Sri Lanka Wildlife Photography Tour Report 2019

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by Charlotte Arthun

Extraordinary sightings of leopards; a secret location for a herd of Sri Lanka's Tusker elephants; remarkable views of Serendibs Scops Owl and close encounters with amazing Water Monitors were all highlights of our recent wildlife photography tour to Sri Lanka. Here, Wild Images leader Charlotte Arthun reports on a very successful trip.

On the first day of our tour we drove through classic Sri Lankan villages , giving us our first sense for the culture, climate, and vegetation of this beautiful tropical island. The three hours to Dambulla Caves passed quickly as everyone spoke on the bus getting to know each other. It was immediately clear that everyone was going to get along very well.

Dambulla Caves is an impressive ancient Buddhist religious site. The temple dates back to the first century BC. These caves originally served as a refuge for an exiled king, who became exonerated several years later and had the temple created there as a show of his gratitude. There are 5 different caves, all with intricately painted and sculpted buddhas. There is also wildlife in the area including Toque Macaques, Grey Langurs, and several species of birds. The temple lies at the top of a massive rock and the climb up the stairs to the temple took about 10 minutes. Each temple is slightly different, but the paintings were all rich with color and extended from the walls all the way to the ceilings. We were shooting with wide-angle and fish eye lenses. As it was a low light environment, we were experimenting with show shutter speeds and testing how slow we could push our shutter speed while still hand holding. For our Olympus users, they were able to get down to 1/15 of a second while retaining a sharp image!

After exploring the caves, we encountered a troop of Toque Macaques at the entrance to the site with several babies in the group. They allowed us to approach closely and photograph them low on the ground with the beautiful backdrop of the mountains. One of our guests

had dropped her hat in the temple, which we found perfectly hung in a tree near the exit, which had clearly and thoughtfully been placed by someone inside the temple.

We continued to our beautiful hotel in Habarana with its expansive grounds featuring several lagoons and a large lake which attracts many species of birds, reptiles and amphibians. Even the occasional elephant has appeared here which whetted the appetite for our next three days of the tour. Toque macaques and gray langurs were daily visitors. It's also a great place to see the Indian Giant Squirrel. With the little free time we had during the day, namely around sunrise and after lunch, most of the guests spent their spare hours exploring the grounds.

We enjoyed a leisurely first morning with a breakfast buffet serving delicious local and international food (the excellent food was the norm for the entire trip). By 9am we were off to visit the famous Sigiriya – or 'Lion Rock'. This is probably Sri Lanka's most famous historical site and is truly impressive. We were accompanied by a local expert to explore the ground level ruins. For those who were interested, they also took a trip up several hundred steps to see the famous lion paws located halfway up the rock. The rest of the group opted for a photography session at one of Sigiriya's lagoons where we photographed birds (White-throated King fisher, Black-hooded Oriole, Purple Sunbird) water monitors, butterflies and dragonflies.

After the morning tour at Sigiriya, we went straight to lunch and had a quick turnaround before heading out on our first safari in Minneriya National Park. This park is best known for "The Gathering" where every year Asian elephants come there in the late afternoons for access to water. This is considered the highest concentration of wild Asian elephants in the world. We entered the park in 2 jeeps, four people per jeep, giving everyone ample room for gear and views on each side. We viewed our first raptors as well as several crocodiles and even the rare purple-faced leaf monkey on our way in to the park. We also photographed some colourful and charismatic birds like the Painted Stork, Red-wattled Lapwing, Indian Thick-knee, Indian Roller, and White-bellied Sea Eagle. Our first sighting of elephants was a family group of about 20 individuals, including calves. They were feeding on grass in an open area. We watched as they used their trunks to grip the grass, and then lightly kicked it with their foot to uproot it before finally shaking off the dirt and consuming it. Carrying on deeper into the reserve we viewed several herds of at least 130 elephants in total together. It was an incredible sight! The young calves were the most entertaining, constantly chasing each other, and then receiving a scolding from a nearby adult. There were elephants in all directions as far as the eye could see. Because this is a well-visited area, there were several other safari vehicles, but we were among the last to leave and got to enjoy the view as the sun began to set and lit up the scene in the golden hour.

"On location" in Minneriya National Park with Wild Images guests Pauline, Gillian and Carolyn (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

The next morning, we visited the impressive Polonnaruwa archeological site. This is a UNESCO World Heritage site and is an absolute treasure of Sri Lanka. It was the site of Sri Lanka's second capital from 11-13 th century AD. The ruins include incredible carvings, sculptures, tombs and temples, as well as the domicile of its Kings. We could have easily spent the whole day exploring each of the different sites. The area is very large and we moved between sites by vehicle. We were lucky to visit on a cool morning with relatively few other tourists, allowing us to photograph the ruins without people in the frame. One of our guests even used the opportunity for several shots with an infrared filter, which turned out to be some of the best landscape shots of the trip. We also got to see some special species including the Crimson-backed Goldenback, Sri Lanka Flying Snake, as well as Toque Macaques and Gray Langurs. Before we headed back to the lodge, we all enjoyed a King Coconut as a refreshment.

In the afternoon we ventured to a lesser known local area in search of Sri Lanka's 'Tuskers.' Only around 8% of Sri Lanka's male elephant population has tusks, while females are tusk-less. We entered this protected area, which was off the beaten path, and were all immediately impressed by the beauty of the reserve, not to mention the fact that we had it all to ourselves! We spent time with several herds of elephants. We were even able to get out on foot and photograph the elephants at a safe distance from the ground using our vehicles as a barrier. The tuskers eluded us in the beginning because they stayed concealed in the thicker vegetation, but finally with some patience we got to see and photograph several bulls with tusks.

After arriving back at the hotel, we did a quick turnaround from dinner to our next safari activity – the night drive! We waited until the last evening for the night drive because the following day was a transit day and we could afford a later start after a late night. Because night drives are not allowed within the reserve, we did a safari along the buffer zone/perimeter of the reserve, where many nocturnal animals roam freely. Our safari lasted from about 8:30pm to 11:30pm. We had some extraordinary sightings that are otherwise very unlikely to see in the day including the Gray Slender Loris, Asian Palm Civet, Golden Palm Civet, Eurasian otter, Indian Nightjar, Golden Jackal, and Indian Gerbil.

Our third day of the tour was the longest transit day of the tour, but not without a few stops on the way. We stopped to photograph an enormous water monitor who lives in the waterways of a village along the main road. We were able to be on foot and get low angle shots, including with its enormous outstretched tongue. We also had a noteworthy lunch stop along the way with delicious Sri Lankan cuisine and a beautiful view of the Sri Lankan lowlands. When were were nearly at our accommodation in Yala, we passed a few elephants on the road who were coming to investigate our vehicle, no doubt hoping we might have a snack to pass their way. We passed them quickly to avoid any kind of contact.

Gillian enjoys a close encounter with a Water Monitor in Sri Lanka (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

In total we had 5 full day safaris within Yala National Park. We saw an incredible diversity of wildlife, and also interesting animal interactions and behaviors. We again used two safari vehicles with the middle row taken out for ample space for all of our camera gear and for movement within the vehicles. Our first three full day safaris were conducted in a couple of the quieter areas of Yala National Park. These are the much less visited areas of the reserve, and we frequently went for hours without seeing another vehicle. Everyone enjoyed the exclusivity of this experience, and we were able to spend as much time as we wanted in each sighting without pressure to move on. In these sightings we would also review photos in camera to make sure everything was perfect with the settings before moving on, which is a luxury you sometimes aren't afforded in busier areas. A lot of our time during these days were spent in photography lessons, and we practiced with several different settings and modes in many of the sightings, particularly of the abundant lizards and birds in Yala.

Each day we did full 12 hour game drives to give ourselves as much time as possible in the reserve. We stopped to alight from our vehicles for a breakfast and a lunch spot at designated areas. Our first day picnic lunch site was perhaps the most eventful of our lunch stops. We stopped along a beautiful river and enjoyed a slight breeze and respite from an otherwise very hot day. It was a very peaceful location, until the Toque Macaques arrived. These monkeys have learned that humans mean food, and they surrounded us hoping for a few morsels. Many of the females carried babies with them, and they were vocalizing a pathetic whimper to elicit our sympathy. It is clearly a strategy that has worked for them in the past. We didn't give in, but they managed to get away with a few of our lunch packs nonetheless!

Our second afternoon gave us perhaps the best leopard sighting of the trip. After a full day of looking and waiting in areas where we heard alarm calls, we headed towards the gate to make the 6pm closure time. Then less than 500 meters from the gate, we encountered a beautiful young female leopard. She was active and it seemed she was contemplating a hunt, going between concealed low-down stalking and then normal walking when she tired of that. Further down the road in the same sighting, a male leopard was spotted. This was a dominant male in the area. He was moving towards a nearby watering hole but managed to encounter a grumpy elephant who promptly chased him off, trumpeting as he ran at the leopard. It was surely an exciting way to end the day!

After three days in this part of the reserve, we moved to a different area to explore one of the more popular sections of Yala National Park. This was one of the most visited areas of the reserve and is where the animals, including the leopard, are most habituated. While it is the busiest part of the reserve, for the most part we managed to evade the crowds.

The topography and landscape varies dramatically in this area to the other. Our first few days were in mostly forested areas with one prominent river, while the last two days were in a more open environment with rocky outcrops and several watering holes. Most of these watering holes supported great diversity of bird life, as well as many water buffalo, which other than one bull, had eluded us the previous

days.

Some highlight sightings from our five days in Yala included a Crested Serpent Eagle successfully hunting and consuming a snake; several Painted-lipped lizards changing from red to white in a matter of seconds; a stand-off between a spotted deer and a Stripe-necked Mongoose, and a baby spotted deer learning to stand only hours after being born. Incredibly we had 10 different leopard sightings of both males, females and sub-adults. We even had a brief but wonderful sighting of a sloth bear out in the open. We photographed several bird species including the Malabar pied Hornbill, Grey-headed Fish Eagle, Yellow-crowned Woodpecker, Emerald Dove, Pied Kingfisher, Common Kingfisher, White-throated Kingfisher, Common Hoopoe, Rose-ringed Parakeet, Yellow-wattled Lapwing, Painted Stork, Orange Minivet, Brown-headed Barbet, Red-vented Bulbul, Asian Paradise-flycatcher, Sri Lanka white-eye, Crimson-fronted Barbet, Common Kingfisher, Eurasian Spoonbill, Asian Openbill, Woolly-necked stork, Purple Heron, Indian Pond Heron, Grey Heron, and the Lesser Adjutant. We also all took part in Indika's 'Bee Eater Challenge', a competition for the best photograph of a little green bee-eater in flight. Thankfully, these birds are common and active during the day, so everyone had plenty of opportunities to get the shot.

After Yala, our whole group opted for the Sinharaja extension. We took a full day to get to Sinharaja with plenty of stops on the way. The first stop was in Tissamaharama to view a large gathering of the Indian flying fox where hundreds of them hang in the trees. Even though it was daylight, the bats were still awake, mostly fidgeting around in the trees, and also flying from one tree to another for a better hanging spot. Their vocalizations of a high-pitched chirp were very audible. Unlike insect eating bats, fruit bats don't echolocate and rely primarily on their vision for foraging. As a result, they have big eyes. They also have a long, canine-like face, aptly giving them the name 'flying fox.' After leaving the bats, with the help of some local experts, we found the Brown Fish Owl in a tree alongside a river. As we moved further west, we began climbing elevation more and viewed several vistas and tea plantations. We arrived in the evening around 6pm with enough time for check-in before rejoining for dinner. After dinner we fit in a Lightroom training and editing session to review a few of the hundreds of photos we had taken so far.

We spent two full days exploring the Sinharaja National Forest on foot and by safari vehicle. It's a paradise for birding as well as for reptiles, amphibians, insects, and invertebrates. The highlight bird species we saw were the Sri Lanka Blue Magpie, Red-faced Malkoha, Sri Lanka Frogmouth, Yellow-fronted Barbet, Spot-winged Thrush, Malabar Trogon, Sri Lanka jungle fowl, and Layard's Parakeet. The first afternoon we did a special trip to find the rare Serendib Scops Owl, located in a forested area outside of the reserve. This owl is the mostly newly discovered bird in Sri Lanka, which was officially recognized as a new species in 2004, nearly 150 years after the next most recent bird discovery. It is suspected that it took so long to identify because it makes a call that sounds more like a frog than a bird, and because it is rare and endemic to only a few forests in Sri Lanka. Knowing it's a highly prized sighting, Indika arranged with a local bird expert to try and locate the bird when we would be there. In order for our guide to find it, he went out early in the morning, around 4 am, to locate it first by sound. This owl primarily vocalizes in the early hours of the morning. Then he homed in on the location until he found the bird, which would remain in the same place if undisturbed until the afternoon, which is when we viewed it. We hiked up the side of a rather steep hill, and remarkably were able to get very close to the owl and photograph it at eye level. This experience was later discussed as the highlight for a few of the people on the tour. During our time in Sinharaja, we also saw the Indian Kangaroo lizard, Green Garden lizard, Hump-nosed Lizard, Giant Wood Spider, and several species of butterfly.

Returning to Colombo with full memory cards and even fuller memories, our guests departed Sri Lanka with heavy hearts after saying goodbye to our wonderful Wild Images guides Charlotte and Indika

In an extraordinary encounter, a large Water Monitor gulps down a Green Forest Lizard for breakfast (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

Portrait of a large Water Monitor in Sri Lanka (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

One of the large male tusker Elephants in our secret location in Sri Lanka (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

Portrait of a Toque Macaque mother and baby in Yala (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

Toque Macaques are very protective with their babies (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

A Toque Macaque family in the forests of Sri Lanka (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

A stunning encounter with a pretty and rare Serendibs Scops Owl in Sinharaja was an absolute highlight of our trip (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

Sloth bear in Yala! (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

A charismatic pair of Sri Lanka Frogmouths in Sinharaja (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

A sleepy male and female Sri Lanka Frogmouth pair (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

Cruising the waterways, a Water Monitor hunts for a meal along a riverbank (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

The stunning and expansive ruins of Polonnaruwa (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

Exploring the ruins of Polonnaruwa is a wonderful highlight of our tour (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

Portrait of a leopard in a remote section of Yala National Park (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

Who's watching you? A male leopard hides in the grasses of Yala (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

Portrait of a Hump-nosed Lizard (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

Grey Langur portrait (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

A family of Grey Langurs surveying their view from their home in the vines (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

Pretty Green Bee-eaters were the subject of one of our photography competitions during the trip (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

Wild Asian Elephants are always a highlight of our Sri Lanka photography tours (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

Zany looking Crested Serpent Eagle (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

A Crested Serpent Eagle showing its namesake crest (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

A statue of a reclining Buddha inside the incredible cave temples of Dambulla (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

Up close and personal with a herd of wild elephants in Sri Lanka (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

Elephant herd in monochrome (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

Living with the Green Forest Lizards of Sri Lanka is a bit like living with dragons in your garden (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

An ambition bird for many, the Sri Lankan Blue Magpie is a stunning feature of the rainforests in Sinharaja (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

Can you ever have too many photos of Sri Lankan Blue Magpies? (Image by Charlotte Arthun)

Portrait of a Blue Magpie (Image by Charlotte Arthun)