

## SRI LANKA – 2012.

We had collectively been discussing a comprehensive mammal and bird trip around Sri Lanka for some time, influenced by the successes of Phil Telfer & Jon Hall especially. It did not take long to decide that we would use the Bird and Wildlife Team as our ground agents, and we were delighted to find that Udithe Hettige would be our guide. The arrangements were discussed at the Birdfair, and then finalised over the internet – we were guided as to the site selection and timings at each destination, to maximise our chances for our main targets, by Deepal and Udithe. ( [www.birdandwildlifeteam.com](http://www.birdandwildlifeteam.com) )

### **Flights:**

We used Sri Lankan airways direct flights from Heathrow ( approx £ 650 return ), whilst Kenny & Cat flew with Qatar Airways via Doha from Manchester. Both flights were fine, and minimised excessive transit delays. We all arrived in the early hours of the morning ( c. 03.00 ) local time.

### **Visas:**

The Sri Lankan authorities decided to introduce tourist visas from Jan 1<sup>st</sup> 2012 ( approx £ 15 )

### **Weather:**

For the majority of the time we had hot, dry and sunny weather, with typical temperatures 28 – 36c. At the rainforest sites of Kitulgala & Sinharaja ( and to a lesser extent Nuwara Eliya ) we had thunderstorms and rain, which at the former site especially, did limit our time in the prime forest.

### **Insects etc:**

Mosquitos and other biting insects were rarely a problem on the trip, but leeches were encountered surprisingly regularly, especially when there had been rain – leech socks are highly recommended.

### **Guides:**

As mentioned above, we were fortunate to be guided by Udithe Hettige, probably the most experienced wildlife expert in Sri Lanka. He is an astonishing guide, by any standards, and can identify mammals, birds, reptiles, butterflies and virtually anything else you can find ! A total professional – he ranks as one of the very best guides that we have travelled with anywhere in the world.

Note: we have not recorded precise site details for the mammals in accordance with Udithe's request.



Sri Lankan Giant Squirrel ( dry zone race ).

**Itinerary:**

19<sup>th</sup> Feb: Arrive in Colombo in early hours of the morning, local time. Leave from the airport directly to drive to Sigiriya ( c. 4 hours ). Birding and mammal watching around the area all day.

20<sup>th</sup> Feb: All day ( and night ) exploring the area thoroughly – 25 hours without sleep !

21<sup>st</sup> Feb: Morning asleep ( ! ), mid afternoon until 03.00 searching for additional species around the Sigiriya area.

22<sup>nd</sup> Feb: Leave to drive to Wasgamuwa N.P. Late afternoon visit into the park where the star mammals are the obliging Asian Elephants. After dinner night drive until 02.00.

23<sup>rd</sup> Feb: All day in and around Wasgamuwa N.P. Night drive curtailed after vehicle developed faults ...

24<sup>th</sup> Feb: Drive to Nuwara Eliya in the hill country. Temperatures were cooler here ( 20c ). Afternoon visit to the famous Victoria Park to search for birds such as Pied Ground Thrush and Indian Pitta.

25<sup>th</sup> Feb: Early start to drive to the Horton Plains N.P., an area of grasslands and montane forest. Walk to the Baker's Falls and World's End area in late morning. Return to Nuwara Eliya in mid afternoon to check on some small mammal traps. Night walk in forest block produced excellent views of Brown Wood Owl and an Indian Porcupine.

26<sup>th</sup> Feb: Morning at Victoria Park again, plus checking the mammal traps. Afternoon visit to the Hakgala Botanical Gardens nearby.

27<sup>th</sup> Feb: After another check of Victoria Park and a site for Slaty-legged Crane ( unsuccessfully on this occasion ) we drove through the hills towards Kitulgala – arriving in the rain. Afternoon in the forest, before heavy rain prevented our intended evening / night activities.

28<sup>th</sup> Feb: All day in the forest at Kitulgala. Heavy rain again hampered our plans and our night activities were impossible.

29<sup>th</sup> Feb: We were on the road by 08.00 for the c.6 hour drive to Sinharaja forest reserve, arriving around lunchtime. The montane race of Sri Lankan Giant Squirrel and the sought after Sri Lankan Flameback Squirrel entertained us over lunch. Afternoon walk in the forest provided us with the Serendib Scop's Owl after we had feared that we had missed out in the rain at Kitulgala – huge relief for the birders ! As spotlighting is forbidden at Sinharaja, we had an early night.

1<sup>st</sup> Mar: All day in the Sinharaja forest. As we were a distance from the lodge when it got dark, we had to walk back up the track in the dark !!!

2<sup>nd</sup> Mar: Pre-dawn start to try to see Green-billed Coucal ( the last of the endemic birds ) that we had heard at roost the previous evening. In addition to the Coucal completing our clean sweep of the endemics, we also located the Slaty-legged Crane ! Drive to Embilipitiya. Evening visit to a huge bat roost containing millions of bats which poured from the cave endlessly – one of the wildlife spectacles of the trip.

3<sup>rd</sup> Mar: Udawalawe N.P. at dawn for dry country species, again featuring many Asian Elephants. Mid-day driving to Yala N.P., probably the most famous and heavily visited park in Sri Lanka. Afternoon visit to the park, and after dinner, a prolonged night drive outside the park, which produced a Fishing Cat as the undoubted highlight.

4<sup>th</sup> Mar: Pre-dawn drive to search for Indian Gerbil with no luck, but we again found a shy Golden Jackal and lots of Indian Hares. As it was the weekend, Udithe suggested avoiding the main park due to the sheer numbers of visitors, and concentrating on the nearby Bundala N.P instead. This proved a good plan, and we hardly saw any other people ! Many birds were seen together with some common mammals which gave excellent photo opportunities. After lunch we went to Tissa to explore the pools or 'tanks' yielding another good array of birds, also a spectacular roost of Indian Flying Foxes... Night drive outside the main park where the Gerbil finally appeared.

5<sup>th</sup> Mar: Part of the morning was spent wader watching at the salt-pans. After lunch we returned to Yala N.P., but still no sign of any Leopards ! Only one or two were being reported daily, despite lots and lots of jeeps looking...

6<sup>th</sup> Mar: Our last day at Yala started early, with us leaving the hotel at dawn to reach the park as it opened. An Asian Elephant on the road well outside the park was a good omen... Even on a weekday there were still large numbers of jeeps at the gate queueing to get in, and we headed for quieter areas as soon as possible. Our luck changed, and we found 2 Leopards for ourselves, both eventually only being watched by 2 or 3 jeeps at maximum. A huge male Elephant with tusks ( uncommon here ), was another memorable find. After dinner we had another night drive, this one producing another Indian Gerbil, a Jungle Cat, good views of a Small Indian Civet and a roosting Indian Pitta.

7<sup>th</sup> Mar: A leisurely drive west along the coast to Mirissa where we would be based for two nights for our whale watching trips. Local walk in the late afternoon produced Jungle Owlet and 2 Brown Wood Owls. After dinner we drove for 1.5 hours to a beach where in the company of some researchers, we waited in vain for nesting Green Turtles to come ashore. We seemed unlucky, as they had seen 2 the night before, but with an early start ahead, we gave up at about 01.00...

8<sup>th</sup> Mar: It was somewhat choppy at sea than ideal as we set off for our first attempt to find Blue Whales. Eventually we located 4 superb individuals, but the conditions were not conducive to photography, and with some on the boat beginning to suffer, we headed back hoping for calmer conditions tomorrow. A large pod of Spinner Dolphins ( maybe 500 strong ) entertained us on the return journey. Afternoon of brief shopping, and then exploration of one last forest reserve, in the hope of one more mammal...

9<sup>th</sup> Mar: Conditions were much better today, and in addition to the Spinner Dolphins again, we found 2+ Blue Whales which gave a series of super views over several hours. Bridled & Sooty Terns, a Long-tailed Skua and a Red-billed Tropicbird were notable. We then drove

back to Colombo, experienced the fearsome traffic jams on the way to the airport hotel, where we had a farewell dinner.



Blue Whale.

### **Birds:**

It became apparent as we completed the first few days, that attempting a serious bird and mammal list on one trip is a demanding exercise. We all were exhausted at various points due to irregular patterns ( and lack ) of sleep ! Nevertheless, we found all 33 endemic birds, and virtually all of the other key species. A final total of 248 species was a fine effort, in the circumstances !

### **Mammals:**

Indian Hare - *Lepus nigricollis* Pleasantly common, with the best numbers and most showy individuals at Yala N.P. Seen on 11 days.

Sri Lankan Giant Squirrel - *Ratufa macroura* This impressive squirrel was seen in all three races – the montane and wet zone races being much more strongly marked. Seen on 8 days.

Indian Palm Squirrel - *Funambulus palmarum* The most common and widespread Squirrel.  
Noted on all days except three...

Sri Lankan Flameback Squirrel - *Funambulus layardi* Sometimes called Layard's Squirrel.  
This forest species was only seen at Sinharaja, and  
was shy and elusive. 3 individuals seen over 2 days.

Dusky-striped Jungle Squirrel - *Funambulus sublineatus* Recorded in small numbers on 6  
days. Found in the highlands and rainforest areas.

Indian Giant Flying Squirrel - *Petaurista philippensis* 2 individuals found at dusk at Sigiriya  
on the 21<sup>st</sup>.

Travancore Flying Squirrel - *Petinomys fuscocapillus* One individual found as we returned  
after dark on the main track at Sinharaja on Mar 1<sup>st</sup>.  
A potentially tricky species.

( Eastern ) House Mouse - *Mus musculus* Small mammal traps set in Nuwara Eliya  
produced 3 individuals, and 1 was seen on 4<sup>th</sup>.

Black ( House ) Rat - *Rattus rattus* The small mammal traps produced 2 individuals.

Brown Rat - *Rattus norvegicus* One was seen on 26<sup>th</sup> at a small rubbish dump while  
looking for Slaty-legged Crake !

Nillu Rat - *Rattus montanus* One of the biggest surprises, was the finding of this little  
known species on the Horton Plains on 25<sup>th</sup>. Even Udithe  
had only seen this on a few occasions.

Indian Gerbil - *Tatera indica* Not as easy as we had expected, but we recorded 5 or 6 on  
night drives outside Yala N.P.

Indian Crested Porcupine - *Hystrix indica* We were fortunate to find 2 individuals – on 20<sup>th</sup>  
and 25<sup>th</sup>, both during prolonged night walks.

Small Indian Civet - *Vivvericula indica* A total of 4 were seen, 2 around Sigiriya and 2  
around Yala N.P.



Dusky-striped Jungle Squirrel.

Jungle Cat - *Felis chaus* We recorded 3 in total, with a young animal just after dawn at Sigiriya on 20<sup>th</sup> giving excellent views.

Rusty-spotted Cat - *Felis rubiginosa* One was seen briefly on the night drive on 20<sup>th</sup> and an amazing black morph individual gave great views on 21<sup>st</sup>. This was the first of this morph that Udithe had seen.

Fishing Cat - *Felis viverrina* One ran across the road at dawn on the way to the Horton Plains on 25<sup>th</sup>, and another was spotlighted at a pool outside Yala N.P. on 3<sup>rd</sup>. Both views were unfortunately brief – the latter especially frustrating, as it was flushed by feral Buffalo !

Leopard - *Panthera pardus* After much searching we finally found 2 individuals at Yala N.P. on 6<sup>th</sup>. Sightings are apparently 'guaranteed' in August when the vegetation is much sparser.... certainly if Leopard is a high priority, it may pay to go in the drier season.

Indian Grey Mongoose - *Herpestes edwardsii* A total of 6 seen at scattered sites, often giving excellent views.



Indian Grey Mongoose.

Ruddy Mongoose - *Herpestes smithii* The commonest of the Mongooses. Seen on 7 days.

Indian Brown Mongoose - *Herpestes fuscus* We struggled with this species, eventually finding one at a rubbish dump near Sinharaja. Even this one was uncooperative and only 2 of us saw it !

Golden Jackal - *Canis aureus* Seemingly much shyer than the ones I've seen in India, we only saw 2, both around Yala N.P.

Indian Flying Fox - *Pteropus giganteus* Seen on 4 days. Huge numbers at some roost trees being very impressive.

Greater Short-nosed Fruit Bat - *Cynopterus sphinx* 2+ seen on 21<sup>st</sup>.

Lesser Short-nosed Fruit Bat - *Cynopterus brachyotis* Tens of thousands ( millions ? ) emerging from a cave near Embilipitiya on 2<sup>nd</sup> was an awesome sight !



Leschenault's Rousette - *Rousettus leschenaulti* Another species emerging in thousands from the cave on the 2<sup>nd</sup>. Less numerous than the above species....

Kelaart's Pipistrelle - *Pipistrellus ceylonicus* c.8 on 19<sup>th</sup> at Sigiriya.

Indian Pipistrelle - *Pipistrellus coromandra* Recorded on 3 days while at Sigiriya – roosting in holes in the brickwork in the dining area at the hotel !

Black-bearded Tomb Bat - *Taphozous melanopogon* At least 2 seen and photographed in a mixed roost at Sigiriya on 20<sup>th</sup> & 21<sup>st</sup>.

Theobold's Tomb Bat - *Taphozous theoboldi* 2+ found at a roost in a rock crack on 20<sup>th</sup>.

Lesser False Vampire Bat - *Megaderma spasma* Seen on the 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> with excellent views and photographs on the latter.

Woolly Horseshoe Bat - *Rhinolophus luctus* 100+ roosting in disused buildings on 20<sup>th</sup>, gave good views.

Rufous Horseshoe Bat - *Rhinolophus rouxii* At least 5 of these distinctive bats were with the Woolly's above.

Dusky Roundleaf Bat - *Hipposideros ater* 1+ found on 2<sup>nd</sup>.

Indian Roundleaf Bat - *Hipposideros lankadiva* 2 of these large bats were in the mixed roost on the 20<sup>th</sup> & 21<sup>st</sup>.

Schneider's Leaf-nosed Bat - *Hipposideros speoris* A distinctive rufous species in the roost On the 20<sup>th</sup> & 21<sup>st</sup>. About 8 seen in total.

Cantor's Leaf-nosed Bat - *Hipposideros galeritus* The most numerous bat at the mixed roost ( 20<sup>th</sup> & 21<sup>st</sup> ) At least 50 individuals on each occasion.

Hasselt's Myotis - *Myotis hasselti* One seen on the 28<sup>th</sup> was our only record.

Grey Slender Loris - *Loris lydekkerianus* At least 2 gave great views on a night walk on 20<sup>th</sup>. A personal highlight !.



Black-bearded Tomb Bat. ( K. Baker )

Toque Macaque - *Macaca sinica* Common endemic Macaque, seen on 10 days.

Tufted Grey Langur - *Semnopithecus priam* Widespread and at times common, especially around Yala N.P. Seen on 8 days.

Purple-faced Leaf Monkey - *Trachypithecus vetulus* Seen on 6 days in various places – we eventually recorded all 4 sub-species.

Eurasian Wild Boar - *Sus scrofa* Seen in groups especially around Yala N.P.

White-spotted Chevrotain - *Moschiola meminna* A total of 6 seen – 5 on 20<sup>th</sup>, 1 on 21<sup>st</sup>.

Sambar - *Cervus unicolor* Surprisingly quite scarce; a total of 7 seen on 4 days.

Chital - *Axis axis* Recorded on 8 days – most numerous at Yala N.P.

Wild Buffalo - *Bubalus arnee* Notably different from their feral cousins, we found groups at Wasgamuwa N.P. & Yala N.P.

Feral Water Buffalo - *Bubalus bubalis* Seen in greater numbers than Wild Buffalo in both localities.

Asian Elephant - *Elaphus maximus* Seen at Wasgamuwa, Udawalawa & Yala N.Ps.  
One of the signature mammals of a trip to Sri Lanka !

Blue Whale - *Balaenoptera musculus* Our whale watching trips yielded at least 6 animals on the 8<sup>th</sup> & 9<sup>th</sup>. Given good weather there seems a very high chance of seeing these magnificent creatures.

Spinner Dolphin - *Stenella longirostris* Large numbers ( c.500 ) were seen on both days of the whale watching trips.

Shrew sp. - A shrew seen at night in the forest on 25<sup>th</sup> unfortunately did not give good enough views for us to attempt an identification...

#### **Stuff we missed:**

Despite amassing a record breaking total during the trip, we still failed to connect with several species. We had a near miss with an Asian Palm Civet that Udithe had brief views of, though none of us could see more than the leaves moving ! Surprisingly, we failed to encounter any of the possible mice or Greater Bandicoot Rat ( other than a freshly dead one ) around Sigiriya, and we had no luck with the Golden Palm Civets or the Brown Palm Civet. Stripe-necked Mongoose seems to have become elusive at Yala, possibly due to the large number of visitors – as night drives are not permitted inside the park, the best bet may be

drives outside – but we failed despite considerable effort. Indian Muntjac was another expected species that we just failed to find – there always seems to be one ! According to Udithe, we heard Red Slender Loris on two occasions, but unfortunately they were not close enough for us to stand a chance of finding them in either case. Finally Sloth Bears were not being reported at all during our time at Yala. Their appearance in daytime seems to be linked to the fruiting of certain trees, and May is considered to be the most favourable time of year. 51 species of identified mammals is well beyond what we had hoped for, and totally due to the skill and hard work of Udithe – whoever beats it will need little sleep, or to ignore the birds.



Asian Elephant.

Steve Davis, Karen Baker, Cat Rayner & Kenny Ross - 2012.