

SRI LANKA: DOUBLE TAP FEBRUARY 2022

INDIAN PANGOLIN



I had visited Sri Lanka in 2018 and focused on the small cats that are such a big draw for mammal watchers. Looking at past trip reports I realized I had “missed” the wet-zone species and also, arguably, the biggest tick of all, the Indian pangolin. It was time to go back. I drew up a list of eleven potential targets and sent it to Chinthaka De Silva who runs Wildlife Expeditions. Although Chinthaka was confident about the chances of most on the list (I ended up seeing eight of my targets), the pangolin was a long shot seen on an estimated one in ten nights drives. That seemed like good odds to me considering how rare pangolins are across Asia. But would it be twitchable in a short four night trip? The answer proved to be an unbelievable “yes”.

Sri Lanka is one of only a handful of countries in Asia that allows quarantine-free travel and is only a three hour flight from my base in Kathmandu. I divided my time equally between the “wet zone” species and then the last two nights targeting the Indian pangolin site. As my previous trip report covered mainly the

dry zone species (including the four cat species) and visits to a number of bat roosts, this report focusses on the mammals that I missed last time.

On the drive from the airport one of my targets was hunting at the side of the road, **Indian brown mongoose**. Although this species was expected at other locations, this was the only - and very welcome - sighting of the trip. The destination for the first two days was Kitulgala forest in the wet-zone. We stayed at a colonial style hotel on the edge of the forest which required a short boat ride across a river to reach the forest. Night walks started at 10pm and the peak activity seemed to be between 12pm to 2 am. I missed the first clear view of a **yellow-striped chevrotain** that kept hidden even though I could see it clearly through my thermo (which doesn't count in my view as I can't see any diagnostic features). Luckily, 5 minutes later another individual made a fleeting but clear showing. Although I would characterize the forest as "quiet" in terms of mammal activity, it's clearly the right place to see the wet-zone specialists. Chinthaka heard the call of a **golden wet-zone palm civet** and after a 30 minute stakeout (and about 20 mins longer than I would have waited) he found it in a fruiting tree 50m from the original location. It was a brilliant "spot" and was a lesson in the rewards of persistence and patience. The next night we repeated the same walk and were rewarded by the sighting of **Red slender loris** (below).

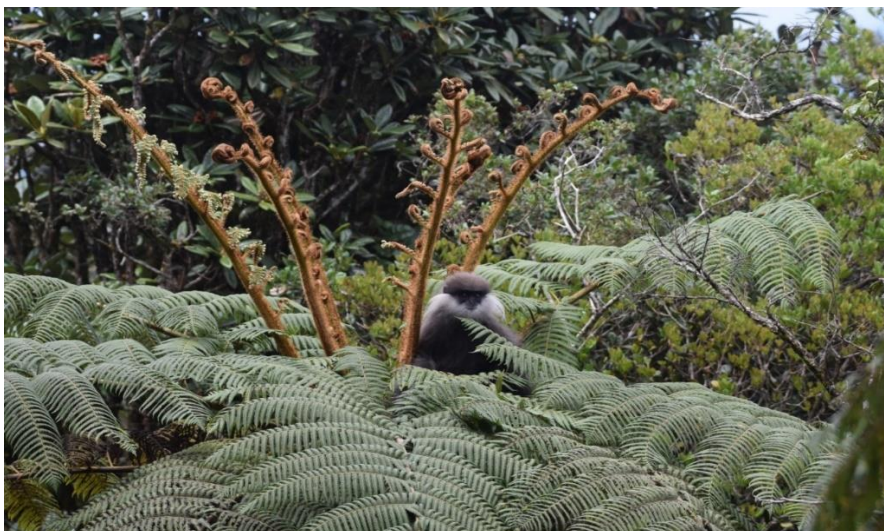
Other nocturnal appearances included **Indian pipistrelle**, **Rufous horseshoe bat**, **Hasselt's myotis**, **Greater short-nosed fruit bat** and **common palm civet**. Diurnal beasts included **Indian palm squirrel**, **Sri Lankan giant squirrel** and **Toque macaque**.



The next day we left for Horton Plains National Park for a daytime visit to this upland park. We stopped on the edge of the park to look for **Dusky-striped squirrel** which made an instant appearance. As we climbed up the hill towards the park we were treated to a close-up view of a **striped-necked mongoose (below)** hunting on the side of the road.



Just a bit further on we spotted a small troop of **Purple-faced langurs (mountain sub-spp also known as the Bear Monkey- see below).**



We then headed to Sigiriya, known for its frequent cat sightings. This time, a new area far from the normal routes had been identified as a potential site for Indian pangolin. On the first night we had been driving and walking until 1 a.m. then it started to rain heavily. We took shelter in disused building and after about an hour the rain stopped. Thinking that post-rain might be an ideal time for an insectivore we continued our search around the forest but nothing stirred. We headed back to the vehicle and started the long drive back. As we turned a corner, there in the headlights was the unmistakable outline of an **Indian pangolin** foraging along the side of the track. The rest is a bit of a blur but I did manage to remember to film the moment (see below) when the coiled pangolin decided it was safe to uncoil and carry on its way.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ybi24KU4EYc>

For all the obvious reasons concerning the relentless pressure on pangolins for their scales and meat in the illegal wildlife trade and as a conservationist first and mammal watcher second, I'm not going to give any information about the pangolin site. If you want to know more, then you will need to book a trip through Chinthaka although he recommends at least 4 nights targeting the pangolin. The last night was a short night drive before heading to the airport. We did see a number of other species (see full mammal list below) but this particular area is not as productive if you are after the long list of more commonly seen mammals.

STUFF I MISSED:

Flame-striped squirrel: Despite multiple attempts to locate it around Kitulgala forest this normally fairly common species eluded me.

Tranvacore flying squirrel: This was possible around Kitulgala and although we tried a new location where an animal had been seen the night before, we just ran out of time waiting for it to show.

Golden Dry-Zone palm civet: Missed it for the second time in Sigiriya but at least I saw its rarer wet-zone relative!

CONTACT DETAILS:

Chinthaka De Silva has been a wildlife guide for 25 years and it shows. He has excellent field craft, observant and knows when to wait. He picked up eyeshine where I had missed it and persisted when I would have moved on. The results speak for themselves

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ITINERARY

Day 1 – Arrival and drive to Kitulgala Forest. Night walk until 2am.

Day 2 - Afternoon walks around the edge of the Kitulgala forest. Night walk until 3 am.

Day 3 - Drive to Horton Plains and Sigiriya. Night drive until 3am

Day 4 - Night drive in Sigiriya until 11 pm and then drive to the airport.

MAMMAL LIST

1	Gray slender loris <i>Loris lydekkerianus</i>	One animal seen during the night drive in Sigiriya.
2	Sri Lana red slender loris <i>Loris tardigradus</i>	One animal seen at night in Kitulgala
3	Purple-faced langur <i>Semnopithecus vetulus</i> (<i>phibricki</i> and <i>monticola</i>)	One small troop (<i>monicola</i>) seen near Horton Plains and one animal (<i>phibricki</i>) seen at Sigiriya
4	Tufted grey langur <i>S.priam</i>	Seen around Sigiriya
5	Toque macaque <i>M.sinica aurifrons</i>	Wet zone sub spp seen at Kitulgala
6	Sri Lanka grizzled giant squirrel <i>Ratufa macroura</i>	A couple of animals seen at Kitulgala.
7	Palm squirrel <i>Funambulus palmarum</i>	Abundant at Kitulgala.

8	Dusky-striped squirrel <i>F. obscurus</i>	Two or three animals seen on the forest fringe of Horton Plains.
9	Indian gerbil <i>T. indica</i>	One seen during the night drive in Sigiriya
10	Black-naped hare <i>Lepus nigricollis</i>	A few animals seen in Sigiriya
11	Greater short-nosed fruit bat <i>Cynopterus sphinx</i>	A couple seen flying around the trail at Kitulgala
12	Lesser false vampire bat <i>M. spasma</i>	A number of animals seen in an abandoned building near Sigiriya
13	Rufous horseshoe bat <i>R. rouxi</i>	A few flying around the hotel lobby at Kitulgala
14	Lesser woolly horseshoe bat <i>R. beddomei</i>	A couple of animals flying near the road as Sigiriya
15	Indian pipistrelle <i>P. coromandra</i>	Common near the river at Kitulgala
16	Painted bat <i>Kerivoula picta</i>	A couple of animals did their fast fly-by during the drive at Sigiriya.
17	Brown bat <i>Myotis hasseltii</i>	Common near the river at Kitulgala
18	Jungle cat <i>Felis chaus</i>	The only cat of the trip at Sigiriya but we were targeting different areas this time.
19	Asian palm civet <i>P. hermaphroditus</i>	A couple of animals seen at Kitulgala
20	Golden wet zone palm civet <i>P. aureus</i>	One animal seen on the trail at Kitulgala

21	Small Indian civet <i>V. inidica</i>	One animal seen along the road at Sigiriya
22	Indian grey mongoose <i>H. edwardsii</i>	Seen during the day near the hotel at Sigiriya
23	Indian brown mongoose <i>H. fuscus</i>	Seen on the main highway heading towards Kitugala
24	Stripe-necked mongoose <i>H. vitticollis</i>	A pair seen hunting near the road on the way up the mountain to Horton Plains
25	Yellow-striped chevrotain <i>M.kathygre</i>	Two animals on the trail in Kitulgala forest
26	Sambar deer <i>R. unicolor</i>	A few animals seen grazing on Horton Plains.
27	Indian pangolin (!!) <i>Manis crassicaudata</i>	One animal seen at 2 am in a location far away from the usual sites

