

## Sri Lanka Primates 21 January 2012-4 February 2012

At the beginning of last year I went to Sri Lanka for a mixture of wildlife watching, eating as much food as possible and seeing some of the historical sites. Compared to others that have written trip reports I saw an unimpressive 26 species of mammal. However besides going to Viharamahadevi park in Colombo to see the large colony of Indian fruit bats, Yala National Park to see leopards and Weligama Bay to go whale watching, the only hard core/dedicated mammal watching I did was to see the primate species on the island. Everything else I saw was by chance. While I enjoy mammal watching of any type, primates are by far my favorite. I originally was not going to write anything about my trip because I didn't think any of my info was useful/no one would be interested, but with all the recent interest in seeing slender loris I figured I could talk about places I went to see them, my experiences with them as well as the other primates on the island. I didn't include my other mammal sightings because the rest were what I would consider the usual suspects. I used a company called Asia TransPacific in the US to put my trip together. I had multiple mishaps the previous year in Borneo, so as a "make up" they were able to hook me up with one of the primate researchers (not a normal guide situation) in Polonnaruwa (which I will talk about later) to guide my friend and I around the island to look for primates. I think pretty much everywhere I went is common knowledge so I don't think this post will give away anyone's secret spots.

My first spot was the Talangama Wetlands which are on the outskirts of Colombo. The area is basically a residential area for what looked like upper class/wealthy people. It is located about 30-45 minutes from Colombo. At the edge of the housing area sits a small wetland that attracts a variety of birds as well as bird watchers. This area is also one of the last strongholds of the western race of the Purple faced leaf monkey, recently listed as one of the 25 most endangered

primates in the world. My friend and I stayed at the Villa Talangama(address 370/F1 Lake Road, Hokandara South) that sits right at the edge of the wetland. At the time I went it was associated with Jetwing holidays that run multiple wildlife trips throughout Sri Lanka. If you can put it into your budget try to stay there! Every morning I was told around 7:30 ish the langurs show up in the trees surrounding the wetland. Just like clockwork they did. There were two troops that I saw each consisting of 10-12 monkeys. They stared each other down and stared me down as I was taking pictures of them. They were all very relaxed and approachable.

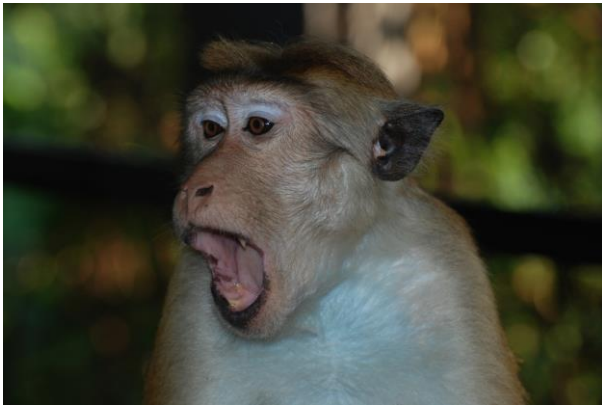


I was told they can also be found sitting in peoples chairs on decks and occasionally raiding gardens. If you can't spend the night there are plenty of places to pull a car off just by the wetlands. There were about 20 bird watchers (none of which I saw take a single monkey photo) when I was there so I doubt anyone would give you any problems if you went to watch the langurs. If I had to chose any of the purple face races to see, this would be the one I would suggest. Sigiriya was my second stop. If you get the chance to actually climb the rock, it is worth the one hour out of your day. I stayed at the Heritance Kandalama hotel which is built into a rock bed that surrounds the Kandalama tank (water body) as well as a 55 acre forest close to Sigiriya. The hotel had resident grey slender loris, dry zone race of toque macaques and tufted grey langurs. I went on a night walk with the naturalist at the hotel one night to see the loris. The hotel was fully booked at the time I was there and I was the only one on the night walk so was able to concentrate my efforts on them. There is a road into the hotel, a small round about or rotary in front of the hotel as well as an exit road out. On the road walking away from the hotel there are dense bushes that are facing the tank. This where we concentrated our efforts and this is where I saw two loris in about 30 minutes of looking. I was also told the trees surrounding the tank itself are a good place to look. If you are unable to stay at the hotel you could always try to eat at the restaurant or go to the bar and see if you can hook up with the naturalist, I do not remember his name, but he was very friendly and told me the loris are one species he saw regularly on night walks. I think all around the best bet to see the grey slender loris is to go to the arboreteum that Jon mentioned in his report. It was about 20-30 minutes from my hotel. Our guide was staying there and it looked like they had multiple rooms that people could stay in, I am not sure however if it was just for locals or if tourists could stay. The night I went there were multiple people spotlighting so the views I got were quick. I learned quickly how fast they could move unlike the sunda slow loris I had seen in Thailand

(hence the “slow” I guess). I could hear them in multiple trees however. The best description of the sound they make is if a galago and a tamarin had a love child (pick any species). Listen for this shrill noise then move your spot light appropriately. My advice would be to wait until you are the only one or there are just a few people spot lighting. There did seem to be multiple trails you could use however. They seemed to be very sensitive to noise and movement. Despite all my efforts I could not get a decent photo at either location. I have plenty of blurred grey skinny objects photos and multiple pictures of tree limbs in the dark that I will not bother posting. I am sure the next person to post about the loris will have an award winning shot and put me to shame (ie Smith family). I was told there was a trail called Kimbissa around Sigiriya that is good for loris as well. I did not use the trail or have the exact location so can not vouch for it. The toque macaque experience at the Heritance Kandalama is worth staying there as well. All the room showers have a large window that faces down towards the tank. It seemed that every time I decided to shower within minutes I would have an audience of 4-5 macaques. Despite my “ move it along ladies, nothing to see here” they would stay. It also seemed that every time I wanted to sit at the table on our deck, a small group would decide that was the perfect moment to sit on the table and watch their offspring play on our porch.

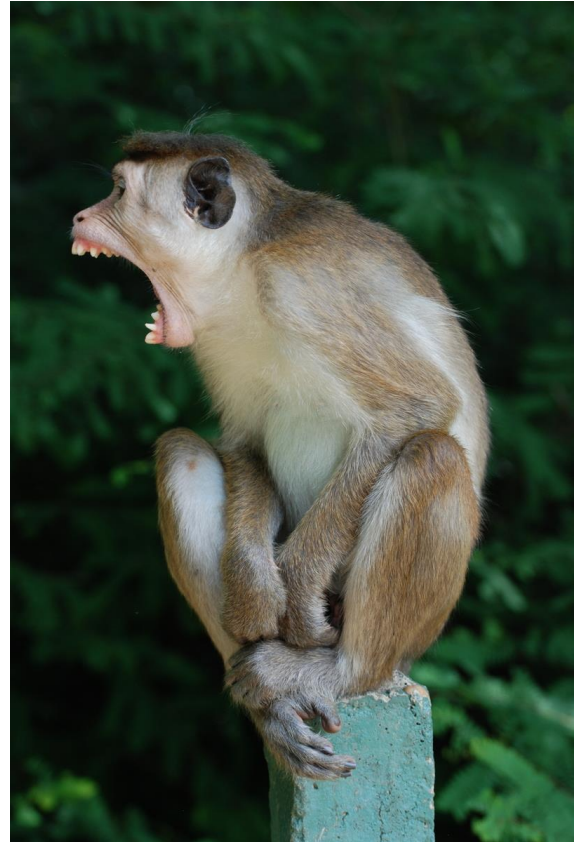






Polonnaruwa was our next spot. Besides being one of the major historical attractions in Sri Lanka, it is also the longest running study site of monkeys. The Smithsonian Institute runs an ongoing study of all the primates, especially the dry zone race of toque macaques. Pretty much any show on the BBC or animal planet you have seen with toque macaques was filmed at Polonnaruwa. There are separate researchers for the toques, the tufted grey langurs, the dry zone race of the purple face leaf monkey and for the grey slender loris. If you see anyone staring off into the woods with a clip board, its a primate researcher. It is a great place to take photos. The purple faced leaf monkeys were the only ones we had some difficulty finding and were the only ones that would run off when trying to take photos. At one point I saw a single female toque sitting with some tufted grey langurs grooming two of them. This was something new for me, but of course when I tried to take a picture the macaque stopped what she was doing. Our guide told us the toques are supposedly some of the most interspecies groomers of any monkey. They had seen a small group dragging a baby spotted deer across the lawn then start grooming it, they had seen them grooming dogs, as well as one toque went to a treehole, pulled out a sleeping grey slender loris then starting grooming it as well. Man words can not describe how much I would have liked to see that! I was also able to see my final grey slender loris at the research camp here, but this is something not open to the public (again no viable photo).



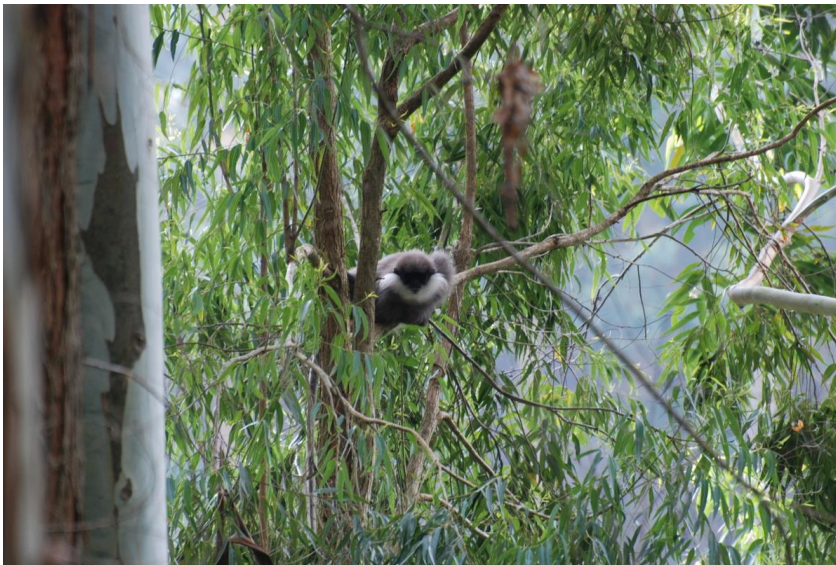






Horton Plains National park in the tea country region of Sri Lanka was our next stop. I went to see the montane race of the purple faced leaf monkey also called the “bear monkey” because of how fuzzy it is. We saw them in two spots. They have a long trail that leads to a point called lands end that is basically a sheer drop overlook. At the end of the trail we found a small troop. There is a small visitor center with a road leading from the entrance and a road leading away. Take the road leading away then when you come to a small Hindu temple on your right ,find a place to pull over and start looking. Walking away from the temple and away from the direction of the visitor center we found a small troop of about 7 langurs. Our guide told us this was a common spot that he sees them in every time he goes.





I had also put in the plans to go to the Hakgala Botanic gardens in the tea country in Nuwara Eliya to see the “bear” monkeys as well. We got there just before they closed and were told by the guards that they rarely if ever see them any more. We looked for about an hour and saw no langurs, but did see a large troop of the montane race of toque macaques.



Like the montane langurs they were super fuzzy. In Yala National Park the only primates we saw were tufted grey langurs. We asked at park headquarters if there were any good spots to spotlight for lorises around the park but were told there were none. On the outskirts of the park there is a small museum complex and temple called Kataragama. It is supposedly a pilgrimage site for both Buddhists and Hindus. It also has a large troop of tufted grey langurs on site that the Hindus give offerings to each day. This made for some very relaxed langurs and a great spot to take photos. I also saw something I had never seen monkeys do before. A male kept going to a female and would attempt/start to breed her. Each time he did this, two other females would come up to him, sniff him, then start pushing him off, it was interesting to watch.







Our last spot for primates was in and around Galle. The historic part of the city is in the inside of a fort. It contains various small hotels, shops, restaurants, houses and a very habituated troop of the wet zone race of the purple faced leaf monkey. At the time I went it consisted of a VERY large male and 7 other langurs. They were hanging out in the trees outside our hotel at 7 am (the Amagalla) and I was told this is a daily occurrence. I would imagine that you could ask any of the places in the fort where they might be if you go.



About 35 km from Galle is the Kanneliya Forest Reserve (also called the Man and Biosphere Reserve). While the distance does not seem like much, with traffic and roads it took us about 2 hours to get there from Galle. I went there to see red slender loris which was not difficult. The actual reserve is only open from 6 am-6 pm so you would have to organize it with a guide to get permission to spotlight. We got there about 1 hour before dusk. Just prior to the gate we saw a troop of the wet zone race of the purple faced leaf monkey.



After going through the gait it looked like there was only one semi steep (but not hard) main trail that went up. After walking about 20-30 minutes there is a small wooden gazebo on you left. We stopped there until just dusk then continued up the trail for another 20 minutes or so. As soon as it became dark we turned around and went down. On your right hand side the forest drops towards a small river. I was told that each night a good number of red slender lorises go down to the river edge to feed. It took us about 3-4 minutes after



starting to find our first loris and within 30 minutes we had found six. Unlike their grey cousins, these lorises would stop and stare at us before going on there way. I also did not hear a single one vocalize. When spotlighting I would look on both sides of the trail and look up as well as vines will be above your head. Word to the wise I learned the hard way here that Sri Lanka does in fact have leeches , so wearing leech socks or taking precautions here may be a good idea.







All in all it is a great place to see primates and seeing all five species as well as subspecies is very attainable!

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