

SRI LANKA. 18 nights. 50 species including leopard, fishing cat, jungle cat, sloth bear, elephant, stripe-necked mongoose, red slender loris, toque macaque, purple-faced leaf monkey (all 4 ssp.) and blue whale. Plus >172 birds, including Kashmir flycatcher and Pied thrush, and various herps and insects.

Dates	10.03.19 – 27.03.19 inclusive
Participants	Miles Foster and Ingrid Statman
Tour operator	Bird and Wildlife Team (Deepal and Himesha) www.birdandwildlifeteam.com
Guide	Dulan Ranga Vidanapathirana
Target Species	Leopard. Fishing, jungle and rusty spotted cats. Blue whales. Endemic primates.
Report author	Miles Foster

Schedule in brief

Day 1 – 3 – Wilpattu

Day 4 – 6 – Sigiriya

Day 7 and 8 – Kitulgala

Day 9 and 10 – Nuwara Eliya / Horton Plains

Day 11 – 14 – Tissa / Yala National Park

Day 15 – 17 – Mirissa

Schedule in detail

10th March – Arrive Colombo. Overnight at Gateway Hotel, Negombo.

Day 01 (11th March) – Negombo to Wilpattu National Park (Wilpattu Safari Camp), stopping briefly at

Anawilundala Wetland *en route*.

Afternoon safari in National Park

Night drive outside park

Day 02 (12th March) – Full-day safari in National Park

Night drive

Day 03 (13th March) – Full-day safari in National Park

Night drive

Day 04 (14th March) – Depart for Sigiriya (Sigiriya Village)

Afternoon mammal-watching in area

Night drive

Day 05 (15th March) – Mammal-watching in area

Night drive

Day 06 (16th March) – Mammal-watching in area

Night drive

Day 07 (17th March) – Depart for Kitulgala (Rest House)

Evening and night mammal-watching in Kitulgala area on foot

Day 08 (18th March) – Mammal-watching in Kitulgala area on foot

Day 09 (19th March) – Depart for Nuwara Eliya (Blackpool Hotel)

Evening mammal-watching in area

Day 10 (20th March) – Morning mammal-watching in Horton Plains National Park

Evening mammal-watching in Nuwara Eliya area

Day 11 (21st March) – Depart for Tissamaharama (Oak Ray Wild Yala) and Yala National Park via Ella

Afternoon wildlife watching in area

Night drive in area

Day 12 (22nd March) – Full-day safari in National Park

Night drive in area

Day 13 (23rd March) – Afternoon safari in National Park

Night drive in area

Day 14 (24th March) – Morning wildlife-watching in Tissa area

Afternoon depart for Mirissa (Mandara Resort) via Bundala National Park

Day 15 (25th March) – Morning whale-watching

Day 16 (26th March) – Morning whale-watching

Afternoon visit to snake rescue project

Day 17 (27th March) – Morning whale-watching

Afternoon depart for Negombo (Gateway Hotel)

28th March – depart for India (separate trip report to follow).

About us

We are reasonably experienced amateur wildlife watchers and quite widely travelled. Although we are generalists and fascinated by all aspects of ecology and ethology, we are mainly interested in predators, particularly mammals and more particularly cats. The quality rather than quantity of sightings is important to us, especially the chance to observe behaviour, and the feeling that we are getting to know a species, while recognising that the behaviour of the observed is frequently influenced by the presence of the observer. So we like to take our time and tend to work on the principal that the best wildlife sighting is the one in front of us rather than dashing off to see what might be round the corner. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, after all.

Bird and Wildlife Team

Many forum members will be familiar with Bird and Wildlife Team, based in Colombo, which claims to be the best wildlife tour operator and have the best guides in Sri Lanka. But as we believe in doing our homework however strong the recommendation, we also looked at a number of other companies who run wildlife tours in Sri Lanka. Although BWT were considerably more expensive they were also considerably more impressive and clearly highly experienced in arranging the kind of tour we were looking for and the reputation of the guides was the deciding factor. We never regretted the extra expense and would agree with the majority opinion that BWT is the company of choice for the serious wildlife tourist. As the company's website observes, 'Costs of our tours are based on the quality of the services we provide, and are highly competitive when so considered'. You get what you pay for.

They were friendly and efficient and willing to go the extra mile to arrange a bespoke tour to suit our personal interests. The accommodation they arranged was almost entirely in modern, well managed hotels that were ideally situated as bases for each leg of the trip, food and service were generally excellent and the staff were unfailingly friendly and courteous.

Deepal and Himesha who arranged the tour were friendly and efficient throughout and in the event everything ran smoothly – always the test of good organisation. In particular they were painstaking in arranging quiet rooms and wheat-free meals for Ingrid – greatly helped by the extra care taken by our guide, Dulan. On the basis of particular recommendations by this forum we were hoping to secure either Dulan or Uditha as our guide and were happy to find that Dulan was available.

We would strongly recommend booking well in advance if you have a particular guide in mind as they have a very busy schedule. And Deepal himself is often out of the office guiding tours, which can mean delays in responding to emails.

Dulan



We have had excellent guides in many parts of the world but Dulan is easily one of the best. Not only is he an outstanding spotter with an encyclopaedic knowledge of his subject and a published research scientist who has been involved in discovering several species that are new to the country, he is also patient, thoughtful, determined, good humoured, good company, good with people and very hard-working. He has friends and contacts everywhere and took us to numerous locations that we would never have found for ourselves, still less had access to. Above all, we had many first rate sightings, including numerous rare and hard-to-find species that we would never have found without him and no one could have worked harder to try to find the species we were most interested in.

Strategy

We booked the best guide we could and took his advice! In arranging the tour, we liaised closely with BWT to maximise our chances of seeing our target species, skipping some destinations and extending our time at others and spent as much time as conditions and energy would allow in searching for wildlife – up to 22 ½ hrs. before we saw our beds again. We used a variety of lamps on night drives.

Driving

All the drivers for our night drives were local to each area and are regulars with BWT. They were all keen, diligent, had a good grasp of what was required and helped with spotting and spotlighting. The driver at Wilpattu was outstanding – patiently manoeuvring his Landcruiser over the difficult terrain.

Transfers between hotels and some of our early evening excursions were by Toyota Hiace minibus. I gather this vehicle is used regularly by BWT. The tyres were not of the newest and on Day 7 one of them burst just after we had overtaken another vehicle – it was fortunate that we were not going faster at the time. But tyre condition improved distinctly afterwards. We had a minor accident on the way to Horton Plains, which given the narrow winding road and tremendous press of vehicles all vying to be first at the gate, is not altogether surprising. Road travel in Sri Lanka is never dull. Suffice to say that it would be a good place to practice your defensive driving.

Equipment

Photography is not the main focus of our trips and we like to travel light. Consequently Ingrid carries a Panasonic Lumix FZ72 bridge cam with 60x zoom and I have a Sony A58 DSLR with an 18 – 200mm lens. I regretted not taking our camera trap as there would have been numerous opportunities to use it in hotel grounds. **Photographs in this report are not to be reproduced without permission.**

Weather

Very hot and dry throughout, temp in high 30s Celsius, though cooler in hills, often strong breeze late afternoon / night wind.

Wilpattu – Day 1 – 3 / 11th – 13th March



Accommodation: Wilpattu Safari Camp. A permanent tented camp among trees close to Hunuvila tank and Wilpattu Hunuwilagama Gate and Park HQ. Quiet, clean and comfortable with *en suite* bathrooms. The manager, Namal, was very friendly and welcoming and a great host and raconteur; we enjoyed many interesting and entertaining conversations around the dinner table. No alcohol here but if you ask in advance Namal will buy it in for you.

Habitat (Zone 3 adjacent to Hunuwilagama): Dry zone forest with numerous tanks (lakes).

Sightings

On all of our game drives here we drove for about an hour from Hunuwilagama Gate on a dusty, orange track through a fairy-tale forest to the clearings around the Viradawala waterholes where leopards had been sighted. Wavering streams of **Lemon Emigrant butterflies** danced along above the track in the speckled light. It was fascinating and very beautiful to see thousands upon thousands of these insects all flying in the same direction on the migration that gives them their name. At various times along this track and around the small waterholes beside it we had excellent sightings of, among others, **wild Water buffalo** (very strong smell!), **Ruddy mongoose**, **Soft-shelled turtle**, **Painted and**

Woolly-necked storks, Crested hawk-eagle, Crested serpent eagle and Asian honey buzzard as well as numerous **Chital**.

The Viradawala area is currently the territory of two young **leopard** sisters whose mother's territory is nearby or overlaps. We found them without difficulty relaxing in the open about 16.00 on our first day. The following morning they were in the same spot under a large tree on the edge of some dense cover with a large bull **water buffalo** grazing quietly nearby. Both leopards showed great interest in the buffalo though it was clearly too big for them and one of the sisters got up and stalked to within about 25 yds. / 22m making good use of cover (below).



Her sister, more sensibly in view of the heat and the size of the buffalo, climbed the tree and settled down to rest. The would-be hunter decided discretion is the better part of valour and also withdrew to rest in dense cover. It was late morning and nature seemed to hold its breath at the approach of mid-day. We drove to a small shaded waterhole nearby to see if one of the sisters would come to drink but without luck. The next morning we found one of them resting in a different tree with about a dozen vehicles in attendance (below).



We explored further afield finding a magnificent and rather plump **bull elephant** eating water plants in a large lake and then heard that a **leopard** had been seen back at the Viradawala area. Rounding a corner we found another jeep waiting for one of the sisters to cross the road. Dulan observed that if she wanted to cross the road she had had plenty of time already and we overtook them. Round the next bend we duly found this beautiful creature strolling quietly along the track about 50 yds. / 45m in front of us. With the other jeep coming up quietly, if rather excitedly behind, we settled down to enjoy a sighting which, but for Dulan, we would all have missed. She stopped once and glanced back at us, her rich golden brown coat and jet black rosettes showing well in the dappled sunlight, then flopped down to rest in the shade, gazing back at us (below).



After a while she got up and walked further along the track before flopping down again and then finally got up and went into the forest on the right – i.e. she had now crossed the track. But her body language suggested that had not been her intention and, as Dulan said, she would probably now double back behind us and return to her own territory and we duly left her to it.

We also had good sightings of **sloth bear**. About 17.40 on our first afternoon we found one in the Viradawala area fossicking for termites just inside a dense patch of forest. Fortunately it soon emerged into the open and gradually made its way towards us stopping occasionally and gazing around in that rather vague, sleepy way that bears do. It was a breezy evening with a cross wind and as we were very still and quiet it seems likely the bear was picking up hints of our scent but could not make out where we were. It approached to within about 25 yards before finally turning around and heading back the way it had come (above).



We saw the same individual two days later about 15.40 crossing some open ground by the track to and from Hunuwilagama Gate. We were able to observe it for about 20 minutes searching for food just inside a tangle of bushes; digging, turning over logs and audibly snuffling, her thick coat providing complete protection from the enormous thorns. After a protracted digging session at the edge of the bushes she re-emerged into the open and sat down on her haunches for several minutes of grooming; vigorously scratching and nibbling her stomach, crotch and legs. She had obviously discovered an ant or termite nest in the bushes and presumably the defenders had managed to attack her underside where the fur is thinner.



Night drives in the surrounding countryside were very productive. We found our first two **jungle cats** hunting in an overgrown field at around 21.20 on the first evening. On seeing us, one of the two immediately ran off about 30 – 40 yds. / ca. 28 – 36 m. where it resumed hunting while the other remained nearby scanning the undergrowth and apparently quite unconcerned (left). Later that night we had a third in an open field by the main road, sitting upright and very alert with ears twitching. The vegetation in both fields was dense, the grass in the open field was about 18" high and the weeds in the overgrown field much

higher. It was a very dark night. Just as we were leaving this site I saw another cat further away who was just disappearing from view. By now I had got my eye in and had had a good view of it so was sure of the identification. Dulan had only had a glimpse and thought it was 50/50. He's the expert so let's

say at least 3 jungle cats on the first night drive of the trip. On a third night we had a fourth (or was it in fact a fifth...?) on the far side of a large ploughed field.

Our first **Grey slender loris** also put in an appearance on our first night drive (11th March) at 23.05, about 10 feet up in the bushes close beside the track. We had a similar sighting two evenings later.



Our second night (12th March) produced **our first Fishing cat**, hunting for small frogs beside a stream, sit-and-wait style (left). It was reassuring to note that the cat had little more success than we do trying to catch these little jumpers!

Meanwhile, we scoured the countryside for that elusive little felid, the **Rusty-spotted cat**... but we had already found three of Sri Lanka's four native cats and the trip had hardly begun.

Night drives in the Wilpattu area also produced:

Small Indian civet

Indian gerbils – numerous, including mating behaviour

Sri Lankan White-striped chevrotain – several

Black-naped hare

Asiatic Long-tailed climbing mouse

Golden jackal – a pack of 4 leaping through long grass very close to a village and apparently unconcerned by the numerous barking dogs.

Frogs – various

A fellow guest at Wilpattu, a young English woman who was travelling alone, **saw 4 leopards and a sloth bear** although she only stayed one night.

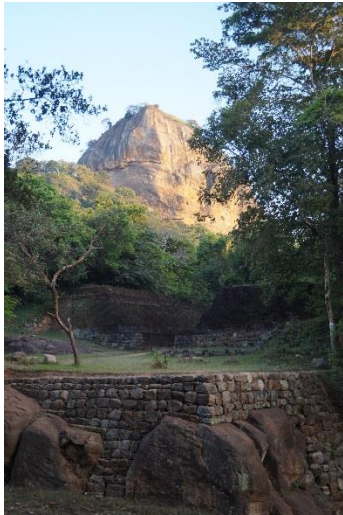
Sigiriya – Day 4 – 6 / 14th – 16th March

Accommodation: Sigiriya Village Hotel. Rooms are arranged in themed 'villages' among extensive grounds with many large trees, ponds, ornamental shrubberies, lawns etc. providing habitat for a varied fauna. Large, sometimes crowded dining room with extensive buffet. Swimming pool with good view of the famous rock. One of our favourite hotels of the trip.

Habitat: dry zone forest, extensive farmland, numerous tanks (lakes)

Sightings

With our regular driver Herath at the wheel, we made our way via the traffic-choked provincial capital of Anuradhapura to the tourist mecca of Sigiriya. The hotel grounds are very pleasant and we had **toque macaques** (dry zone ssp.), **tufted grey langurs**, **hard-shell turtles** and a **water monitor** before we reached our room. That's our kind of hotel.



We set off to explore with Dulan and Herath at 17.30 and had our first **Purple-faced leaf monkeys** (northern ssp.) in the forest near the moat (left). They were quite tricky to spot and very shy – in fact, with very few exceptions, all the purple-faced leaf monkeys we saw were noticeably bashful compared to their more confiding and inquisitive relatives. Now, when a creature is called the ‘purple-faced’ something-or-other it is reasonable to suppose that it actually has a purple face, don’t you think? Or perhaps not. Suffice to say, we never did discover quite how these guys got their name. I have scoured the internet and failed to find a single photograph of one that has a purple face, not even when it was obviously pretty cross. However, whereas they do not in fact seem to have purple faces surely their most obvious feature is those extravagant side-whiskers so reminiscent of a Hindu warrior, so that one might be forgiven for thinking that the Kshatriya langur

might have been a better name and arguably less of a mouthful, or even the General Burnside monkey or the Kaiser Wilhelm lutung or simply kalu wandura as it has been known in Sri Lanka for centuries. But no, for some mysterious reason the person who discovered it decided to name it after a feature it does not in fact possess.



Also a particularly close sighting of a fine black-naped hare here, which for once did not run away as soon as it saw us (left).

Day 5 / 15th March we decided to have an easy morning birding in the grounds before driving out in the afternoon to a **Leaf-nosed bat** (right) roost in a private location discovered by Dulan’s colleague Udithe and thence to one of the large rocky outcrops that characterise the area and where there are **horse-shoe** and **tomb bat** roosts.



Spotlighting on the way back at about 20.10 we had an excellent sighting of a **Fishing cat** crouching on the stonework on the edge of the Sigiriya moat. It cannot have been actually fishing as the water is too far below the parapet and there are crocodiles in it (all serious moats really should contain crocodiles). On seeing us it ran across the road behind our vehicle and we thought we had seen the last of it. Fortunately it took up position on top of the low wall that borders the forest and settled down peacefully to wash, giving us some fine viewing in the process.

After dinner we set off with a local driver to scour the surrounding country for a Rusty-spotted cat... no luck with that but good sightings of some of the more common night birds and animals.



Day 6 / 16th March. Good birding in the hotel grounds with Dulan after breakfast, then a smallish but still magnificent **Water monitor**, a **Land monitor** and a **Grey mongoose** (left). This young mongoose is often seen in the grounds around mid-morning and late afternoon as it follows its regular beat. We followed at a distance and caught up with it just licking the yolk off its lips after devouring a land monitor egg near a leaf pile in a corner of the garden.

At 17.00 we drove to the forest near the moat and found a single **Purple-faced leaf monkey** very high up and further on above the moat **Toque macaques** roosting in twos and threes in a very tall bare tree and a few **Purple-faced leaf monkeys** in a separate tree still browsing on reddish-coloured leaves, one with a baby at the breast. Then to another bat roost for **Rufous horseshoe** and **Dusky roundleaf bats**.

The night drive (21.30 – 02.30) produced a large **Indian rock python** in an overgrown field in front of a private house where the residents were presumably slumbering soundly, unaware of this monster in their 'garden'. We estimated its length at around 10' / 3m which is standard for an adult and maximum girth about 22" / 0.5m though it might have been larger, it moved slowly in a straight line with head raised, as pythons are wont. Interestingly, there were a number of dogs sleeping or running about nearby, as there always are in Sri Lanka, and we could not help wondering whether one of them would be found missing next day.



Later, about 22.25, beside one of the many large reservoirs in the area we had our third **Fishing cat** eating a large fish about 6 – 10' (2 – 3m) from the edge of the water where it continued to feed, warily looking about, for several minutes. It was Saturday night and dance music drifted across the water from a nearby hotel. Then another vehicle pulled up nearby with a rather noisy party of revelers on board, so we switched off our lights in case they noticed the cat and

spoiled its evening as well as ours. The cat however made its way through the long grass towards the other vehicle and settled down in the open under a small tree about 50' / 15m from the road where it remained for some time (above left), alternately closing its eyes as though dozing and looking over at the other vehicle when there was a fresh outburst of noise. It was a windy night and it also seemed to respond to nearby rustlings in the grass even though it had just enjoyed a large meal. Eventually the revelers left and, satisfied that the cat was now safe from further intrusion, we left it to its digestive somnolence. We were struck by its striking facial markings and noble head.

Back at Sigiriya Village at 02.30 a pair of **Common palm civets** greeted us almost on the doorstep of our room.

En route to Kitulgala on 17th March we stopped off at **Popham Arboretum** for a **False vampire bat** roost (right). One of the staff was rearing an orphaned **Indian scops owl** which he showed us.



Accommodation: Kitulgala Rest House. Charming, old fashioned and somewhat faded, it stands in its own grounds beside the river with wonderful views of the forest, a popular restaurant overlooking the river, friendly and helpful staff, hotel not very busy when we were there. Its claim to fame is that this is where the cast stayed when they were shooting *The Bridge on the River Kwai* and there are faded displays about the film in the bar and restaurant. Our room was not the highest standard of the trip but clean, quiet and comfortable.

Habitats: Wet zone rainforest, secondary forest, riverine.



Sightings on the first afternoon included **Alexandrine parakeets**, 35 **Open-billed storks** roosting above the river and a **Trinket snake** in the corridor outside our room - you don't have to go far to see wildlife here.

Our first night's forest walk produced, among others, several species of frog, a large **scorpion**, a **tailless whip scorpion**, a **wolf snake** (which mimics the venomous krait) and, Ingrid's spot, a truly venomous **Hump-nosed viper**, which we gave a respectfully wide berth. In fact, Dulan carefully moved it off the track in case it was still there when we came back. Its camouflage colouring was excellent and Ingrid did very well to spot it on a very dark night in the forest with sweat in her eyes, mosquitoes in her hair and leaches crawling up her legs. In fact, all that was lacking for the true rainforest experience was a venomous snake that everyone else had missed.



But this was a three-star night. The first star was the endemic **Serendib scops owl**, (left) only discovered in the mid-1990s by Dulan's colleague, Deepal Warakagoda, and known from only a [handful of sightings](#).

The second was a **Golden palm-civet** eating jak fruit and the third was, at last, a **Rusty-spotted cat**! Except Ingrid and I didn't see it.... In fact, Dulan only saw its ears sticking out of some long grass but that was enough for a positive ID. It scarppered as soon as it saw the torch beam and search as we might we had neither sight nor snatch of it. But a good night nonetheless.

Returning to the hotel in the early hours Ingrid pointed out my shirt was soaked with blood. Six plump **leaches** duly fell plop onto the bathroom floor and three more were still attached. The bathroom looked like a crime scene and it took an hour-and-a-half to stem the bleeding. The bites were still weeping twelve hours later. Such fun.

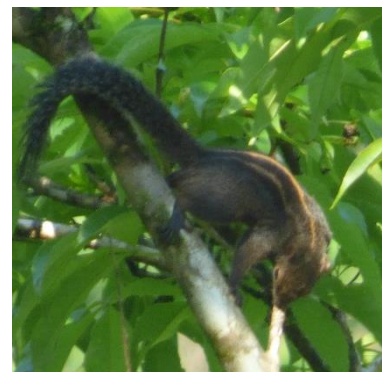
Day 8 / 18th March brought a **Brown mongoose** in the hotel grounds, a **Giant squirrel** in the forest (wet zone ssp.) lots of nice birds, bugs and butterflies, another **Serendib scops owl** (or the same one in a different place) and a very handsome **Green forest lizard** (*Calotes calotes*) eating a huge beetle and posing very nicely for its photograph (right).



After dark we headed back into the forest – herps of all shapes and sizes abounded including several rare **Hump-nosed lizards** but the mammal highlights were a **Red slender loris** moving very fast through the trees, which we also heard calling, and the **Golden palm civet** back for another portion of jak fruit. No sign of that Rusty spotted cat though...

During the night the **moonlight** grew stronger which may have affected mammal activity (3 nights before full moon). Dulan told us that he and his colleagues have collected research data that suggests **slender loris** are less active on moonlit nights. And I remember that Vladimir Dinets also found red slender loris less apparent by moonlight. Obviously the one we saw didn't get the memo. Its call could easily be mistaken for a bird and according to the [Loris and potto conservation database](#) the sound it was making, a 'Short low, soft whistle or squeak, monosyllabic', indicates it was 'Probably calling for a conspecific'. So maybe moonlight brings out the romance in a slender loris.

Day 9 / 19th March – last chance for **Flame-striped squirrel** (right). Dulan spotted one quite early in our walk which gave us our first glimpse then a few minutes later Ingrid spotted a second which led to a very good sighting as it foraged on a thin, sparsely leaved tree, showing well though scarcely still for a moment. Its feeding habit was to snip off pencil-thin twigs then nibble the ends while hanging head first from a branch. All the individuals we saw had a very dark ground colour and a bright orange-red stripe.



Nuwara Eliyah and Horton Plains – Day 9 and 10 / 19th and 20th March

Accommodation: Hotel Blackpool. Modern, friendly, on outskirts of town. Quiet room.

Habitat: Wet zone, montane grassland and cloud forest.

Sightings.

A drive and walk to a location Dulan knows outside the town produced 3 **Dusky-striped squirrels**, and **Giant squirrel** of the montane ssp. with a distinctive smoky grey tail with numerous faint bands. Other sightings included the very rare **Kashmir** and **Dull blue flycatchers** and a pair of **Rat snakes** engaged in courtship wrestling.

The following morning we were up at 03.40 to be at **Horton Plains** when the park opens, it was around 10 degrees and very cold. We found numerous **sambar** in the cattle pastures *en route* and a large sounder of **wild boar** crossing the road. This is a very popular tourist destination and, although there are a number of hiking trails, most people take the circular trail to the scenic viewpoint of World's

End. We stopped beside the Arrenga Pool where otters are sometimes seen but had only a number of birds including the much sought-after **Whistling thrush**. There was a tremendous melee of vehicles at the park headquarters and the car park was already overflowing. We walked back to Arrenga Pool along the road and had a distant glimpse of **Bear monkeys**, the montane ssp, of Purple-faced leaf monkey, and saw a small herd of **sambar** grazing in the rolling grassland east of the road. We heard a sambar 'pooking' but the deer were too far away and too scattered to make much of this though back at the pool we found a two-day old **leopard scat**. In the early afternoon near Pattipola we had a much better sighting of **Bear monkeys** and in the evening in the garden of another of Dulan's friends we had a good sighting of the **montane ssp. of toque macaque**, whose 'hairstyle' is even more eccentric than their lowland relatives.

Our last morning here was spent birding in Victoria Park, Nuwara Eliya, where we again saw many sought-after species including **Pied thrush**, **Scaly thrush** and **Sri Lankan nuthatch**.

Tissamaharama and Yala National Park area – Day 11 – 14 / 21st – 24th March

Accommodation: Oak Ray Wild Yala – modern hotel, swimming pool, good food and service.

Habitat: Dry zone. Varied, including forest, wetland, grassland and farmland

Sightings.

In the late afternoon of our first day we headed for Lake Tissa and the **Indian flying fox** roost in a group of large trees on the south-west shore of the lake. As well as the estimated 15,000 flying foxes dozing and fidgeting in the branches this is a great spot for water birds – we had **spot-billed pelicans**, **ibis**, **Alexandrine parakeets**, **Indian** and **greater cormorants** and a **Great Egret** (Eastern race) in full breeding plumage. The **flying fox fly-out**, observed from the roof of a nearby hotel with Yatala Wehera stupa in the distance and a blazing sunset, was truly spectacular.

We avoided the notoriously crowded Zone 1 of **Yala** and concentrated on Zone 5. Though we did not see a leopard (we came close) we had numerous excellent sightings including:

wild **water buffaloes** – numerous

a large female **elephant** about 25 years old

grey mongoose – several including a sub-adult chasing a **black-naped hare**

ruddy mongoose

stripe-necked mongoose – 2 - our first sighting was an excellent spot by Ingrid as it fossicked along a river, another was digging vigorously for crabs in the mud beside a waterhole (right and below)



jackal

chital – including a herd of about 60 that was always below the Weheragama Reservoir dam with some magnificent bucks, younger males in velvet and many does with young.

numerous birds.

Night drives in the surrounding area including around Bundala. We scoured the country for miles around by night for a glimpse of that elusive Rusty. I think we looked under every bush in Sri Lanka, it certainly felt like it. No one can say we didn't try. However, other sightings included:

Small Indian civets

jungle cat and kitten – keeping well hidden – it was interesting to note that this pair was much less confident than those at Wilpattu, presumably the mother was cautious because the kitten was with her

elephants – several – walking on road or feeding in open farmland, including a group of males with one tusker – calling with loud rumbles that could be heard at considerable distance, and a loud trumpet audible about 1 mile away

fishing cat – crossed the road and stopped to glance at us over its shoulder before disappearing into the undergrowth.

Also seen in this area:

Lesser bandicoot rat.

Water monitors – pair at the side of the road, male and female; a passerby said the female, which was bleeding, had been hit by a vehicle, but she seemed none the worse and quickly headed for the lake scattering onlookers and hotly pursued by the male.

Mirissa - whale-watching etc. – Day 15 – 17 / 25th – 27th March

Accommodation: Matara Resort. Modern hotel, swimming pool, good service etc.

Hour after hour of endless jostling traffic brought us to a comfortable hotel on the beach and a very welcome swim in the Indian Ocean before supper.

The south-west coast of Sri Lanka is reputed to be the easiest place in the world to see **Blue whales** but, of course, sightings are not guaranteed and the behaviour of the boat crews has attracted a great deal of criticism. However, BWT has built a close relationship with a company that operates in a responsible manner and to increase our chances of good sightings we arranged three consecutive sailings rather than the standard single whale-watching trip.

So, on 25th March we were up at 05.30 and off to the bustling, chaotic harbour for our first whale-watching trip. We didn't sail until 07.10 however as we were kept waiting for a Chinese party that was late. They turned out to be a very excitable group of youngsters and two people got off the boat before departure as they couldn't face the racket. The boat held a maximum 35 passengers and it was perhaps half full and we were able to move around freely. Not far from shore we spotted a **green turtle** and a few minutes later two more mating. However another boat approached too close causing

one to dive – the Chinese youngsters hysterically excited by all this. All the turtles we saw were timid although we were never closer than about 50 yds. / 45m. We duly joined 18 other boats and a light aircraft 6 nautical miles off shore near the inner shipping lane. Whales have been killed by ship strike here and shipping companies are willing to [move the lane](#) further off shore but the Sri Lankan government fears that will affect the income of its ports.



I spotted a small pod of **bottle-nose dolphins** bow-riding another boat then, after chasing about for a bit, we had reasonable sightings of one ‘small’ and one large **blue whale**. On the way back to shore we encountered a pod of **spinner dolphins**. The following day was much quieter and there were only four tourists on the boat besides us. We came across the **spinners** again between the shore and the whale-watching grounds and some tiny two-man fishing boats. One of the men was paying out a long-line and our deckhand-cum-spotter told us that both dolphins and men were probably hunting yellow-

fin tuna. Soon after arriving at the 6-mile mark we spotted a spout that I estimated at about 15’ / 4.5m and had a view of a large **blue whale** (above).

After it surfaced it left a large brown slick of poo, dotted with orange-red spots like roses scattered on the surface. Its dive intervals were 11, 8, 6 and 10 minutes. In all we had four blues that day – two large and two medium-sized. I have read that one rarely sees a blue whale’s flukes and, while most did not show their tails, we had four full fluke or tail-up

dives that day and three the next. On the way back to shore the **spinners** (right) put on a fine display, one repeatedly cartwheeling and one or two performing a half-spin and landing on their sides – we never saw a full 360 degree spin. On our third day we were the only tourists on the boat – making just 6 of us with Dulan and the three crew who showed themselves as skilful as ever, managing to get close enough but never too close to the



whales while remaining as far as possible from other boats so that we had at least two sightings pretty much to ourselves. We never approached the whales as close as most of the others and binoculars and zoom lenses were a definite advantage though they were hard to use given the motion of the boat. Needless to say, we did not see anyone else carrying them and to give the passengers a good view many of the boats got too close. At one point we had a good view of a whale when one of the larger boats pulled across our bow and almost onto the whale. Naturally, it dived. The larger boats carry up to 70 passengers and looked pretty cramped, it was hard to imagine they provide a very good experience. Two of them were trailing clouds of diesel fumes. We had several sightings and timed a dive of 15 minutes by an adult blue that spouted 13 times on surfacing. Heading for shore we saw dolphins in the distance and another green turtle. My last sighting was of a full, tail-up, humpback-style dive in the far distance, flukes and tail stock showing well above the water.

On our second afternoon at Mirissa we visited a friend of Dulan who showed us a troop of **purple-faced leaf monkeys**, a couple of **brown hawk-owls** and a **fruit bat** near his house and took us for a stroll around the Galle Fort, where we saw a **Purple-faced leaf monkey** (southern race) that, unusually, was sitting in an exposed position on top of a church watching the world go by, quite unlike most of his conspecifics. Perhaps they are more habituated to people here. The following afternoon we visited Mr. Thelessawila, a man who rescues snakes from herpetocidal farmers. He keeps the snakes for a few weeks before release and uses them in educational events for schools in the hope that the rising generation will grow up with a more positive attitude. While we would always rather see wildlife in

the wild, this was a very interesting afternoon and I was particularly struck by the strength of a small python. I shuddered to think how strong the one we saw near Wilpattu was.

En route to Negombo on our final afternoon we stopped to explore tomb bat roost among some caves in a patch of dense thorny woodland and then dropped in on another of Dulan's contacts who runs his own small rubber plantation where we had our final bat of the trip, a **rare Rhinolophus species**. After a very comfortable night at the Gateway Hotel in Negombo, we said farewell to Dulan and Herath and boarded our flight to India – trip report to follow....

Conclusion

Sri Lanka's reputation as a wildlife destination is well deserved and Bird and Wildlife Team exceeded our expectations as a wildlife tour operator. We would thoroughly recommend both. We found the people every bit as charming and courteous as reputed, and the atmosphere relaxed and friendly and we were naturally appalled by the Easter terrorist outrages (April 2019). But it is to be hoped that things will return to normal before long and when they do we would definitely recommend a trip.

Links and Resources

Industrial pressures on pressure on Sri Lanka's wildlife:

https://site-api.ceylontoday.lk/e_news_paper?sdate=2019-03-25

Serendib scops owl: <https://orientalbirdclub.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/serendibscops.pdf>

Loris and potto conservation database: <http://www.loris-conservation.org/database/authors.html>

Campaign to move shipping lanes: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-6772113/Unusual-alliance-Sri-Lanka-forged-save-blue-whales.html>

Species list

Adapted from the checklist supplied by Bird and Wildlife Team and completed on our behalf by Dulan. E = endemic. On the whole, I have not delved in detail, either in the body of the report or in the species list, into the arcane subject of sub-species.

SRI LANKA SPECIES LIST - MAMMALS	AREAS WHERE SEEN
Bats	
Indian Flying Fox <i>Pteropus giganteus</i>	Tissa, Mirissa
Greater Short-nosed Fruit Bat <i>Cynopterus sphinx</i>	Mirissa
SRI LANKA SPECIES LIST - MAMMALS	AREAS WHERE SEEN
Bats	
Indian Flying Fox <i>Pteropus giganteus</i>	Tissa, Mirissa
Greater Short-nosed Fruit Bat <i>Cynopterus sphinx</i>	Mirissa
Long-armed Sheath-tailed Bat <i>Taphozous longimanus</i>	Sigiriya
Dusky Roundleaf Bat <i>Hipposideros ater</i>	Sigiriya, Tissa
Dekhan Leaf-nosed Bat <i>Hipposideros galeritus</i>	Tissa
Schneider's Leaf-nosed Bat <i>Hipposideros speoris</i>	Sigiriya
Lesser False Vampire Bat <i>Megaderma spasma</i>	Kitulgala
Rufous Horse-shoe Bat <i>Rhinolophus rouxii</i>	Sigiriya
Indian Pipistrelle <i>Pipistrellus coromandra</i>	Wilpattu
Pigmy Pipistrelle <i>Pipistrellus tenuis</i>	Sigiriya
Bears	
Sloth Bear <i>Melursus ursinus</i>	Wilpattu
Bovids	
Wild Buffalo <i>Bubalus arnee</i>	Wilpattu, Yala – every day in these areas
Feral Water Buffalo <i>Bubalus bubalis</i>	Wilpattu, Sigiriya, Tissa
Cats	
Jungle Cat <i>Felis chaus</i>	Wilpattu, Tissa
Rusty-spotted Cat <i>Felis rubiginosa</i>	Kitulgala
Fishing Cat <i>Felis viverrina</i>	Wilpattu, Tissa
Leopard <i>Panthera pardus</i>	Wilpattu
Canid	
Golden Jackal <i>Canis aureus</i>	Wilpattu, Sigiriya, Tissa
Cetaceans	
Blue whale <i>B. m. breviceuda</i> , (aka. Pygmy blue whale)	Mirissa – every day
Bottlenose dolphin <i>Tursiops aduncus</i> (ID probable)	Mirissa
Long-snouted / Spinner Dolphin <i>Stenella longirostris</i>	Mirissa – every day
Civets	
Small Indian Civet <i>Viverricula indica</i>	Wilpattu, Sigiriya, Tissa
Asian Palm Civet <i>Paradoxurus hermaphrodites</i>	Sigiriya, Tissa
Golden Wet-Zone Palm Civet <i>Paradoxurus aureus</i> E	Kitulgala – both days
Deer and Mouse-deer	
Sri Lankan White-striped Chevrotain <i>Moschiola meminna</i> E	Wilpattu, Sigiriya, Tissa
Sambar <i>Cervus unicolor</i>	Wilpattu, Horton Plains
Chital <i>Axis axis</i>	Wilpattu, Sigiriya, Tissa – every day in all
Indian Muntjac <i>Muntiacus muntjak</i>	Wilpattu
Elephant	
Asian Elephant <i>Elephas maximus</i>	Wilpattu, Tissa – everyday in both areas
Lagomorphs	
Indian Hare <i>Lepus nigricollis</i>	Wilpattu, Sigiriya, Tissa – everyday in W & S
Mongoose	
Indian Grey Mongoose <i>Herpestes edwardsii</i>	Sigiriya, Tissa
Ruddy Mongoose <i>Herpestes smithii</i>	Wilpattu, Tissa
Short-tailed (Brown) Mongoose <i>Herpestes brachyurus</i>	Kitulgala, Horton Plains
Stripe-Necked Mongoose <i>Herpestes vitticollis</i>	Yala

Pigs	
Eurasian Wild Boar <i>Sus scrofa</i>	Wilpattu, Tissa
Primates	
Red Slender Loris <i>Loris tardigradus</i> E	Kitulgala – both nights
Grey Slender Loris <i>Loris lydekkerianus</i>	Wilpattu, Sigiriya – every night
Toque Macaque <i>Macaca sinica</i> E	Widespread
Tufted Grey Langur <i>Semnopithecus priam</i>	Widespread except Kitulgala
Purple-Faced Leaf Monkey <i>Trachypithecus vetulus</i> E	Sigiriya, Kitulgala, Horton, Tissa, Mirissa
Rodents	
Asiatic Long-tailed Climbing Mouse <i>Vandeleuria oleracea</i>	Wilpattu
House (Black) Rat <i>Rattus rattus</i>	Nuwara Eliya
Brown Rat <i>Rattus norvegicus</i>	Wilpattu
Lesser Bandicoot Rat <i>Bandicota bengalensis</i>	Tissa
Indian Gerbil <i>Tatera indica</i>	Wilpattu, Sigiriya, Tissa
Shrews	
Pearson's Long-clawed shrew – <i>Solisorex pearsoni</i>	Nuwara Eliya
Squirrels	
Sri Lankan Giant Squirrel <i>Ratufa macroura</i>	Wilpattu, Kitulgala, Horton, Tissa
Indian Palm squirrel <i>Funambulus palmarum</i>	Widespread
Sri Lankan flameback Squirrel <i>Funambulus layardi</i> E	Kitulgala
Sri Lankan Dusky-Striped Squirrel <i>Funambulus p. obscurus</i> E	Nuwara Eliya, Horton Plains

