

Sri Lanka

'The Ultimate Island Safari'



Sri Lanka is unmatched for its wildlife for an island of its size. It is the best place in the world for seeing Blue Whale. It has the largest seasonal concentration of Asian Elephants. The island is arguably the best for seeing and photographing Leopard. The Sinharaja Bird Wave is the largest in the world and offers the best viewing. Sri Lanka has a host of other bio-diversity rich features and beautiful landscapes, which make it the Ultimate Island Safari.



Elephants at Minneriya during "the Gathering"

Sperm Whale off the coast of Mirissa



WHAT IS SPECIAL ABOUT SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka is the best place in Asia to see wild Elephants, Leopards and Blue and Sperm Whales. The presence of the largest terrestrial animal and a top level carnivore such as the Leopard is highly unusual for a relatively small island of 65,000 square kilometers. It has other “Big Game” safari animals such as Sloth Bear, Jackal, Water Buffalo, etc. It is also a bio-diversity hyper hot spot. Sri Lanka is the ultimate island safari. A few of the special wildlife highlights are described below.



Playful baby elephants at Minneriya during “the Gathering”

The Gathering

The Gathering of elephants in Minneriya National Park from July to early October (with peak numbers in August and September) is the highest concentration of Asian Elephants in the world. 300 elephants may be gathered in a one kilometer quadrat at times. At its peak, the total numbers on the Minneriya lake bed exceed 450 elephants. This is an eco-tourism spectacle on par with the Mara Migration in East Africa.

Best for Blue

In May 2008, the author publicised that South of Dondra Head, the southernmost point in Sri Lanka, may be the best place in the world to see Blue Whales. It is almost certainly the best in which to see Blue and Sperm Whales together. The author has had Blue and Sperm Whales and Spinner Dolphins in the field of view at the same time. The whale watching season runs from December to April with peaks of migrating whales in December-January and April. During the season, Blue Whales are often (and at times Sperm Whales) seen within an hour of leaving the fishing port of Mirissa.



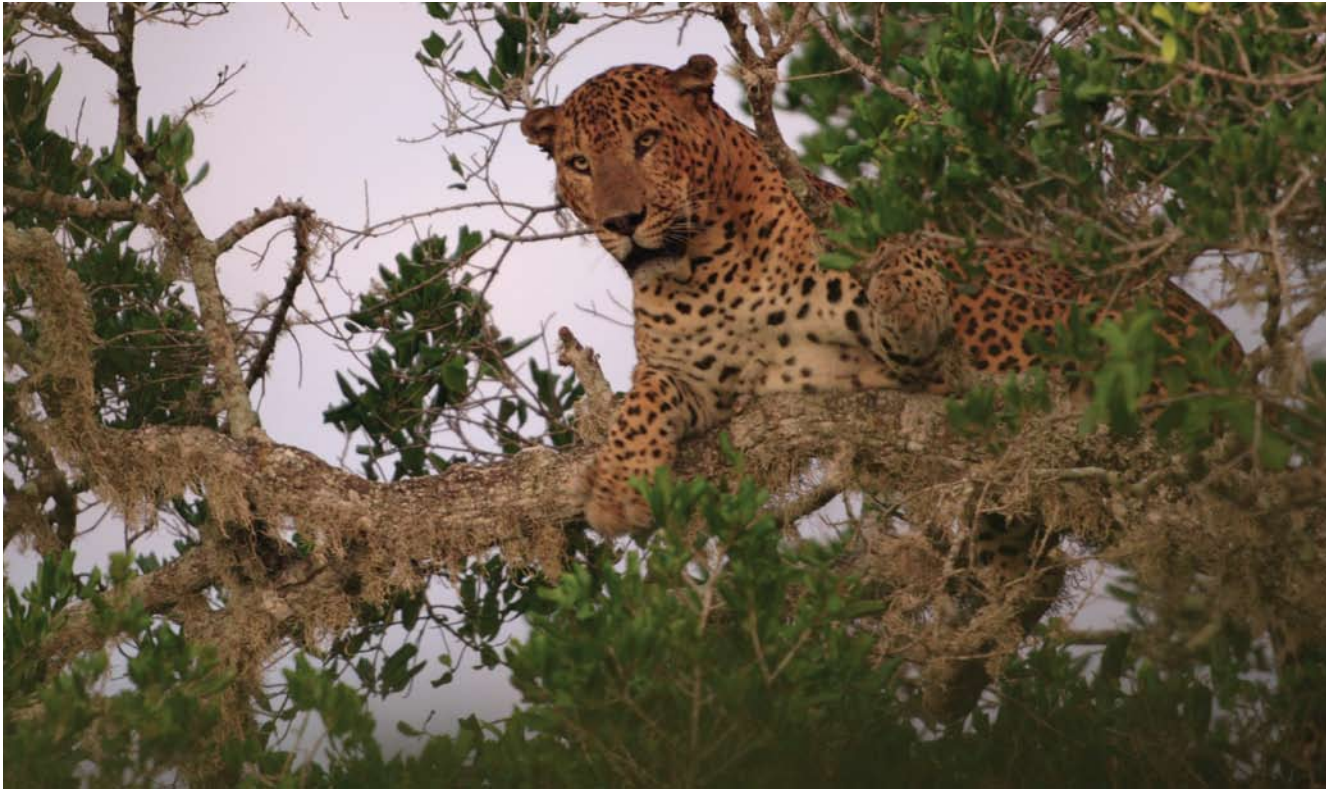


Blue Whale off the coast of Mirissa



Sub-adult leopard at Yala

Leopard's Island



A large male leopard on a tree at Yala

Yala National Park in Sri Lanka may have one of the highest densities of leopards in the world with a study showing an average of one leopard per square kilometer. Being the top terrestrial predator, cubs and sub-adults are relaxed during the day and have become accustomed to visitors. Yala is one of the best sites for photographing leopards and other Asian wildlife of dry lowlands.

A curious leopard checking out a Pangolin at Yala



Sinharaja Bird Wave



A Ceylon Blue Magpie at Sinharaja

The Sinharaja Bird Waves in the lowland rainforests of Sri Lanka are the largest mixed species feeding flocks of birds in the world. They are also the subject of one of the longest such studies, with over two decades of field work. The Sinharaja Bird Waves average 41 individuals. As many as 59 species of birds have been recorded as participants in the waves. The studies over two decades show that on average, 12 species will participate in a mixed species feeding flock. The author has on several occasions seen over 6 species of endemic birds in the Sinharaja Bird Wave.

Crimson-backed Flameback (left) Green-billed Coucal (right) at Sinharaja



Dragons and Painted Wings



Crimson Dropwing at Sigiriya

Sri Lanka is also a hot spot for dragonflies and butterflies. It has over 117 species of dragonflies and damselflies with 52 endemics and new species continuing to be discovered. It has 243 species of butterflies and skippers. Many of the birding guides have turned their hand into running tours for dragonfly watching and butterfly watching. The availability of field guide books, naturalist tour leaders and specialist tour operators puts Sri Lanka ahead of other Asian destinations.

Blue Mormon at Wasgamuwa



Monkey Business



Purple-faced Leaf Monkey at Polonnaruwa

Sri Lanka is very good for watching primates, a class of mammals with universal appeal. The Toque Monkey, Purple-faced Leaf Monkey and the nocturnal Red Loris are found only in Sri Lanka. The montane race of the Red Loris may well turn out to be a new species. The pronounced climatic zones has resulted in three sub-species (or geographical races) of the Toque Monkey and four races of the Leaf Monkey. Ancient cities such as Sigiriya and Polonnaruwa are good places to watch wild primates.



Toque Monkey (left) and Hanuman Langur (right) at Sigiriya

Biodiversity Hyper Hot Spot



Green Vine Snake at Sinharaja

Two diagonally blowing monsoons shedding water into a mountainous core, has created a variation in climate which is normally found only across a continent. The wet lowland rainforests and the cloud forests in the highlands teem with an endemic bio-diversity found nowhere else in the world. Sri Lanka (together with the Western Ghats) is amongst the eight bio-diversity hyper hot spots in the world.



Colourful Orthopterans mating at Sinharaja

In terms of species per square kilometer, Sri Lanka ranks very high for many groups including flowering plants, birds, mammals, amphibians and snakes. There are few islands in the world which have both this high rate of species diversity, endemism and the presence of large mammals such as Elephant, Leopard and Sloth Bear with a very real chance of seeing them. In fact no small island of this size, packs in so much.

Sri Lanka is also very popular with birdwatchers. 33 species are found only in Sri Lanka. Another 52 species are found only in Sri Lanka and India.

WHAT TO SEE & WHERE



Mugger Crocodile at Uda Walawe

Uda Walawe National Park is the best place in Asia for seeing wild elephants. Yala National Park is your best chance in Asia for seeing Leopard. Yala also has Elephant, Sloth Bear, Jackal etc. Serious birdwatchers in search of endemics should visit the rainforests in Sinharaja and Kithulgala and the cloud forests at Horton Plains National Park.

Sri Lanka has 14 species of endemic mammals. Endemism is very high with dragonflies and damselflies (almost 50%), amphibians (over 90%), freshwater crabs (100%), flowering plants (nearly 25%), etc.



Spinner Dolphins off the coast of Mirissa

A typical wildlife tour will range from coastal habitats to scrub jungle to bio-diversity rich lowland rainforests and cool cloud forests. A day could start with snorkeling in clear water with an abundance of reef life and continue with a drive through beautiful verdant paddy fields and village gardens culminating with an ascent through rugged mountain ranges to an elegant Tudor property at the foot of a cloud forest.



Sunrise at Yala

HOW DO I TRAVEL?

Sri Lanka has a good network of public roads. But for those pressed for time, the best option is to take an organised tour. Travel between sites is by air conditioned cars. 'Safari jeeps' are used in the dry lowland national parks administered by the Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWLC). The rainforests under the Forest Department (FD) are accessed by foot. Visitors are allowed to walk in Horton Plains National Park, the only national park where walking is allowed.



A lone Elephant at Yala

WHAT ABOUT ACCOMMODATION?

Sri Lanka offers a broad range of accommodation. Standards are high with game lodge type hotels like Yala Village, Vil Uyana with a man made wetland reserve and international green award winners such as the Kandalama Hotel. Hotels by chains such as Aitken Spence, Amaya, Jetwing, John Keells and Serendib Leisure are environmentally conscious and work close with academics and environmentalists to minimize their impact and also to be champions in research and conservation.



Purple Swamphens fighting at Kotte

WHAT BOOKS SHALL I TAKE?

A&C Black, Bradt Travel Guides, New Holland, Oxford University Press, etc have guides to the birds of Sri Lanka. For example, Sri Lankan Wildlife (Bradt Travel Guides) and Photographic Guides to Mammals, Birds and Reptiles of Sri Lanka by New Holland. Books can be ordered on the web. Bookshops in Colombo such as Barefoot, ODEL, Lake House Bookshop Hyde Park Corner, Vijitha Yapa, Sarasavi, MD Gunasena have books on wildlife. Free downloads of over a dozen books are available on www.jetwingeco.com.



Spotted Skink at Sinharaja

WHOM SHALL I BOOK WITH?

Most tour operators can arrange a visit to the national parks. Serious wildlife enthusiasts should consider a specialist wildlife operator such as those are listed in A Photographic Guide to the Birds of Sri Lanka and A Photographic Guide to the Mammals of Sri Lanka published by New Holland in the UK.

SAMPLE ITINERARY

Day 1 Arrival in Sri Lanka and transfer to hotel on stretch of coast between Galle - Mirissa for two nights.

Day 2 Mirissa for marine safaris. Blue Whales in concentrations not seen elsewhere in the world would be the highlight. A bonus is the presence of Sperm Whales and pods of dolphins.

Day 3 Morning, visit the Galle Dutch Fort (a UNESCO World Heritage Site). Leave for hotel around Yala for four nights.



Star Tortoise at Yala

Days 4-6 Morning and evening game drives to Yala National Park, with emphasis on Elephant and Leopard.

Day 7 Morning, leave for hotel nearby to Sinharaja rainforest for two nights. Evening at Sinharaja with the emphasis on endemic plants, reptiles and birds.

Day 8 Whole day at Sinharaja with the emphasis on endemic plants, reptiles and birds.

Day 9 Morning, leave for hotel at Nuwara Eliya for two nights. En route, visit ancient monastic ruins of Buduruvagala. Pause at Ella Gap for landscape photography.

Day 10 Full day at Horton Plains National Park, for montane endemics.

Day 11 Morning at Hakgala Botanical Gardens for habituated Purple-faced Leaf Monkeys. More opportunities for montane birds. After lunch, leave for Kandy and visit the sacred Temple of the Tooth. Evening, leave for hotel in the area around Sigiriya - Dambulla - Habarana for three nights.

Day 12 Morning, climb Sigiriya Rock. In the evening, game drive to Minneriya National Park for elephants.

Day 13 Early morning, visit the ancient city of Polonnaruwa, a UNESCO archaeological site, to watch troop of the dry lowland race of the Toque Monkey, the Northern Race of the Purple-faced Leaf Monkey and Hanuman Langur. In the evening, game drive to Minneriya National Park for elephants.

Day 14 Visit the ancient Dambulla Rock Temple en route to a hotel in Negombo for one night.

Day 15 Departure



Elephants at play during "the Gathering" at Minneriya



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Design and image selection by Riaz Cader.