

Sri Lanka Wildlife Photography Tour Report 2017

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Sri Lanka Wildlife Spectacular

Dambulla

Sri Lanka, the island of spices, is one of the jewels in the natural history crown of South Asia.

Our group met in Colombo airport, from where we started the journey north eastwards towards Habarana, our base for exploring Minneriya where we were to start our search for herds of Asian Elephants on their annual migration in Sri Lanka.

En-route we made a stop to explore the historical site of Dambulla with its extensive cave temple complex. The murals, petroglyphs and Buddha statues within the caves are some of the oldest and best preserved arts of their kind in Sri Lanka. Dambulla is thought to have been inhabited from as early as 7th to 3rd Century BC and our visit here was a lovely opportunity to stretch our legs and take a break from our long drive. We saw our first Grey Langurs on the walk up to Dambulla. We also stopped to admire a pond filled with Blue Water Lillies, the national flower of Sri Lanka, and a selection of frogs swimming amongst them.

Climbing Sigiriya Rock

In the region of Minneriya we were principally there to photograph the mass migration of Asian Elephants but as the best elephant encounters generally happen in the afternoon, this left us with the mornings to explore some of the other spectacular historical sites of Sri Lanka.

In the knowledge that our most strenuous walk on the trip would be the climb up Sigiriya Rock, we decided to go on our second morning while the light was low and the temperature was still cool.

Although it was crammed with tourists, Sigiriya was worth seeing for the view from the top of it and also its cave of paintings around half way up the climb. We also made a brief stop to photograph some stunning lotus plants in flower at one of the pools in the Sigiriya site.

The Elephant Migration at Minneriya

After taking a break, we decided to venture out on our first safari into Minneriya in search of elephants. Although the weather threatened to pour down for the afternoon, it never really eventuated and we enjoyed two encounters with herds of Asian elephants while the storm clouds loomed. In smaller groups of jeeps we enjoyed watching scuffles between younger elephants, baby elephants establishing their positions in their herds and we could hear the sounds of noisy grazing around us.

On the way out of Minneriya, we drove alongside a small, drying river whose pools allowed us our first glimpses of Adjutant and Painted Storks, Asian Openbills and White-bellied Kingfishers as well as Toque Macaques and more Grey Langurs.

Polonnaruwa

Our cultural excursion this morning was to the phenomenal and vast temple of Polonnaruwa under the careful guidance of both Indika and local guide Prema.

On the way to Polonnaruwa we made a short stop at a culvert when we could see a massive Water Monitor making its way down the rocky stream bed. For a while we took some photographs of this massive monitor lizard as it explored the culvert looking for food. Joining

it were a few Indian Pond Herons in their breeding plumage, also foraging in the stream. As we were sitting there a small group of roving entertainers with a selection of fortune telling cards, pythons and cobras passed us by. We stopped to handle the pythons which was quite enjoyable before we ventured further to the temples.

While we visited several temples, we also discovered that the reptile handlers had followed us in so we succumbed to photographing one of their pet cobras.

Polonnaruwa was the thriving commercial and religious centre of Sri Lanka some 800 years ago. It consists of a lot of temples and religious buildings. For three centuries it was the royal capital, of both the Chola and Sinhalese kingdoms. In Polonnaruwa, it all started in the late 10th century when the South Indian Chola dynasty had conquered Sri Lanka.

The Cholas chose Polonnaruwa as their new capital and moved the capital from Anuradhapura. Their reasons were apparently that it was a strategically better place to be protected from attacks from the Ruhunu Sinhalese kingdom in the south-east, and that it had fewer mosquitos!!!

In 1070 though, the Chola dynasty was overtaken by the Sinhalese kingdom (King Vijayabahu I), which kept Polonnaruwa as his capital. And it was during this Sinhalese period that Polonnaruwa reached its high glory.

The second king (King Parakramabahu I, 1153-86) built many large buildings, beautiful parks and a huge lake/ tank of water (25 square km). The third king (King Nisanka Malla, 1187 – 96) tried to match his predecessors' achievements, and ended up bankrupting the kingdom in his attempts!

In the early 13th century the cities glory was fading, it was abandoned, and the capital moved to the western side of the island where Colombo is today. That was the sad end of the era of beautiful Polonnaruwa as a capital.

Over a morning we visited the Royal Palace, the swimming pool, the stunning and intricate Vatadage with its impressive guard stones, the large stupa of Rankot Vihara and finally the Buddhist statues of Gal Viharaya.

That afternoon we took a jeep safari back in Minneriya in search of elephants. This safari allowed us closer views so we could practice photographing close up details of elephants and, while we watched great herds of them roam around us, we also photographed the attending Cattle Egrets wandering through the legs of these gentle giants. In all we saw upwards of 200 elephants in the reserve that afternoon and photographic opportunities were abundant!

Our Journey to Yala

On our long transit day from Habarana to Yala we made some stops to photograph rice paddies, a few Pheasant-tailed Jacanas and also the begging elephants on the side of the road at the more remote end of Yala National Park.

Yala

We arrived at our beautiful lodge at sunset, only to be told that the staff had found a leopard on the nearby granite boulder. We dropped everything in our possession, grabbed our cameras and we managed to get some last light of day shots before she retired from her lofty granite boulder, out of our sight. What an amazing start to our trip in Sri Lanka's most renowned park for leopards!

In total we saw 7 Leopards in Yala – 6 of them within the park and 1 in the grounds of our lodge. We were also lucky enough to see two Sloth Bears during our four days in the reserve!

Our first full day on safari in Yala National Park really gave us a taste of the beautiful topography of the park. We saw only brief glimpses of a leopard that day but we managed to see some other wonderful scenes including a large troupe of Grey Langurs sunning themselves on a large boulder, many birds, elephants and Toque Macaques.

We stopped for lunch at an isolated beach that was adorned with the palm frond huts of seasonal fishermen. It was a beautiful spot with a beach washed clean by the warm waters of the Indian Ocean.

On our next day we arrived just after sunrise and we only had to wait around half an hour to see our first Stripe-necked Mongoose was spotted foraging for food at a small waterhole. While we sat and photographed it we got a call in by cell phone that two leopards had been spotted lying on a road around five kilometres away. We drove over to find two young leopard sisters lounging around the road in the early morning sun. We stayed with them for as long as we could and we watched one of them climb up a tree, sleep for a while, climb down and go off to sleep behind a termite mound. When they were both finally hard to see we went off to spend the rest of the day in the park. During the full day safari we saw herds of Spotted Deer, Painted Storks, an elephant, Ruddy Mongoose, White-bellied Sea Eagles, Brahminy Kites and a Brown Fish Owl.

We found a stunningly beautiful river waterhole to take a rest and eat lunch. While we dined we were joined by pretty little Scarlet Drop-Wing dragonflies, very shy Spotted Deer, several curious Toque Macaques and even a baby Mugger crocodile!

It was hard to leave the shade of the stream and venture back out on safari but the afternoon we found one of the leopards we saw this morning sitting right next to a pool on the main road of the park! We stayed with her while she rested, got up, moved and found another spot to rest again.

As we left a large flock of Malabar Pied Hornbills flew over us at dusk. It was an amazing way to end a beautiful day in this remote part of the park.

We decided to return to Yala this morning but only for a morning safari in the park. It was quite quiet in the park that morning. We stopped briefly at a water hole when we saw a female Black-necked Stork wading in the shallows searching for breakfast. We then decided to drive to the far end of the park to enjoy our own but our meal was soon interrupted by a large troupe of Toque Macaques, who had become used to the picnic place next to the river and who proceeded to raid our truck plus all of the surrounding trucks trying to steal our breakfasts!

After we had finished eating, we stayed on to take a few photographs before we slowly drove out of the park. While we didn't see any leopards, we did hear about a Sloth Bear so we enjoyed a rather brief encounter with it as it tried to make its way through the quickly accumulating safari trucks. We tried to work out which direction it was going in so we could spin our truck around and get another glimpse. Sadly we think it might have gone to rest in the shade and we never saw it again that day.

Yala's Elephants Take a bath!

As we drove out of the park we stopped to see a herd of elephants approaching a waterhole. Since herds or larger groups of elephants are unusual to see in Yala, we thought we would just sit and watch and see what they would do. Thinking that they would only go for a drink, we were amused to see them actually get in to the pool and take a swim! In the family was one baby elephant and for around ten minutes we had the pleasure of watching him swim with his family, try to get in the middle of them and also try to climb on the backs of the younger swimming elephants. It was hilarious to watch! The elephants finally left the pool and went to stand under a nearby tree to escape the heat. Taking their cue we also returned to the lodge for lunch and a break.

In the afternoon we decided we'd head out to a nearby wetlands reserve where we enjoyed encounters with the male Black-necked Stork partner of the female we'd seen that morning, many aquatic birds, the biggest Mugger crocodiles of our trip to date and some gorgeous Black-winged Stilt chicks.

On the following day we enjoyed another full day inside Yala. The only leopard sighted on the morning safari was a very shy male who appeared at the side of the road before eventually taking off. In the afternoon we spotted another male leopard sitting in the long grasses near the main road. We sat and watched this male until he got up and wandered off. As he approached the road he saw a few Spotted Deer and tried to hunt them but he was unsuccessful so he gently sloped off into the forest.

On our last full day in Yala the morning safari produced few creatures except for a solo elephant wandering through the woodlands and a rather unusual gathering of Painted Storks feasting off dying Tilapia in the river, alongside birds of prey, Adjutant Storks and two Woolly-necked Storks. Towards the end of the morning safari we learned that a female leopard had been seen moving across the main road and into the nearby bushes to rest in the shade. We noted where she went for her siesta before we decided to take our own in the middle of the day for lunch.

Our first drive saw us looking for birdlife and after we spotted some lovely birds like Jerdon's Leaf Bird and a few White-bellied Kingfishers, we decided to turn around and go back into the park to see if we could find any leopards.

Towards the sunset, we'd heard that the female leopard had got up and was heading towards the forest. Trying to sense her movements we went around to another side of the forest and we waited. Finally we were rewarded with a full view of her as she came out of the long grass and walked right by us through the forest into the dense woodlands nearby. What a tremendous way to end our last full day in Yala!

On our last morning in Yala we enjoyed a wonderful bird photography session from sunrise at a pool adjacent to our lodge.

This spectacular pool featured a variety of bird life including Black-winged Stilts, Painted Storks, Spot-billed Pelicans, White-throated Kingfishers and Asian Spoonbills. It was also the home of several large Mugger crocodiles and visited by herds of buffalo on occasion. Our lodge also had a nice path leading down to a local beach. While not suitable for swimming, the beach had a few pretty fishing huts on the boulders at the high tide mark.

The early morning light allowed for some wonderful photography at both locations.

We left Yala after a short lunch to return to Colombo where we enjoyed a spectacular farewell dinner at our lodge in Negombo.