

# *Sri Lanka*

## Endemic Birds





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## INTRODUCTION

Adventure, Ayurveda, Beaches, Culture, Great Hotels, Hill country, Nature, Tea, Scenery, Spa, Service, Underwater, Villages ..... there are an infinite number of reasons for exploring Sri Lanka. In this publication, we hope to introduce you to just one of a million facets of this magical island.

Sri Lanka is an island which defies convention. According to classic island bio-geographic theory, small islands don't have large mammals. Hmm..... well, unfortunately for theory, Sri Lanka is an exception as the largest terrestrial mammal in Asia, the Asian Elephant is found on the island. What is more, beyond doubt, the best in Asia in which to see the Asian Elephant, is Sri Lanka. During September and October, 'The Gathering', an annual influx of elephants takes place at Minneriya National Park. It is one of the great wildlife spectacle on the planet. Then there is the Big Spotted One. The leopard, is elusive all over the world. In Sri Lanka, there are good opportunities to see and photograph this 'ultimate cat'.

What about birds? Here, the theorists have got it right. Islands are marvelous vestibules for evolutionary dynamics to work, resulting in speciation. The island has 33 endemic species of birds according to the Ripley Guide: Birds of South Asia by Pamela Rasmussen and John Anderton (2005). A new species of owl was discovered in 2001. Many more plants and animals await to be discovered by science.

## BIRDING FACTS AT A GLANCE

**ENDEMICS** 33 species of endemic birds. 55 species are endemic to mainland India and Sri Lanka.

**WHEN TO GO** For general purpose bird watching, especially for a family holiday with elephants, leopards and other mammals thrown in, the country is a year round destination. Serious birders in pursuit of the endemics traditionally prefer November to April when the rainforest rich south-west is at its driest.

**TOP SITES** Sinharaja and Kithulgala are amongst the best lowland rainforests for endemics. For the highland endemics, Horton Plains National Park is very important. Talangama close to Colombo provides easy access to wetland birds.

**LOGISTICS** A good network of roads makes independent travel by public transport possible, but not necessarily comfortable. The availability of accommodation can vary amongst the top sites. An organised tour with a skilled naturalist guide may yield most of the endemics in one week, although two week birding trips are recommended for serious birders.

**BOOKS** Less serious birdwatchers could opt for *A Photographic Guide to the Birds of Sri Lanka* published by New Holland. *Birds of Sri Lanka and Southern India* is a booklet of 42 plates illustrating 263 species, which can be downloaded free from [www.jetwingeco.com](http://www.jetwingeco.com).



**Ceylon spurfowl** *Galloperdix bicalcarata*

Extremely shy. Found in pairs in wet-zone forests and riverine forests in the dry zones. Loud duetting betrays their presence, though birds often remain well hidden. Notoriously elusive and wary – even at Sinharaja. Looks like a female junglefowl but has black and white markings on the belly in both sexes. Easily identified by their duets which have a rise in pitch.



**Ceylon junglefowl** *Gallus lafayetii*

Widespread up to the mountains in surviving forest tracts. Best seen in the dry zone national parks, especially early in the morning. Extremely nervous in the wet-zone forests, except in protected forests where they are habituated to handouts. The female is brown with barred wings. The male can be mistaken for a domestic cockerel. The neck is golden.



**Ceylon wood-pigeon** *Columba torringtonii*

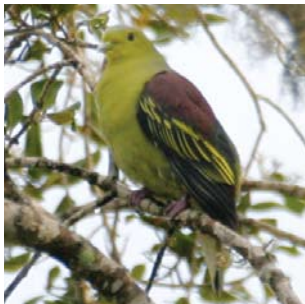
Prefers large forested stretches in the highlands, but makes seasonal movements to the lower hills, descending as low as Sinharaja. Generally likes well-forested areas, although can be seen visiting gardens. It has a bluish-grey body with a black and white marking on the hind-neck. Bigger than a feral pigeon.



### Ceylon green-pigeon

*Treron pompadora*

Male has a conspicuous purple mantle. Female is similar to the orange-breasted green-pigeon, but has a greenish rather than grey nape. Found throughout the island, but is less common than orange-breasted. It can even turn up in the suburbs of cities as pigeons are great travellers.



### Ceylon hanging-parrot

*Loriculus beryllinus*

Quite common in the wet zone up to the mid-hills, occurring locally in riverine forests in the dry zone and in some dry zone areas such as Gal Oya. Male has a red crown. A small, green bird with a red crown and beak. Often seen hurtling overhead uttering a three syllable call.



### Layard's parakeet

*Psittacula calthropae*

Found in and around good quality wet-zone forests in the lowlands and mid hills. Sometimes also in dry zone areas such as at Gal Oya. Flocks often wheel around calling noisily. Female has a dark bill. It is also called the emerald-collared parakeet although the 'emerald collar' is not always clear in the field. The best guide is their distinctive raucous calls.



### Red-faced malkoha

*Phaenicophaeus*

*pyrrhocephalus*

Confined to a few remaining tall forests in the lowland rainforests, including Sinharaja, Morapitiya and Kithulgala, where almost always seen with mixed-species feeding flocks. Generally silent, but occasionally utters a guttural croak. Surprisingly this striking bird is hard to see in the canopy. The red face, black upperparts, and tail with white underparts make it un-mistakeable.





**Green-billed coucal** *Centropus chlororhynchus*

Found only in a few lowland rainforests such as Sinharaja, Morapitiya and Kithulgala. A few birds also occur in small pockets such as Bodhinagala. Probably one of Sri Lanka's most endangered birds. Looks very similar to the Greater Coucal which is a common garden bird even in towns. The green and not black bill is diagnostic.



**Serendib scops-owl** *Otus hoffmanni*

First seen in 2001 and described to science in 2004. Reddish-hued plumage and soft single-note call helps prevent confusion with other scops-owls. Male has orangish irides (the 'whites' of a bird's eye); female's are yellowish. The overall reddish brown and apparent lack of ear tufts help separate it from the other two scops owls. Restricted to a few lowland rainforest areas such as Sinharaja and Kithulgala, where generally seen at the disturbed forest edge, often near the ground.



**Chestnut-backed owlet** *Glaucidium castanonotum*

Found in well-wooded areas in wet-zone lowlands and hills, this species is probably more common than you might expect. Diurnal, but could easily escape notice, were it not for its wide repertoire of calls. It has chestnut upperparts and a head finely barred in grey and white.



**Ceylon grey hornbill** *Ocyrceros gingalensis*

Female has dark mandibles with a yellow 'island' along the middle. Male has yellow mandibles with a dark patch at the base. Widespread, occurring in almost every sizeable forest patch in the lowlands and hills. Utters a series of rolling calls and a harsh, far-carrying 'kraaa'. The overall grey upperparts and lack of a casque on the upper mandible make confusion unlikely with the larger Malabar Pied Hornbill.

### Yellow-fronted barbet

*Megalaima flavifrons*

Found mainly in the wet-zone lowlands and hills. Displaces brown-headed barbet in heavy forest. Also a common bird in the gardens and tea estates of the mid-hills and highlands. Like with all the barbets, the body is green.



It has a yellow forehead and blue on the face.

### Ceylon small barbet

*Megalaima rubricapillus*

'Pop pop pop' calls uttered from a high vantage point help locate this sparrow-sized bird. Found in gardens and forests in the lowlands and hills. Also in the heart of cities such as Colombo and Kandy, though easily overlooked



due to its small size and arboreal nature. Like all barbets, loves to feed on ripening figs. It has yellow around the eyes and a crimson forehead. It lacks the streaking on the underparts found in the similar coppersmith barbet which replaces it in the dry zone.



**Crimson-backed flameback** *Chrysocolaptes stricklandi*  
Makes its home in well-wooded gardens and forests in wet-zone lowlands and hills. Displaces the commoner black-rumped flameback in dense forest patches. Utters a shrill whinnying call when flying from one tree to another. The 'red-backed' form of the more common black-rumped flameback is similar, but the crimson-backed has an ivory-coloured bill. Female's crown is black with white flecks.



### Ceylon swallow

*Hirundo hyperythra*

Deep red underparts and rump help separate this from the migrant races of the red-rumped swallow, which may also have clear streaking on the underparts. Found throughout the island and is fond of hawking for



insects over open areas. The red underparts separate it from the migrant barn swallow which also has blue upperparts.

### Ceylon wood-shrike

*Tephrodornis affinis*

Found mainly in the scrub jungle of the dry lowlands. Not uncommon in suitable forests and adjoining chena (slash-and-burn agriculture) lands with patches of scrub forest. Sexes are similar. An overall greyish bird with a



dark mask. The underparts are pale. It is what birders describe as a nondescript bird.



**Black-capped bulbul** *Pycnonotus melanicterus*

Occurs mainly in the wet-zone forests in the lowlands and hills. Also locally present in some dry zone forests. The black cap and yellow plumage is distinctive. In flight often shows white tips on the tail feathers.



**Yellow-eared bulbul** *Pycnonotus penicillatus*

Look for this bulbul in the wet-zone hills and highlands. Most common in the highlands, where it often visits gardens. The face is strikingly patterned in black and white with yellow ear tufts. Calls strongly.



**Ceylon whistling-thrush** *Myophonus blighi*

Male is brownish-black, with a blue gloss on the fore parts and a blue shoulder patch. Female is brown with a blue shoulder patch. Best located early in the morning or late in the evening by shrill grating call. Confined to the cloudforests in the central highlands and the Knuckles.



**Spot-winged thrush** *Zoothera spiloptera*

Superb song betrays its presence in many forests in the wet lowland and hills. Common in damp forests, where it forages for invertebrates on the forest floor. Not rare, but long-term survival depends on the future of wet-zone forests. The white spots on the wings are easy to make out if you have a good view. The face is also marked strongly in black and white.

### **Ceylon scaly thrush**

*Zoothera imbricata*

Like the spot-winged thrush, also found in wet-zone forests from the lowlands to the highlands. Partial to forest patches adjoining streams. Its hissing call is more high-pitched than that of the spot-winged thrush.

Seldom sings. Unlike the spot-winged thrush, the scaly thrush has a heavy bill. The plumage is scaled rather than spotted. A discrete bird.



### **Sri Lanka bush warbler**

*Elaphrornis palliseri*

A dark warbler, with skulking habits, that keeps close to the forest floor. Found in *Strobilanthes* thickets in the highland forests, such as those around Nuwara Eliya. Pairs often keep in touch using a series of contact calls.

Both sexes have a reddish brown wings and tail. The male has reddish irides and the female's is pale.





**Dusky blue flycatcher *Eumyias sordidus***

A forest bird of the highlands, found occasionally in the mid hills. It has adapted to human presence and will also visit gardens, being quite confident in places where it has grown used to people. It may be mistaken for the black-naped monarch as both are small birds in blue. However the black-naped monarch has white not blue on the belly and under-tail coverts and its behaviour is more frenetic.



**Brown-capped babbler** *Pellorneum fuscicapillus*

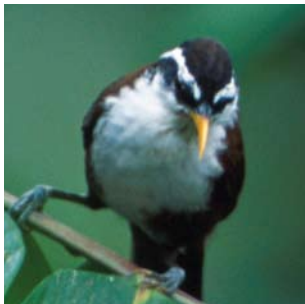
Presence betrayed by distinctive 'pritee dear, pritee dear' call. Skulking, rarely showing itself in the open. Found throughout the island up to the highlands, wherever forest patches remain. If you are lucky enough to see it, expect a small brown babbler with a darker brown cap.



### **Ceylon scimitar babbler**

*Pomatorhinus[schisticeps]  
melanurus*

Lives in forested areas all over the island. Separate dry zone and wet zone races have been described, but are indistinguishable in the field. Almost always found in a duetting pair: the male



utters a long bubbling series of calls that ends with a 'kriek' from the female. So well synchronised that sound often appears to come from a single bird. A prominent white eye-brow and the down-curved 'scimitar' bill help to identify it.

### **Ceylon rufous babbler**

*Turdoides rufescens*

Always found in noisy flocks, and is a nucleus species of mixed-species feeding flocks. Usually seen in the wet-zone rainforests, mainly in the lowlands but also in the highlands, and tends to occur only where



extensive, undisturbed forests remain. Almost absent from the heavily disturbed Kanneliya Rainforest. The orange bill and legs, rufous body and constant chattering help to separate it from the other babblers.

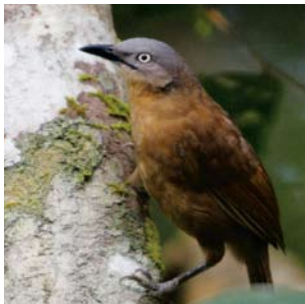
**Ashy-headed laughingthrush**

*Garrulax cinereifrons*

Confined to a few extensive lowland rainforests.

Prefers to forage near the ground and occasionally at the shrub layer, almost always with mixed-species feeding flocks. Flocks keep up a medley of 'hysterical' sounding calls,

sometimes with a faint metallic quality. Extremely timid, always keeping within cover and fleeing in haste across any road it meets. The 'Barrier Gate' flock at Sinharaja offers a good chance to see this bird. It has an ashy head and brown body.



**Legge's flowerpecker**

*Dicaeum vincens*

Prefers tall forests in the lowland wet zone, where often seen quite close to the ground when feeding on the ripe berries of the common *Osbeckia* species along roadsides. Males sing from a high perch. The blue upperparts, white chin and throat and yellow belly makes it very different



from the other flowerpeckers. The female is duller.



**Ceylon white-eye** *Zosterops ceylonensis*

A clear 'split' in the white eye ring, in front of the eye, helps distinguish this species from the oriental white-eye. It is also darker and slightly larger. The calls of the two species are very different. Found mainly in the highlands, but makes occasional seasonal movements to the lowland wet zone where it mixes with the oriental white-eye. The flocks of small green birds encountered in gardens in the highlands are of this bird.



**Ceylon crested drongo** *Dicrurus lophorhinus*

Restricted to wet-zone forests from the lowlands to mid elevations. Deeply forked tail is normally without rackets (the projections on the outer tail feathers found in many drongos). Occasionally may show rackets, and can then be confused with the greater racket-tailed drongo, found in riverine forests of the dry zone. At close quarters, the crest, a tuft like projection on the forehead is seen. It has a lovely repertoire of belling calls. It is also a great mimic.

## Ceylon blue magpie

*Urocissa ornata*

An unbelievably colourful bird. Chocolate brown on the head and wings with a red bill, eye-ring and legs set against blue plumage with white on the tail. It is hard to believe this bird is also in the crow family. Always found in small



flocks, it is unusual in that the whole flock will help a pair to nest and raise young. Restricted to wet-zone forests of fairly significant size.

## White-faced starling

*Sturnia albofrontata*

Restricted to a few lowland wet-zone forests, where it frequents the canopy, often joining mixed-species feeding flocks. Its sharp calls are the best clue to its presence. It has greyish upperparts, paler streaked underparts and



a white face and pale bill. Occasionally a few birds will join a mixed species feeding flock. The starlings tend to keep to the canopy. Sometimes they come down to almost ground level to feed on the fruit of shrubs such as bowitiya (*Clidemia hirta*) and *Osbeckia* spp.



**Ceylon hill-myna** *Gracula ptilogenys*

Found in the lowland wet-zone forests, where it keeps to the high canopy. Utters a range of high-pitched, far-carrying calls and whistles. Distinguished from the lesser hill-myna by having one pair of wattles, not two, and the black base to bill. Both of the hill myna species show a lot of white on the wing in flight.

## SAMPLE ITINERARY FOR ENDEMIC BIRDS

**DAY 01** Arrive in Sri Lanka and transfer to **Colombo** for one night. Evening at **Talangama Wetland** for bitterns and other wetland birds.

**DAY 02** Morning visit to **Bodhinagala Forest Reserve**, a lowland rainforest close to Colombo. Look for Ceylon grey hornbill, yellow-fronted barbet, Ceylon hanging parrot and if lucky the scarce endemic green-billed coucal. Thereafter proceed to Sinharaja for two nights.

**DAY 03** Full day in **Sinharaja Rainforest** (A UNESCO World Heritage Site) for lowland endemics and mixed species bird flocks. According to a study of the mixed species bird flocks, on average 42 individuals occur in the flocks. This makes these the world's largest mixed species bird flock. The mixed species bird flock study of Sinharaja has continued since 1981 and is considered the longest bird flock study in the world. Birding highlights include red-faced malkoha, Ceylon blue magpie, white-faced starling and scaly thrush.

**DAY 04** After breakfast leave for **Kithulgala** for two nights. Afternoon, cross the Kelani River in a dugout canoe and reach the **Kelani Valley Forest Reserve**, a lowland tropical rainforest rich in endemic fauna and flora. Another chance for lowland endemics such as Ceylon myna, green-billed coucal, spot-winged thrush, Ceylon blue magpie, Ceylon spurfowl, brown-capped babbler and red-faced malkoha.

**DAY 05** Morning and afternoon endemic birding at **Kelani Valley Forest Reserve**.

**DAY 06** After breakfast leave for **Nuwara Eliya** for two nights. Afternoon, visit Victoria Garden for Himalayan migrants such as Kashmir flycatcher, pied thrush, Indian pitta and Indian blue robin. Other highlights include yellow-eared bulbul, Ceylon white-eye and dusky blue flycatcher.

**DAY 07** Pre dawn start for **Horton Plains National Park** for the endangered Ceylon whistling-thrush. Other highlights include Ceylon bush warbler and Ceylon wood pigeon.

**DAY 08** Departure.



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