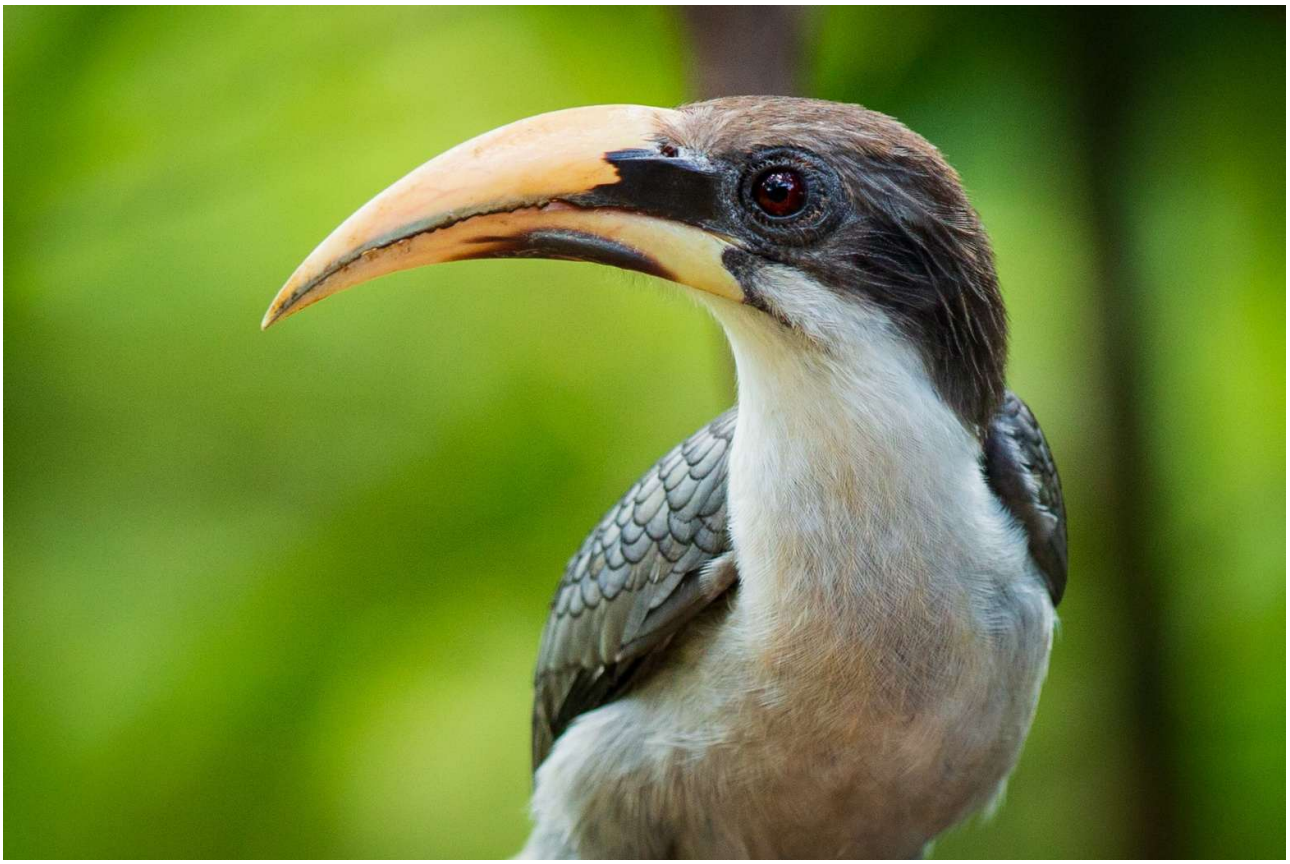
Inala Nature Tours

TRIP REPORT

Tonia Cochran and local guide Sameera | February - March 2025



Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill, T. Cochran

Sri Lanka – Leopards, Blue Whales and the Sinharaja Bird Wave

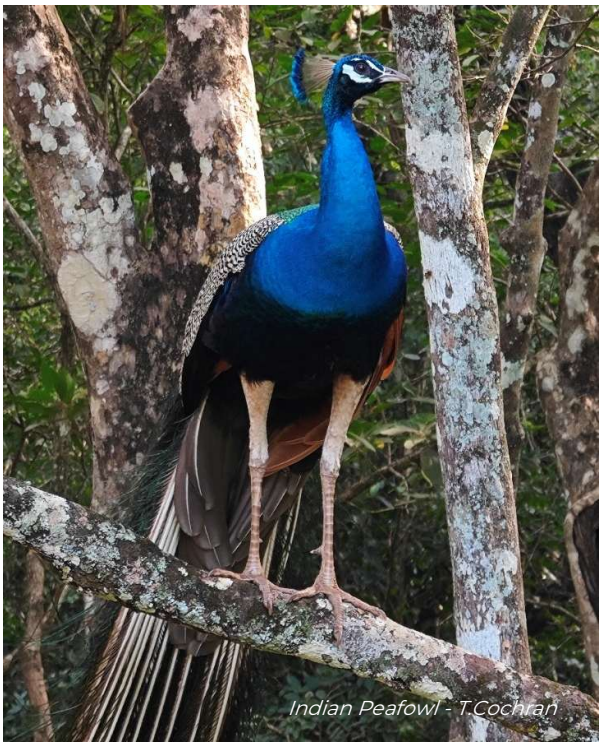
Day 1

25 February Colombo to Waikkal

Today, everyone transferred to our designated hotel in Waikkal.

Day 2

26 February Wilpattu National Park


Indian Peafowl - T.Cochran

We met early this morning and started the tour with an early boat safari in the waterways up the Dutch canal near Ranweli, using two small boats which were able to navigate the narrow waterways. During this one-hour introduction to Sri Lankan birding we saw a range of waterbirds including White-breasted Waterhen, two Striated Heron in the deep recesses of the undergrowth on the banks, Little, Great and Medium Egret, Purple and Grey Heron, Little Cormorant and a Common Redshank. We also saw an Asian Openbill on a grassy island and our first White-throated Kingfisher perched on an overhanging branch, a group of five Sri Lanka Green-Pigeon which was our first endemic, a male Asian Koel calling, Brahminy Kite and groups of beautiful Blue-tailed bee-eaters and Rose-ringed Parakeets roosting in the branches of trees. Several Purple-rumped Sunbirds were also seen scooting around the trees on the bank and Spot-billed Pelicans flew overhead. A colony of Indian Flying Fox were roosting and squabbling in the trees on the bank and several large Common Water Monitors swam across the waterway or cruised in the water along the banks looking for food.

We then returned to the hotel for breakfast before heading off in our tour vehicle to our accommodation near Wilpattu National Park. After enjoying a delicious lunch, we hopped aboard two safari jeeps driven by local guides and park rangers Lahiru and Supun and headed into the national park in the dry north-west of the island for a half day afternoon tour. Declared a sanctuary in 1905, Wilpattu has one

of the largest populations of Leopard on the island. While the drivers arranged the parks passes in the office, we explored the park entrance, admiring the Bark and Common Four-clawed Geckos under the roof of one of the shelters and the recently shed skin of a Forsten's Cat Snake attached to the rafters. We then proceeded into the park in the vehicles, where we explored the road ahead, the road verges and roadside vegetation. Here we saw a Shikra perched on a branch by the side of the track, Malabar Pied Hornbill, Black-hooded Oriole, our first Indian Peafowls, Asian Woolly-necked Stork, a Brown Fish Owl roosting in a tree next to a waterhole where we also saw Common Kingfisher, Grey-headed Fish Eagle and an Indian Black Turtle next to the waterhole. Other species here included Asian Green Bee-eater, Indian Paradise Flycatcher, Black-naped Monarch, Orange-headed Thrush, Orange-breasted Green Pigeon, Asian Emerald Dove, Coppersmith and Brown-headed Barbet, Common Iora, Indian Robin, Common Magpie-Robin, Black-backed Dwarf-Kingfisher and Common Bushlark near the shore. Endemic Brown-capped Babbler, Sri Lankan Shama and Sri Lanka Junglefowl were also added to the list here. Mammals we saw included Tufted Grey Langur, Toque Macaque, Indian Hare, several groups of Chital (Spotted Deer), Wild Water Buffalo almost completely submerged in some of the waterholes, and Ruddy Mongoose. A large Bengal Monitor foraged for food next to the track. We returned to our accommodation in time for dinner and then headed to our rooms.

Green Bee-eater - T.Cochran

Day 3

27 February Wilpattu National Park

We spent today on a full day safari in the dry scrub forest and seasonal wetlands of Wilpattu NP taking a picnic breakfast and lunch with us to make the most of

our time here. Over 250 species of birds have been recorded here. In and around the waterholes within the park we saw flocks of Lesser Whistling-duck, Great Thick-knee, Eurasian Black-winged Stilt, Pacific Golden Plover, Red-Wattled Lapwing, Kentish Plover, Richard's Pipit, a Greater Painted Snipe foraging in the open near the shore, Pheasant-tailed Jacana, Common Snipe, Green Sandpiper, Common Redshank, Common Greenshank, Gull-billed and Whiskered Tern, Little Grebe, Asian Woolly-necked and strikingly coloured Painted Stork, Oriental Darter, Black-headed Ibis and a variety of herons and egrets. Mugger Crocodiles were lazing on the banks and in the water and a large endemic Sri Lankan Flapshell Turtle, with its strange rubbery carapace, was sunbaking in the grass near a waterhole.

Other birds seen in the park today included Green Imperial Pigeon, Greater Coucal, Indian Swiftlets flying overhead, Crested Serpent Eagle, Changeable Hawk-eagle, Brahminy Kite, endemic Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill, Asian Green, Blue-tailed and Chestnut-headed Bee-eater, Common, White-throated and Black-backed Dwarf-Kingfisher, Indian Roller, and we were also lucky to see an Indian Pitta foraging deep in the undergrowth. We also added Small Minivet, Black-headed Cuckooshrike, Black-hooded Oriole, Brown Shrike, White-browed and Red-vented Bulbul, Ashy Woodswallow, Asian Brown and Tickell's Blue Flycatchers, Black-naped Monarch, Indian Paradise Flycatcher, gorgeous iridescent Purple and more Purple-rumped Sunbirds, Brown-capped and Yellow-billed Babblers and also Dark-fronted Babbler which is a possible future split.

We stopped for lunch at a campsite where endemic Toque Macaques and Sri Lanka Junglefowl loitered hopefully, and had to be on high alert to stop them getting in the jeeps and stealing whatever they could pick up. Some of the baby macaques were also playing in the puddles left by the recent rain. After lunch we came across a foraging Sloth Bear and we watched the huge lumbering animal as it foraged amongst the termite mounds on the side of the road. Three-striped Palm Squirrels scooted amongst the branches and three species of deer (Chital, Sambar and Northern Red Muntjac), two species of mongoose (Ruddy and Indian Brown Mongoose) and a Golden-backed Jackal were also seen this afternoon.

Late in the afternoon just before we were about to return to our accommodation, we came across a group of jeeps which signalled the presence of something big. Word quickly passed around that a Leopard was sleeping in the bushes near the track to the lake, so there was quite a bit of vehicle manoeuvring as each vehicle had a chance to show their guests a tantalising glimpse of the spots on the leopard's flanks and a front paw which hid the face. Shortly after we had our turn, a buzz of excitement indicated the Leopard was now on the move and most of our group were able to see the lithe form of 'Cleopatra' the dominant female in the area moving through the forest near our vehicle before disappearing into the undergrowth. Mission accomplished; we headed back to our hotel near the park.

Water Buffalo - T.Cochran

Day 4

28 February Wilpattu NP to Habanara

After breakfast we visited Anuradhapura, the island's first capital, which was founded in 5th century BC. Here we were met by local guide Lalith who showed us around and explained the history of some of the most famous dagobas (Buddhist shrines) in Sri Lanka, remains of palaces, temples, monasteries, ceremonial baths and the temple of the holy Bo-tree (*Ficus religiosa*). This tree was grown from a sapling of the tree under which the Buddha found enlightenment in India and was brought to this location in 300 BC. This same tree is still alive here, and more cuttings from it have also been planted around the site.

We then had lunch at a local restaurant, where a Rohan's Globular Frog (*Uperodon rohani*) behind the door of one of the cphillubicles in the ladies toilet caused considerable interest and a short ingression by some of the male members of the group. New birds we added today included Brown-backed Needletail, Eurasian Coot in some ponds at the temple and House Swifts nesting in one of the cave temples. Malabar Pied Hornbill were also seen eating figs from the trees in the temple grounds. A pair of Black-headed Orioles and Three-striped Palm Squirrels were also located here, as were a colony of Long-winged Tomb Bats roosting in a rock overhang at the temple. We then headed to our accommodation at Habarana where we would have dinner and stay for the next two nights. As we headed back to our rooms after dinner, we admired the brightly coloured Painted Land Crabs which had emerged from their burrows in the lawn and were busily foraging in the grass in the lodge grounds, making the most of the damp conditions provided by the recent rain. A huge male Sri Lankan

Tussar Silk Moth also decorated the walls of reception as it rested here waiting for dark.

Leopard - T.Cochran

Day 5

1 March Sigiriya

This morning, we headed off early to bird in Sigiriya Sanctuary for some dry-zone species before returning to the hotel for breakfast. One of the highlights of the morning was watching a Spot-bellied Eagle-Owl who at first perched apparently asleep in the light rain before darting to the ground to catch something which it ate on a nearby branch. Afterwards it meticulously cleaned its beak. We also had great views of a pair of Malabar Pied Hornbill sitting on the powerlines where we also saw Stork-billed Kingfisher and watched a Zitting Cisticola displaying, with Ashy Prinia, Red-rumped and Sri Lanka Swallows and Tawny-bellied and Yellow-billed Babblers in attendance. We also added another endemic this morning: Sri Lanka Woodshrike. Other new species for the trip included Blue Rock-thrush, Thick-billed Flowerpecker, Golden-fronted Leafbird, Baya Weaver, White-rumped and Tricoloured Munias and Common Giant Flying Squirrel.

We then headed to the iconic Sigiriya Rock Fortress to explore the elaborate gardens and pools constructed for King Kasyapa to protect him from his brother who was the rightful king and to hear its history by local guide Nihal. Some of the group then headed up the stairs to the top of the massive 200-metre-high rock to view the spectacular scenery and see the palace ruins while others photographed the scenery and birds in the rock garden. Highlights included the remains of the ‘mirror wall’ with its ancient graffiti which shows the development of the Sinhala language and script, and the amazing ancient urban planning and impressive hydraulic system which justified it being added as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1982. During the visit, all members of the group were able to view a pair of Peregrine (Shaheen) Falcons (subcontinental race of the Peregrine Falcon)

gliding around the rock. Other birds we saw here included Sri Lanka Green Pigeon, Green Imperial Pigeon, Common Hawk Cuckoo, Black-headed Cuckooshrike, White-browed Fantail and Indian White-eye. Oriental Garden Lizard and Sri Lanka Bronze Skink were seen sunning themselves on the rocks around the temple grounds and both Water and Bengal Monitor were seen around the pools that were formerly used as baths by the King's supposed 500 concubines. After a chop suey lunch at a local restaurant, we met with local guide Gunarathma at ancient Polonnaruwa, the second capital of Sri Lanka after the destruction of Anuradhapura in 993, before returning to Habarana. We headed to our accommodation for a quick buffet dinner (accompanied by some truly memorable entertainers with enthusiastic voices) before most of the group headed out on a night drive. This proved a great success, and we saw several Jerdon's Nightjars roosting on the road and one Indian Nightjar perched on a branch next to the road near the hotel. Brown Fish-Owl and a roosting White-bellied Sea-eagle were also seen as were two Asian Elephants who disappeared quickly into the gloom of the roadside vegetation as we approached, no doubt thinking we were vigilant crop owners who were on guard around the community to protect their rice crops, some of whom were sleeping on platforms high in the trees and accessed by handmade ladders. We also had great views of an Asian Palm Civet in a palm, a glimpse of a Small Indian Civet as it dashed across the road, two Indian Hares, a White-spotted Chevrotain, a Jungle Cat relaxing under a tree and a Scheider's Roundleaf Bat at the hotel. We also heard the strange yodelling howls of Golden Jackals at intervals throughout the night and had good views of a Hump-nosed Viper warming itself on the road and a dying Streaked Kukri Snake which was doing similar and was not so fortunate, being clipped by a passing vehicle. Indian Skipper Frogs were seen and heard in the pools in the hotel grounds.

Monitor Lizard - T.Cochran

Day 6

2 March Habarana to Kandy

Today we left early to head to the Dambulla Cave Temple which is famous for its rock paintings and is among the best-preserved monastic temple cave complexes in Sri Lanka. Dambulla's origin as a place of worship dates back to the reign of King Valagamba in the 1st century BC, who took refuge in these caves when driven out of Anuradhapura by Chola invaders. Once he regained the throne, the king had the interior of the caves transformed into magnificent rock temples. More paintings and statues were added over time by later kings and its history was explained to us by local guide Saman. The workmanship and paintings in the cave were truly stunning and the colours as vibrant as if they had been painted yesterday, not over 2,000 years ago! We then travelled to Kandy where we visited Sri Dalada Maligawa, the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic with local guide Raja. Built in the 16th century AD, the temple is the most revered site in Sri Lanka. It was believed that the owner of this sacred relic had the right to rule the country. Sri Dalada Maligawa is located adjacent to the Royal Palace complex of the former Kingdom of Kandy and overlooks the placid expanse of Kandy Lake. After experiencing some of the evening chanting, ceremonial trumpet (dungchen) and drumming ceremony conducted by the monks, we headed to our accommodation in Kandy. Today was mostly a day of culture but we did add one new bird species-Pale-billed Flowerpecker – and a few new lizard species at a rock shelter near Kadugannawa: Kandy Round-eyed Gecko (*Cnemaspis kandiana*), two recently described *Cnemaspis* species – *C. kohukumburai* (described by our guide Sameera and his colleagues) and *C. retigalensis*, and Kandian Half-toed Gecko (*Hemidactylus depressus*).

Dambulla Rock Temple - T.Cochran

Day 7

3 March Kandy to Nuwara Eliya

This morning, we left early to travel to Nuwara Eliya high in the hill country, visiting one of the many tea plantations en-route. We also called in at another roadside rock cutting known to our herpetology expert guide Sameera where we saw another *Cnemaspis* species (*C. upendrai*) and a Sri Lanka Bow-fingered Gecko (*Cyrtodactylus fraenatus*). Here we also saw a beautiful Narrow Banded Bluebottle Butterfly here. After lunch at our accommodation in Nuwara Eliya, we visited Hakgala Botanical Garden. Only a few kilometres from Nuwara Eliya, this quaint garden is one of five botanic gardens in Sri Lanka. Located around 1,680 metres (5,500 feet) in a cool temperate climate, it is a serene and quiet place with an interesting collection of over 10,000 species of plants. The gardens are a good place to see the endemic highland variety of the Purple-faced Leaf Monkey known locally as the “Bear Monkey” due to its shaggy coat, and we watched a group of these distinguished-looking animals with their beautifully groomed mutton chops and another group of Toque Macaques foraging in the trees near the path. We also saw another endemic here a pair of Dull-blue Flycatchers and heard another endemic – Sri Lanka Thrush. Other new species we recorded today were Indian Cormorant, Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike, Grey-headed Canary-flycatcher and Sri Lanka White-eye and we also heard Yellow-eared Bulbul. We also saw a beautiful male Rhino Horn Lizard clinging to the side of a tree, so perfectly camouflaged that we almost missed him. We returned to our accommodation for dinner as the daylight faded.

Male Rhino Horned Lizard - T.Cochran

Day 8

4th March Horton Plains

This morning, we had a very early start and travelled to Horton Plains National Park, set on a plateau in the central highlands. Our main target was the endemic Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush (locally called ‘Arrenga’), a cryptic species which is easily disturbed by vehicle traffic, so we had to arrive by dawn for a chance to see it. We waited by a pool inside the park in anticipation, and to our delight saw a pair of these amazing birds! The female was as striking as the male with her rich chestnut body and electric blue-flecked wings, and we had great views of this cryptic and elusive species. Shortly afterwards, we had short but good views of several other endemic highland bird species here: a skulking Sri Lanka Bush

Warbler, Sri Lanka White-eye, Dull-blue Flycatcher, Sri Lanka Wood-Pigeon and Yellow-eared Bulbul. We also heard our first Red-backed Flameback and saw the Mountain form of Common Tailorbird (which may be a future split) and had beautiful views of a pair of Velvet-fronted Nuthatches, Loten's Sunbird and a Grey Wagtail foraging in the pool here. Sameera also found a Pale Green Shrub Frog and the egg mass of a Common Hourglass Tree Frog on vegetation hanging over water. The tadpoles develop inside the egg mass and on hatching, drop into the water to complete their metamorphosis into frogs. We also watched a Sri Lankan Giant Squirrel and an endemic Dusky Palm Squirrel foraging amongst the leaves in the tree canopy here. After 'cleaning up' the endemics likely to be found in this area, and adding the gorgeous Orange Minivet, Asian (Cinereous) Tit and another Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike, we walked to Mini World's End, stopping frequently en-route, and picking up another male Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush, a distant view of the endemic Sri Lanka Thrush, good views of Indian Blackbird and Indian Blue Robin and adding Jerdon's Bushlark, Paddyfield Pipit, Pied Bushchat and Tricoloured Munia in the grassy areas of the walk. We spent some time at the viewing platform overlooking the valley at Mini World's End and watched four Black Eagles gliding and swooping in a recognition display flight at close range with an Oriental Honey Buzzard in attendance, before returning the way we had come, picking up a group of foraging, Purple-faced Langurs and seeing Fishing Cat and Jungle Cat scat on the path. We also saw Shikra and Brahminy Kite as well as Zitting Cisticola and several Hill Swallows on the walk, with a super quick glimpse of another endemic – Sri Lanka Scimitar-Babbler. We also did well with lizards, seeing a beautiful Black-cheeked Lizard and cryptic female Pygmy Lizard on the walk. Interesting plants here included several species of endemic *Strobilanthus, Dendrobium* orchids, *Impatiens,* and the unusual arum 'Jack-in-the-pulpit' (*Arisaema tricolor*), with Sri Lankan Tiger Butterfly and Red Helen Butterfly also being seen today. On our return from the walk a small van miraculously appeared next to the picnic shelter and before we knew it a homecooked lunch comprised of local ingredients was brought out and placed on the picnic table for us, which was voted one of the best meals on the whole trip. While we were eating our lunch we were accompanied by a young male Sambar Deer, an Indian Grey Mongoose and a group of Large-billed Crows who all looked on hopefully waiting for us to drop or throw a bit in their direction (they all left disappointed). We then boarded the bus and returned to our accommodation, stopping briefly to see a female Rhino-horned Lizard and a local milk factory to sample some delicious creamy local yoghurts. We once again returned to our accommodation in Nuwara Eliya for dinner and a well-earned rest.

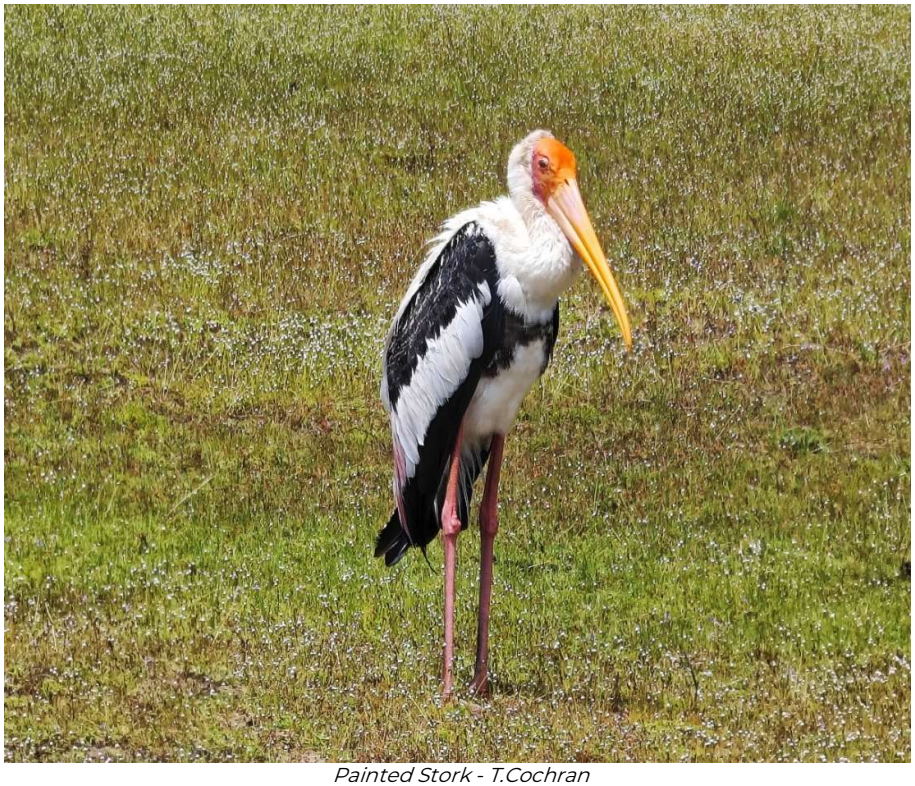
Day 9

5th March Nuwara Eliya to Tissamaharama

Jungle Owlet - T.Cochran

This morning, we took a pre-breakfast early morning walk around Victoria Park which was originally the research field centre of the Hakgala Botanical Garden and named in 1987 to commemorate the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria. Here we saw our main targets: Kashmir Flycatcher, which breeds in the Himalayas and overwinters in the upland forests of Sri Lanka and southern India, and Pied Thrush. Green Imperial Pigeon, Blue-tailed Bee-eater, Green Warbler, Sri Lanka White-eye Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, a group of Yellow-billed Babblers, a female Indian Blue Robin, Purple Sunbird, Forest Wagtails, Brown-headed Barbet and Coppersmith Barbet were also here, with House Swifts overhead. Unfortunately, the only Eurasian Otter we saw this trip was a dead individual lying on the bank of the small stream. So sad. Ruddy Mongoose also seen today. We returned to the hotel for breakfast and to pack our bags, before heading to Ravana Falls to take some pics and see some endemic geckos, including *Cnemapsis lokugei* named by Sameera and his colleagues). On our arrival at the hotel, we were checking in and drinking our welcome drinks when a disturbance at reception indicated something interesting was happening. We headed outside to find that an Indian Cobra was crossing the driveway and heading into the nearby forest. Show over, we then headed back inside for lunch. After lunch we travelled into the Tissamaharama community to meet two locals who gave us a guided tour of several local people's backyards which harboured an amazing variety of owls. First, we saw the Brown Fish Owl, followed shortly by a Brown Boobook, then a pair of beautifully marked Jungle Owlets and an Indian Scops Owl in their day roosts, all in quick succession. There had obviously been a huge amount of sleuthing and hard work to locate all these species in such a short time. The big owl finale was Barn Owl, which wasn't due to appear until dusk, so we visited Tissamaharama wetlands. Waterbirds we saw here included Lesser Whistling Duck, Eurasian Coot, White-breasted Waterhen, Common Sandpiper, Asian Openbill, Oriental Darter, Little and Indian Cormorant, Glossy

and Black-headed Ibis, Black-crowned Night-Heron, a variety of egrets and herons, and Sameera's keen eyes also picked out both Cinnamon and Yellow Bittern. A perched Grey-headed Fish-Eagle was also seen here, while a giant Bengal Monitor prowled around the shore investigating possible food. In this area, thousands of Indian Flying foxes were roosting in the trees, and we watched them squabbling and flapping, getting increasingly agitated as dusk approached, before bursting in pulses from the branches on their nocturnal foraging mission, watched closely and hopefully by Mugger Crocodiles which lay partly hidden in the growth under the trees. An Indian Star Tortoise were also seen here. At dusk, after we enjoyed the spectacle of the mass eruption of fruit bats and a late addition of a Tiriki Keelback which Sameera had conjured from the water to show us, we then moved to the local beach to wait for the Barn Owl. This was obviously a popular place for locals to hang out, as one was washing his car and another group playing music very loudly while enjoying a picnic dinner. We stood dubiously waiting for the prescribed 'shade of darkness' that the locals had recommended and then astoundingly, right on cue a Barn Owl flew silently into the branches of the tree in front of us, oblivious to the noise and activity around it! After admiring its sleek beauty and the whiteness of its front in the dim surroundings, we gratefully thanked our local guides and headed back to our accommodation in Tissamaharama. We also saw the endemic Red-backed Flameback, Green Imperial Pigeon and Little Swifts today.



Painted Stork - T.Cochran

Day 10

6th March Yala National Park

Today we left our lodge early to make the most of our time at Yala National Park. This National Park is the country's premier destination for wildlife viewing and is considered to be the best place in Sri Lanka – and possibly the world – to spot Leopard. Yala is also an excellent birding destination with close to 300 species recorded here. After a quick reconnaissance of a few of the roads within the park, we headed to a private lodge where we enjoyed our picnic breakfast. We then headed out in earnest, exploring the roads and verges for birds and wildlife.

Along the roads and track, birds seen today included Asian Emerald Dove, Orange-breasted and Sri Lanka Green-Pigeon, Greater Coucal, Blue-faced Malkoha, Pied and Grey Bellied Cuckoos, Crested Treeswift, House Swift, several Barred Buttonquail, a perched Crested Serpent-Eagle, Changeable Hawk-Eagle, Shikra, Brahminy Kite, two White-bellied Sea-Eagle (the same species found in Australia), Grey-headed Fish-Eagle, a pair of Brown Fish Owls, a Eurasian Hoopoe having a dust bath on the road, Malabar Pied Hornbill, Asian and Blue-tailed Bee-eaters, Indian Roller, Coppersmith and Brown-headed Barbet, our fist views of Alexandrine and endemic Layard's Parakeet, Indian Pitta, Black-headed Cuckooshrike, Sri Lanka Woodshrike, Common Iora, White-browed Fantail, our only views of Ashy Drongo, Jerdon's Leafbird, Indian Silverbill, Scaly-breasted Munia on the trip, both brown and white morphs of Indian Paradise-Flycatcher, Brown Shrike, White-browed Bulbul, Orange-headed Thrush, Asian Brown Flycatcher, and great views of the endemic Sri Lankan Sharma. We also watched a Painted Stork fishing in a weir next to the road, accompanied by several Mugger crocodiles lined up under the cascading water with their mouths open, hopefully waiting for fish to fall in.

We also had fantastic views of three Asian Elephants (two females with a young calf) who materialised out of the forest on one side of the road and slowly crossed the road in front of our jeep. We watched for quite some time as one of the elephants proceeded to scrub herself under the chin and armpits with mud which she collected in and applied with her trunk, presumably to stop insects biting her. We also saw several Indian Hares, groups of Tufted Grey Langur, Sri Lankan Giant Squirrel, several herds of Chital and a lone Sambar near a waterhole. In the late afternoon we also saw the entire back (including the back of the head and one ear) of a Leopard asleep on a rocky outcrop quite near the vehicle. We also saw several small herds of Asian Water Buffalo. We watched one individual submerge itself at regular intervals in a waterhole in an attempt to rid itself of the swarms of flies. A Grey Heron had decided that the Water Buffalo's back made a great perch, and we watched transfixed as the buffalo repeatedly disappeared below the water leaving the heron apparently standing in mid water or gliding along as the water buffalo walked under the water and re-emerged with the

heron still clinging determinedly to its back. We also saw a cute domestic kitten which must have been dumped. We worried about such a small defenceless animal being here until it caught and ate a Buff-striped Keelback Snake in front of us. Butterflies today included Common Crow, Small Orange-tip and Jezabel and we also saw more Indian Star Tortoise. We stopped for a lovely picnic lunch and a rest during the heat of the day at a lunch shelter (all safari groups were required to stop here between 12 noon to 2pm). Here we saw an Oriental Garden Lizard near the toilet block and the newly described Pondichery Fan-throated Lizard (named by Sameera and his team) on the sandy beach. Some of the group took advantage of the cool breeze in the shelter to have a quick nap. At 2pm we left and continued exploring the park. Bird species seen at and around some of the waterholes within the park included Cotton Pygmy Goose, Garganey, Eurasian Moorhen, Grey-headed Swamphen, White-breasted Waterhen, Eurasian Black-winged Stilt, and a Jacana with two young chicks feeding on and around the waterlilies. Species on the shore included Pin-tailed Snipe Little Ringed Plover, Yellow-wattled Lapwing, Red-wattled Lapwing, Kentish Plover, Common, Marsh and Wood Sandpiper, Oriental Darter, Little and Indian Cormorant, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Common Redshank, Common Greenshank, Great Thick-knee, Little, Gull-billed and Whiskered Tern, Asian Openbill, Asian Woolly-necked stork, Lesser Adjutant, Painted Stork, and our first views of Pied Kingfisher in addition to Common and White-throated Kingfisher and Jerdon's Bushlark, Richard's Pipit and Oriental Skylark. We also watched a Plain Prinia and Streaked Weavers building their nest in the reeds. We explored inside the park until the last possible minute before the gates closed and then headed back to our accommodation in Tissamaharama, seeing more Jerdon' Nightjar on the road and a Leschenault's Rousette Fruit Bat. At dinner, Sameera caught a Painted Globular Frog and put it into a glass for us to view (to the alarm of the kitchen staff!) before carefully releasing it again.

Orange-breasted Green Pigeon - T.Cochran

Day 11

7th March Bundala NP to Weligama

We once again headed out early this morning, this time to explore Bundala National Park, arriving just before opening time with several of the local fisherman who are allowed to traditionally fish within the park. Bundala is an internationally recognized RAMSAR wetland and a UNESCO Man and Biosphere Reserve. It contains several shallow, brackish lagoons that are a haven for migratory birds and waders. We enjoyed breakfast at a coastal site at the park which has recorded human occupation from 25,000 years ago with anthropogenic shell midden deposits that show an intensification of estuarine resource exploitation as humans responded to opportunities presented by the formation of new coastal systems over the last 5,000 years. During the morning, we saw more Cotton Pygmy Goose, Glossy Ibis, Grey-headed Swamphen, Richard's Pipit, and another Pied Cuckoo a pair of Grey-bellied Cuckoos, Great Thick-knee, Eurasian Black-winged Stilt, Little Ringed and Kentish Plovers, Lesser Adjutant, Brown Shrike, Painted Stork and added several new species: Eurasian Collared Dove, Watercock, Indian Thick-knee, Caspian Tern, Eurasian Spoonbill, Western Marsh Harrier, Ashy Prinia, Clamorous Reed-warbler, and Chestnut-rumped Reed-warbler. Mammals seen here included Tufted Grey Langur, Small Indian Civet and Indian Grey Mongoose. A large Bengal Monitor was also seen clinging grimly to the side of a tree sunbaking in the morning light.

We left the park mid-morning to return to briefly to our accommodation to pack and check out, before heading to Galle. After lunch, we headed out on a walk around the 17th century Dutch built Galle Fort, including a small museum, where the local curator explained the Portuguese, Dutch and English involvement on the development of the fort. By this time the afternoon sun was beating down, so we rested under the shade of a huge Indian Almond (*Barringtonia asiatica*) tree and enjoyed drinking the contents of local whole coconuts which a local woman expertly hacked open using a large machete, creating a hole in the top large enough to fit a drinking straw. Our local assistant Hasith then used the machete to cut the nuts in half so we could scoop out the delicious flesh after drinking the coconut water. Revived but not keen to go back out into the baking sun, we hailed our bus and drove by the lighthouse en-route to our beachside accommodation at Weligama.

Bengal Monitor - T.Cochran

Day 12

8th March Sinharaja

This morning, we took a cruise from the local harbour, where we steamed up and down the coast about 10 nautical miles from shore on the lookout for cetaceans. This area is located near the continental shelf and is a migration route and therefore one of the world's top 'hot spots' for Sperm and Blue Whales. Although no whales were sighted today, we did see several large groups of Spinner Dolphin, some of which performed their characteristic vertical corkscrew leaps into the air. Several Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphins were also seen this morning. We also briefly glimpsed the head of an Olive Ridley Turtle as it came up for air

before disappearing below the surface. Several flocks of terns (Bridled, Little, Common and Great Crested Tern) were also seen this morning. After returning briefly to Galle for another huge buffet lunch, we then headed to our next destination, Sinharaja Forest Reserve, a biodiversity hotspot and the country's largest tract of tropical Gondwanan relict rainforest (including *Dipterocarpus* species) where the endemism of the flora and fauna is extremely high. Twenty-eight of Sri Lanka' 35 endemic species have been recorded in Sinharaja including the recently discovered Serendib Scops Owl and other rarities such as the Sri Lanka Spurfowl, Chestnut-backed Owlet, and White-faced Starling. The mixed species of bird flocks found moving through the rainforest canopy within Sinharaja are believed to be the largest in the world. These flocks are popularly dubbed the 'Sinharaja Birdwave'. We arrived at our rustic locally run lodge late afternoon where we had dinner before retiring to our rooms in preparation for our early morning the next day.

Day 13

9th March Sinharaja

This morning, we met with local 'master birder' Thilak and piled into two safari jeeps, which worked their way slowly up the rough unsealed tracks to a local community in the jungle, where we spent the morning birding. In a gully at the back of a house we picked up several endemics including a pair of Sri Lanka Spurfowl, Sri Lanka Junglefowl, Ashy-headed Laughingthrush, Spot-winged Thrush and had great views of a Slaty-legged Crake, as well as the endemic Galle Round-eyed Gecko on the wall of the house. We had breakfast in the garden next to a nesting Purple-rumped Sunbird who peered unconcerned from its pendulous, purse-shaped nest while incubating its eggs. We also had good views of the Southern form of endemic Purple-faced Langur here.

More endemics we saw in the nearby forest included Sri Lanka Drongo, Sri Lanka Myna, Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot, Layard's Parakeet, Chestnut-backed Owlet, Black-capped Bulbul, Sri Lanka Green Pigeon, a pair of Sri Lanka Frogmouth and both Crimson-fronted and Yellow-fronted Barbets. We also watched a male Red-back Flameback guarding a nesting hole, periodically reaching in and grabbing a faecal sac before flying a long distance to deposit it so as not to alert predators of its nestlings. Other new birds for the tour today included Lesser Yellownape, Square-tailed Bulbul, Yellow-browed Bulbul and White-bellied Drongo.

We returned to our lodge briefly for lunch before once again boarding the jeeps and working our way up another track where one of the locals had placed some rice to attract the birds. We were not disappointed as soon after we saw several more endemics.....Orange-billed Babbler, the greatly anticipated Sri Lanka Blue Magpie, Sri Lanka Wood-Pigeon and Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill, followed shortly

after by a distant but very recognisable endemic White-faced Starling. The endemic Layard's Palm Squirrel was also seen here.

We then rattled our way back down the track to our hotel, stopping hopefully at a den of an Indian Pangolin where our guide Thilak had seen the animal relatively recently (it sadly wasn't home today), admiring a beautiful Common Green Forest Lizard and some giant *Acavus* landsnails and passing a local man who had climbed to the top of a Fishtail Palm (*Caryota urens*) to extract the sap from its flowers which became the 'honey or treacle' which we had enjoyed several times as a topping on a dessert with Water Buffalo curd or yoghurt – delicious! After dinner, we took a walk around the grounds of the lodge with Sameera and the chef from the lodge. Sameera's keen eyes soon picked up several reptiles and amphibians including Asian House and Common Four-clawed Gecko, Ceylon Wolf Snake, Asian Common Toad, Gunther's Golden-backed Frog and the endemic Sri Lankan Golden-backed Frog, Common Hourglass Tree Frog, Leaf-dwelling Shrub Frog and Sri Lanka Rock Frog (which can squeeze itself into narrow cracks between rocks). We then headed off to bed in preparation for another big day in Sinharaja tomorrow.

Sri Lanka Blue Magpie - T.Cochran

Day 14

10th March Sinharaja

We had another early start this morning to make the most of our second day exploring the Sinharaja Forest Reserve. On the way to the park, we had great views of another Slaty-legged Crake bathing in a puddle on the road from our vehicle, showing the chestnut head and breast and striking black and white horizontal stripes on its belly, before it scampered off into the dense undergrowth which was an unexpectedly great start to the day. Our first mission was to try to get the endemic and secretive Sri Lanka Thrush just after dawn when, like other *Zoothera* species it was most active, and the forest was quiet and unpopulated. After a bit of searching and some very intense scrutiny of the heavily shaded forest floor, we had success, watching a pair of these shy and secretive birds flicking dead leaves over with their beaks, searching for edible tidbits in their search for breakfast and reminding us that we had not yet ours. We then returned to a local shelter and enjoyed a picnic breakfast that we had brought with us from the lodge and supplemented with tea and coffee provided by the shelter managers, whilst enjoying a procession of birds coming to the feeder- another Sri Lankan Blue Magpie, Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill, Yellow-fronted Barbet and Yellow-browed Bulbul. We then headed to the main gate of the forest reserve where we met up with local ranger and plant expert Mahinda. We walked along the track to the research station, exploring en route, while Mahinda pointed out all the plants and a pair of endemic Sri Lanka Kangaroo Lizards. We saw Dark-fronted Babbler and the endemic White-throated Flowerpecker and found some two-month-old Elephant scat from the last remaining elephant in the area – sad and tragic as he is the last of his line and the distinct genetics of this part of the island. We also stopped at a small stream where we noticed two Boulenger's Keelback snakes in the water. One slipped away as soon as we arrived but the other was intent on hunting the small fish that were gathering in the shallows. After gliding in the water for a while, it darted its head under a submerged log, emerging shortly afterwards with a fish which is promptly dispatched. After walking to the Research Station and viewing a nesting Black-naped Monarch, we returned for lunch, having nabbed all the Sri Lankan endemics except Red-faced Malkoha, Crimson-backed Flameback and the recently discovered Serendib Scops Owl. En route we dodged seeds thrown at us by naughty Toque Macaques as they sat in the trees overhead eating their lunch and admired a bright green endemic Long-nosed Whipsnake.

Our master birder had managed to find a roosting Serendib Scops Owl while we were on our walk with Mahinda, so after lunch we navigated our way along a narrow forest trail where with careful scrutiny, we could make out the form of this exquisite owl roosting, which unlike the two other species of Scops owl in Sri Lanka, has no ear tufts. It is believed that there are no more than 80 individuals of

this extremely range-restricted species, so we fully appreciated the rarity of the bird and skill of our guide in finding it in the dense undergrowth.

Two endemics still eluded us: Red-faced Malkoha and Crimson-backed Flameback – so we walked to some nearby disused paddy fields and wetlands where Thilak seemed confident of success. After a reasonable wait, two Crimson-backed Flamebacks came in and flew around for a while, causing much excitement. Further excitement was caused by an endemic Sri Lanka Scimitar-Babbler who flew past, giving us much better views that the quick previous glimpse we had of this species. Then nothing for a while, during which time we spent our time admiring the *Nepenthes distillatoria,* dragonflies and butterflies. Then just as we were about to admit defeat and head back along the track, Thilak started jumping around and waving excitedly. We pointed in the direction he was pointing and couldn't believe our eyes as a pair of Red-faced Malkoha had flown into a nearby tree. We had great views of both birds before we left them in peace to return to the car. Bingo and all 35 endemics were now seen on this trip! We stopped a few times enroute home for some interesting sightings: once for a large (over 2 metre long) Oriental Rat Snake, and a Schokar's Bronzeback and another time to see a Purple-faced Langur eating a Jackfruit, first wrestling the huge fruit from the branch and then proceeding to tear away the thick skin. Eventually the whole thing got too difficult, and the monkey dropped the fruit which smashed on the ground far below. We returned to our homely lodge in Sinharaja for our last dinner together.

Day 15

11th March Sinharaja to Colombo

This morning, we had to leave early to drive three of our group to the airport for their flights home. The others were staying on for a night or two in Colombo. We took a packed breakfast and ate that on the bus and were farewelled from the lodge but the ever-friendly staff and a male Common Garden Lizard in full early morning display of bright green, white stripes and golden head with blue-green marks around his eyes and ears. On our arrival at Bandaranaike International Airport in Colombo we said our sad farewells to our guides and our fellow travelers. The tour ended with 213 species of birds seen – including all 35 endemics! – and an additional one species heard only, 31 mammal species and a phenomenal number of 36 reptiles and 9 amphibians (with an additional 2 heard only), thanks to Sameera's keen eye and expert herpetology knowledge. Many thanks to all our local guides and support staff for making the trip such a success and to the members of the group who were excellent and enthusiastic company, despite the long days spent in the field-it was a real pleasure traveling with you.

On behalf of Inala - thanks for touring with us.

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