

Pre-COVID visit to Sri Lanka – Feb 2020

Michael Johnson



I had the very good luck of having a three-week trip to Sri Lanka in February 2020, squeezed in before COVID shut the world down. Mammals were high on the priority list; however, I must admit birds were a little higher. This is not a blow-by-blow description, rather some thoughts and notes about Sri Lanka as a destination and where we went and what we did. We saw 24 mammal species and 209 bird species.

Pre-COVID Sri Lanka was easy to get to with Sri Lanka Airlines offering a daily flight from Melbourne to Colombo. It left about 5pm and arrived at 10pm, local times, with a flight time of about 12 hours. We were a party of three with my wife Sue and our friend Graeme.

Accommodation: Sue's sister had for many years been managing boutique hotels in Sri Lanka and so she was able to arrange some amazing lodgings, otherwise we used standard tourist hotels. Needless to say, accommodation is available for every budget.

Getting around: we had a driver and mini van however Sri Lanka is serviced by a comprehensive bus network supplemented by a national rail network. Public transport supplemented by local taxis and tuk-tuks would easily get you anywhere. I would not drive myself. It is not because the traffic was too chaotic, although roads are busy, and nobody drives at all fast. It is because of the extreme curtesy that is required of drivers. Nobody thinks anything of cutting right across oncoming traffic expecting others to give way. I'm not sure I'm up to it.

Obviously having our own driver gave great flexibility and he also a great guide and facilitator. We were lucky in that our driver was extremely interested in birdlife and was a great observer. More than once we swerved off the road to look at a woodpecker or something he had seen in trees 20 or

30 metres away. He was also very interested in mammals and we introduced him to spotlighting. His downfall was reptiles, every small lizard he saw was a “chameleon”. Sri Lanka does have a species of chameleon but we never saw one, all the small lizards we saw were species of Agamidae.

Other guides: Near most national parks there are drivers with four-wheel drive “safari” vehicles, most of which are a somewhat beat up. The drivers rent the vehicles on an hourly basis and I imagine the quality of driver as guide can vary a lot. All the guides we had that were associated with accommodation were excellent, mostly well educated, and always dedicated to the wildlife. If there is a downfall from a mammal watching point of view is they are mostly into birds. More than that they emphasize the endemic birds. I get the feeling a lot of birders have “done” India and come to Sri Lanka primarily to see the endemics, thus the guides feel the endemics are something really special. I was talking to one guide about birds when he asked me how many endemics there were in Australia. He looked crestfallen when I told him somewhere over 300 species.

I had chosen The Mudhouse, an eco-lodge in Anamuduwa, as our first stop because it was only 2 hours from the airport and it seemed like a good spot to relax after our flight. By the time we got there it was around 2am and our driver missed the road. We ended up going down a back road and I remember being thrilled to see many small rodents running out of our way off the road. However, we had been awake for 24 hours so were looking forward to our bed.

Waking the next morning there were birds everywhere, I felt I had been given keys to the lollyshop. We stayed three nights at the Mudhouse and saw 70 bird species. Indian palm squirrels, grizzled giant squirrels and black-naped hares were all common, but were also seen often elsewhere. Like several other hotels we stayed at, there was a resident naturalist who gave morning and evening escorted walks. He also gave a nighttime spotlighting tour on which we saw a gray slender loris, Indian gray mongoose and Sri Lanka spotted chevrotain. Earlier in the day we had found some Indian crested porcupine quills and so we searched that area for them without success. When the others went to bed, I continued in the hope of finding a civet or some of the small animals I had seen on arrival. All I found was number of different frogs. There were plenty of frogs around and had I had a guidebook I would have produced quite a list of frogs from this trip. As it was, for the entire trip I only managed to identify one species.



After an early morning birdwalk on the third day we headed out, seeing a chevrotain dive into the bushes as we drove down the road. We stopped beside the road in a small town outside Wilpattu National Park to change to an open 4WD for a four-hour tour. I had thought to spend quite a bit of time here but in the end decided to spend more time at Yala. Still, I wanted to compare the two national parks. We had a successful tour including toque macaque, ruddy mongoose, golden jackal, wild boar, chital, red muntjac, and water buffalo as well as a variety of birds. The highlight was a young sloth bear. The driver tried



to convince us that another four hours would almost certainly produce a leopard however I put that down to salesmanship.

We then drove on to Mannar for the night. Mannar is in the north-west at the closest point of Sri Lanka to India and is a mecca for shorebirds and waders. The hotel we stayed at that night provides a guide who in this case was an English naturalist who basically got an expenses paid holiday in return for guiding guests. Our birdwatching the next morning produced 83 species in three hours, including my first flamingoes. Not much in the way of mammals though apart from a feral population of donkeys (tickable in my book).

Our next stop was Sigiriya, the heart of the "Cultural Triangle". I felt that as I had never been to Sri Lanka before, we should see at least some of the country's rich cultural heritage. Our hotel looked out at the Rock. We watched tourists climb to the top of the Rock (a long way up) to view the remains of what was basically a brothel for the local king. Good luck to them, I was more interested in the troop of tufted gray langurs that invaded the hotel grounds, the first of this species we had seen. We did see what was probably the most unusual animal of the trip in some ruins we did visit. It was a Schneider's earth snake, a primitive species of snake that usually lives underground chasing earth worms.



In the evening we hired another 4wd to do some spotlighting. Around Sigiriya the 4wd business is mainly about seeing elephants, and we had a hard time convincing the driver that was not our priority. As it happened, we had a great view of a small group of elephants as we drove over to meet him. The driver was diligent driving around back roads searching for small mammals but as neither he or I really knew what we were doing we did not see any. We did see two nightjar species, an owl and a tortoise though. As the evening came towards a close, the driver took control and drove frantically up and down a major road looking for elephants. We soon found a young one foraging on the verge, and honor satisfied the driver took us back to the drop-off location.

We then proceeded to Kandy (via a couple of unwanted tourist attractions our driver thought essential) where I found the Temple of the Tooth less impressive than I had expected. We did see fruit bat colony on the shores of the lake. We stayed a couple of nights in a house-hotel on a rural property where I tried a little nighttime spotlighting by myself. I saw nothing until towards the end when I caught what I took to be a reasonably large animal in my light about thirty metres or so away, until after a minute or so it bounded away. It's eye-shine matched that described for leopard but my immediate reaction was that it could not have been. I later found out leopards are common in the Kandy region and have even been seen drinking from Kandy lake.

After Kandy we went up to Nuwara Eliya for the Horton Plain National Park and its montane birds. Nuwara Eliya has been a popular hill station since colonial times and there is an abundance of accommodation at all levels. It is possible to stay closer to the national park but you are really limited to a couple of home-stays. Horton Plains National Park is located on top of a mountain and is popular with both local and international tourists for the walk to Lands End, apparently a fantastic lookout, and the herd of tame sambar deer. We were advised that chatting tourists make birds scarce on the walks inside the park, and the way to see the birds is to start at the gate and walk down the mountain via the road with your transport waiting at some convenient point. We did this

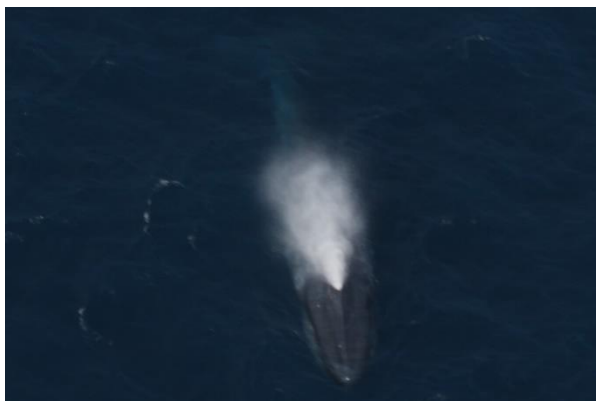
on two mornings and got most of the birds we were after. Doing this allows you to easily view the endemic dusky striped squirrels. We also had good treetop views of a troop of toque macaques, and on the drive back one morning our best views of purple-faced langurs for the trip.

We then went back down to the coastal plain and Yala National Park. We stayed with Noel Rodrigo's Leopard Safari. Noel is the originator of the tented safari camp concept in Sri Lanka, and has worked tirelessly for leopard conservation. Noel is also a family friend. Again, the typical 4wd vehicles were used, these in much better condition to the ones we had seen before. Each vehicle came with both a naturalist and a driver, but we soon found the drivers were as good guides as the naturalists. Despite all that we missed out on leopards, for which Yala is famous. It was obvious from the behavior of animals around us that leopards were there, and we saw plenty of fresh pug marks. But no leopards. Truth be told we saw few new animals at Yala, as far as mammals go only sambar deer. However, what we got was tremendous views of many species. I said before I wanted to compare Yala with Wilpattu National Park, and from what I saw the former gave much better views. Yala is infamous for the traffic jam of hundreds of 4wd vehicles at the main gate at opening time. Given the location of Noel's camp, they use a back entrance and we saw none of that.



Next stop was Sinharaja where we stayed at Blue Magpie Lodge. Indian palm squirrels are common in the village, however the endemic flame-striped jungle squirrel can be found a little bit up the hill, as close as the national park ticket box. I had read that jungle cats have been seen around the lodge and I went out spotlighting each night but saw nothing.

Of course, we wanted to see blue whales. My sister-in-law had arranged stunning accommodation in Galle Fort, which fortunately was only a half hour drive from Mirissa, the main port for whale-watching on the southern coast. We chose what we thought sounded like the most ecologically responsible boat, no idea if it was or not. The onboard naturalist gave a talk on the way out which mainly consisted of talking about how they abide by regulations followed by displaying line drawings



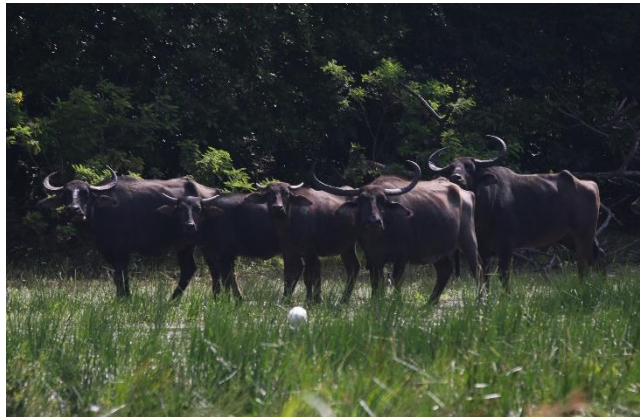
of whale species, "this is a blue whale" etc. We had good views of several whales and a bonus pod of spinner dolphins on the way back in. We had been recommended viewing from a light aircraft so we booked that in the following day. It was certainly interesting viewing the animals from the air and you got a better impression of their size. However, I am not sure it was any better than the boat overall. The aircraft people make a thing about how they don't disturb the whales, but we noted that the plane used the

boats to find the whales. And from our vantage point it seemed the boats kept a proper distance anyway.

That was the end of our mammal watching in Sri Lanka. I can highly recommend Sri Lanka, the people are very friendly, the scenery beautiful, and there is a lot to see. Most importantly there is wildlife everywhere. I'd love to go back and if I did would concentrate more on small mammals.

Mammals seen:

1. Asian elephant *Elephas maximus*
2. **Toque macaque** *Macaca sinica*
3. **Tufted grey langur** *Semnopithecus priam*
4. **Purple-faced langur** *Trachypithecus vetulus*
5. **Grey slender loris** *Loris lydekkerianus*
6. **Flame-striped jungle squirrel** *Funambulus layardi*
7. **Dusky striped squirrel** *Funambulus obscurus*
8. Indian palm squirrel *Funambulus palmarum*
9. **Grizzled giant squirrel** *Ratufa macroura*
10. **Black-naped hare** *Lepus nigricollis*
11. **Indian flying fox** *Pteropus giganteus*
12. **Indian grey mongoose** *Herpestes edwardsii*
13. **Ruddy mongoose** *Herpestes smithii*
14. **Golden jackal** *Canis aureus*
15. **Sloth bear** *Melurus ursinus*
16. **Feral donkey** *Equus africanus*
17. **Wild boar** *Sus scrofa*
18. **Blue whale** *Balaenoptera musculus*
19. Spinner dolphin *Stenella longirostris*
20. **Sri Lanka spotted chevrotain** *Moschiola meminna*
21. **Chintal** *Axis axis*
22. Red muntjac *Muntiacus muntjak*
23. Sambar deer *Rusa unicolor*
24. Domestic water buffalo (feral) *Bubalus bubalis* *



*There are some who argue that true wild water buffalo still exist in Sri Lanka and that they can be identified by size and shape of their horns. If so, I also saw the wild species.