axis* – Yala



Sambhur – *Rusa unicolor* – Sigiriya



Asian Wild Buffalo – *Bubalus arnee* – Yala

I skipped including photos of a few of the more common species, as they're widely seen and not especially noteworthy from a photographic point of view. The table below is a summary of the 40 mammal species recorded during the trip.

Species	Photo	Species	Photo
Asian Elephant		Fishing Cat	
Gray Slender Loris		Jungle Cat	
Sri Lanka Red Slender Loris		Leopard	
Tufted Grey Langur		Small Indian Civet	
Purple-faced Langur		Common Palm Civet	
Toque Macaque		Sri Lanka Brown Palm Civet	
Indian Crested Porcupine		Indian Grey Mongoose	
Sri Lanka/Grizzled Giant Squirrel		Ruddy Mongoose	
Palm Squirrel		Golden Jackal	
Small/Travancore Flying Squirrel		Sloth Bear	
Indian Gerbil/ Antelope Rat		European Otter	
Indian Bush Rat		Eurasian Wild Pig	
Little Indian Field Mouse		White-spotted Chevrotain	
Black- naped/ Indian Hare		Yellow-striped Chevrotain	
Indian Flying Fox		Malabar Red Muntjac	
Long-eared False Vampire Bat		Spotted Deer	
Beddome's Woolly Horseshoe Bat		Sambhur	
Indian Pipistrelle		Asian Wild Buffalo	
Least Pipistrelle		Asian Wild Buffalo	
Rusty-spotted Cat		Asian Swamp Buffalo	

Birds

One of the great advantages of touring with Chinthaka is that his expertise spans *both* mammals and birds. That suited me perfectly, as I had several key bird targets for Sri Lanka and wanted to make the most of every opportunity.

In total, we saw 129 bird species, and the table below lists all of them, along with an indication of which ones I managed to photograph well enough to keep. Rather than include dozens of bird photos and make the report overly long, the following eBird link shows the species I ended up with usable photographs of - <https://ebird.org/tripreport/583831>

Species	Photo	Species	Photo	Species	Photo
Little Grebe		Wood Sandpiper		Jerdon's Bushlark	
Spotted-billed Pelican		Black-winged Stilt		Barn Swallow	
Little Cormorant		Little Tern		Sri Lanka Swallow	
Indian Shag		Whiskered Tern		Forest Wagtail	
Oriental Darter		White-winged Black Tern		Grey Wagtail	
Little Egret		Rock Pigeon		Paddyfield Pipit	
Greater Egret		Spotted Dove		Small Minivet	
Intermediate Egret		Asian Emerald Dove		Orange Minivet	
Grey Heron		Orange-breasted Green Pigeon		Sri Lanka Woodshrike	
Purple Heron		Sri Lanka Green Pigeon		Indian Paradise-Flycatcher	
Cattle Egret		Green Imperial Pigeon		Black-naped Monarch	
Indian Pond-Heron		Sri Lanka Lorikeet		White-browed Fantail	
Black-crowned Night Heron		Alexandrine Parakeet		Black-capped Bulbul	
Painted Stork		Rose-ringed Parakeet		Red-vented Bulbul	
Asian Openbill		Layard's Parakeet		White-browed Bulbul	
Asian Woolly-necked Stork		Greater Coucal		Yellow-browed Bulbul	
Lesser Adjutant		Blue-faced Malkoha		Square-tailed Bulbul	
Black-headed Ibis		Indian Koel		Common Iora	
Eurasian Spoonbill		Eastern Barn Owl		Gold-fronted Leafbird	
Lesser Whistling-Duck		Indian Scops-Owl		Jerdon's Leafbird	
Brahminy Kite		Brown Fish-Owl		Tickell's Blue Flycatcher	
White-bellied Sea Eagle		Jungle Owlet		Oriental Magpie-Robin	
Grey-headed Fishing Eagle		Brown Boobook		Sri Lanka Shama	
Crested Serpent-Eagle		Jerdon's Nightjar		Indian Robin	
Shikra		Indian Nightjar		Brown-capped Babbler	
Changeable Hawk-Eagle		Palm Swift		Yellow-billed Babbler	
Osprey		House Swift		Orange-billed Babbler	
Sri Lanka Junglefowl		Crested Tree Swift		Plain Prinia	
Indian Peafowl		Common Kingfisher		Common Tailorbird	
White-breasted Waterhen		Stork-billed Kingfisher		Velvet-fronted Nuthatch	

Purple Coot		White-breasted Kingfisher		Tickell's Flowerpecker	
Eurasian Moorhen		Pied Kingfisher		Purple-rumped Sunbird	
Grey-headed Swampphen		Asian Green Bee-eater		Purple Sunbird	
Great Thick-knee		Blue-tailed Bee-eater		Loten's Sunbird	
Pheasant-tailed Jacana		Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill		Common Myna	
Asiatic Golden Plover		Malabar Pied Hornbill		Southern Hill Myna	
Lesser Sand Plover		Brown-headed Barbet		Black-hooded Oriole	
Red-wattled Lapwing		Crimson-fronted Barbet		White-bellied Drongo	
Common Redshank		Sri Lanka Small Barbet		Racket-tailed Drongo	
Common Greenshank		Yellow-fronted Pied Woodpecker		Sri Lanka Drongo	
Marsh Sandpiper		Rufous Woodpecker		House Crow	
Green Sandpiper		Golden-backed Woodpecker		Jungle Crow	
Common Sandpiper		Red-backed Flameback		White-rumped Munia	

Reptiles, Butterflies, and Flora

If I were into herping, Sri Lanka would be high on my list of places to visit. We saw quite a few reptiles without even trying — a reminder of just how rich the island is for amphibians and reptiles.

There were also plenty of butterflies throughout the trip, adding colour to almost every walk, and a good range of native flora to enjoy along the way. Even outside the main bird and mammal targets, Sri Lanka delivered a diverse and rewarding natural history experience.

Other Comments

It was an intense trip, and many of the key targets were achieved. I'll probably go back at some stage — I'd still love to get a better photo of the **Sloth Bear** and finally secure a shot of a **Rusty-spotted Cat**. The **Indian Pangolin** remains missing from my target list. If I do return, I may juggle the timing to go **before the monsoon**, as conditions might be more favourable for both nocturnal mammals and photography.

Sri Lanka isn't at the top of my immediate priorities, as there are still plenty of mammals and birds in my target families to chase elsewhere, but it remains a place I'd happily revisit when the timing aligns.