

Sri Lanka, August 3-20, 2013.

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Sri Lanka has been well covered by trip reports over the years, but most of them describe winter trips, so here is a summertime supplement.

Visiting SL in August has its advantages: the weather is really good (there were only a few brief showers the whole time), and larger wildlife in dry-zone parks is concentrated around watering holes. Rodents and particularly shrews are apparently easier to see. But some mammals (lorises, palm civets, pangolins) are much more difficult to find than during the rest of the year. A few bat roosts mentioned in winter-time trip reports were empty or nearly empty. Also, there are no regular whalewatching trips in summer; you can organize one through larger hotels in Mirissa, but it would be prohibitively expensive unless you have a large group. An alternative is going out with a fishing boat, but that's also a bit difficult.

The moon was almost full on the last night of the trip. I didn't notice any difference in mammalian activity related to moonlight, except for red slender lorises, which showed up only in the last hour of the night, after the moon had set. For everything else (including grey slender lorises), it seemed to me that moonlit nights were actually better. Another unexpected observation was that grey slender lorises seemed to be more tolerant of white light than red light. Perhaps they have learned to associate red light with pesky mammal-watchers and unpleasant camera flashes.

My wife Nastia accompanied me on this trip, except for the last few days. We made a couple of beach stopovers, but it proved to be beneficial from wildlife-viewing point of view: in hotel gardens we found many birds and some mammals that we would probably have missed otherwise.

It looks like all mammal-watchers visiting the island use the same company and the same person for guiding and transportation. We were on a very tight budget, and generally enjoy being totally independent and finding animals ourselves, so we simply rented a car and drove around. Driving in SL is excruciatingly slow (40-50 kph in the lowlands, 20-30 kph in the highlands, 100 kph on the pleasantly empty new freeway from Galle to the southern outskirts of Colombo) and takes some getting used to, but it's not nearly as bad as in India, winter-time Russia or parts of Africa. We saw only one serious accident the whole time. I think the country will become a perfect wildlife-viewing destination as soon as the freeway network is completed (supposedly around 2020). We originally booked a compact car, but got upgraded to a Toyota Prius; that had some unforeseen consequences I'll mention below.

The downside of visiting without a guide was that nighttime access to some parks was difficult to arrange. I'll share some tips below (and won't share a few others).

I had ten brand-new Sherman traps with me, but seldom had a chance to use them because I didn't have trapping permits for any nature reserves. In three nights when I did set the traps, I caught only one mouse of the most common species. One trap got stepped on by an elephant, but I managed to fix it. Spotlighting for rodents, however, proved amazingly effective. I also had a device I had recently invented, called SOREX (Sound Reception Enhancing X-thing) which proved useful for locating small mammals, particularly shrews. Unfortunately, the device looks extremely embarrassing, and can't be used when there are people around. I will only describe it privately, and only to those who will swear on their children's health to keep the description secret. Another little tool I had was a mouse squeaker. I accidentally lost my old rubber squeaker just before the trip, and had to buy a more expensive plastic replacement that proved almost totally useless; carnivores didn't react to it at all.

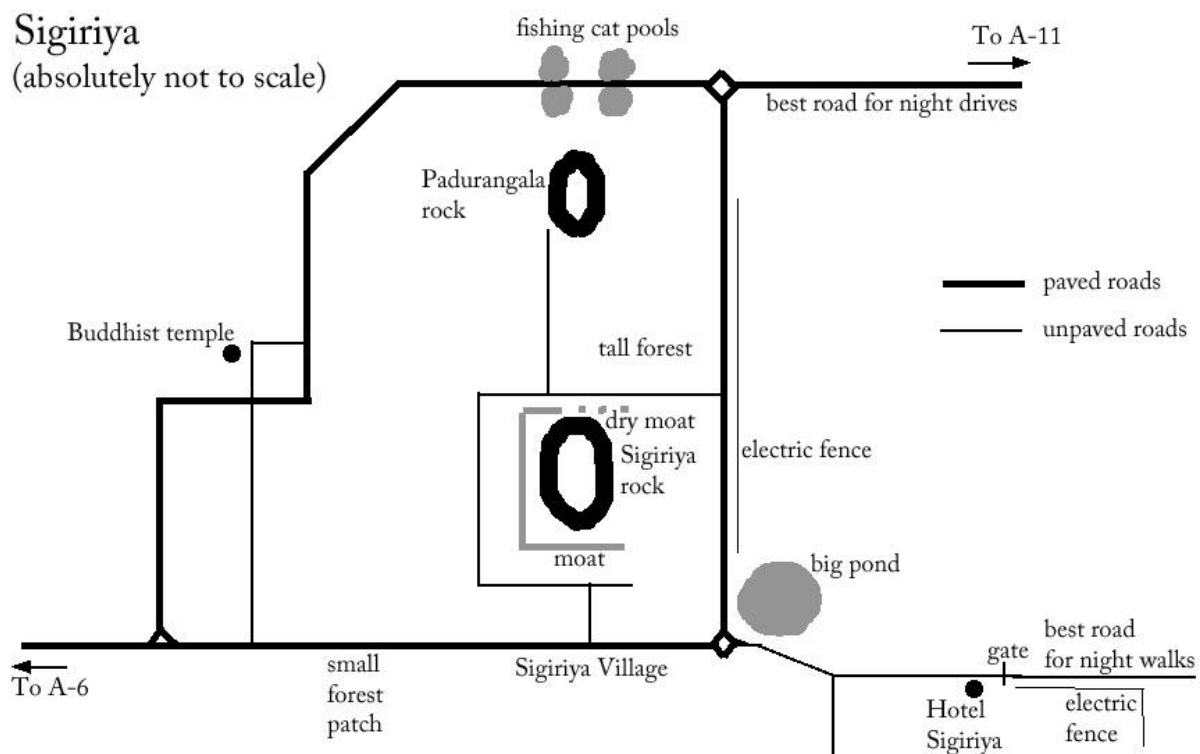
Overall, SL was the easiest place to find wildlife of all Asian countries I have visited. I credit it to the locals' friendly attitude towards nature: there is little poaching, virtually no cage bird trade, and the network of nature reserves is excellent by Asian standards. SL still has a huge elephant population, and the world's highest rate of death from snakebite. I think India used to be like that a few decades ago, but overpopulation and market economy have largely destroyed the unique balance of people and nature there. In addition to mammals, I saw all endemic birds except one (SL bay-owl) with little special effort.

The people of SL seriously consider it their patriotic duty to make every foreign tourist happy, and go out of their way to help you. The road police would sometimes pull you over, then notice that you are a foreigner, ask if you need any help, and let you go, even if you've been driving at twice the speed limit. The attempts to rip you off are so rare and obvious that they seem almost charming. There is very little crime in general. SL is probably the only country between Saudi Arabia and Japan where a suitcase left in the street might not disappear within five seconds. If you are planning a long trip to other Asian countries, consider including a few short visits to SL in your schedule for healing purposes.

SL has five climate zones (arid, dry, transitional, wet and montane). Dry and arid zones have wildlife more similar to southern India, while most endemics are concentrated in wetter areas and the mountains. Widespread species often have highly distinctive dry-zone and wet-zone races, with numerous variations to that pattern (for example, purple-faced langur has dry zone, montane, western wet zone, and southern wet zone races). In the cases when such variation is absent (i. e. in palm squirrel), I suspect that the range has recently expanded due to anthropogenic habitat modification. The races often look so different that some zoologists have jumped at a chance to "split" them into full species, often with totally insufficient justification and no attempt to check the situation in transitional areas. Pending a molecular study, I consider all SL chevrotains conspecific with Indian ones, and, of course, I don't take seriously the pathetic

attempt to split golden palm civet into three (!) species based on a handful of specimens, very poorly examined. That species might even be conspecific with the brown palm civet of southern India. Leopards of the highlands are said to be almost always black, while in the lowlands black leopards are pretty much unheard of.

Sigiriya. This ancient rock fortress in the dry zone is probably the island's most popular tourist destination, but the surrounding area is also very popular for mammal watching, thanks in part to some good paved roads through remnant forests. We spent a few days there. It took me a while to figure out where the best roads for spotlighting are (see map).



The best road for night walks is the one leading to Hotel Sigiriya. Beyond the hotel it is closed to vehicles at night due to high elephant activity. For the first 500 m of the closed part there is an electric fence on one side, so if you are attacked by an elephant (which is very unlikely, no matter what the locals tell you) you can simply roll underneath the fence. There is a gap of about 50 cm below the lowest wire; even if you get shocked, it's not as bad as you might think (I've survived more than one shock a few years ago while sneaking out of camps in Corbett NP). Anyway, I saw a total of eleven elephants while driving or walking at night around Sigiriya, and all were perfectly well-behaved. Along the closed part of the road I saw a common muntjac, a small, long-nosed grey-and-white shrew that I identified as **Horsefield's shrew** (*Crocidura horsefieldi*), a golden palm civet, and one non-cooperative grey slender loris. The short part of that road before the hotel looks totally trashed, but that was where I saw the only

cooperative lorises of the trip. The hotel has recently undergone renovation, so the hotel grounds are no longer good for any mammals except tufted grey langur, toque macaque, Indian giant squirrel and both species of *Cynopterus* fruit-bats (in fruiting fig trees). The place is still good for birding.

The best road for night drives is the road that branches off Sigiriya Road about halfway between Sigiriya and A6 highway and ends at A11 junction (see map). I drove it many times, and saw two common palm civets, four or five Indian civets, one juvenile golden jackal carrying an unidentified rat (probably a white-tailed), two fishing cats, a dozen black-naped hares, a few elephants, and the eyeshine of a few chital. Toyota Prius proved to be a good car for night drives on paved roads: at low speed it is so quiet that with windows down you can sometimes hear rodents running through dry leaves in roadside woods. But it makes annoying beeping sounds when in reverse, and the radio turns on automatically when you shift back to forward. Walking in the forests along that road, I found two white-tailed rats (*Cremnomys blanfordi*) under fruiting fig trees, and a few Indian field mice (*Mus booduga*), mostly in clearings. The latter species was amazingly abundant in all habitats around Sigiriya during our stay there: I saw these tiny mice while spotlighting on foot, during night drives, and trapped one near our hotel (the only other mammals around the hotel were palm squirrels and one grey mongoose). Other people have seen rusty-spotted cats along the northern part of this road, but I saw only feral cats (one looked like it could be a 2nd generation hybrid).

The best forest in the area is a patch of tall primary forest between Sigiriya and Pidurangala granite outcrops. The side facing the moat is good for grey giant flying squirrel and SL bicolored spiny mouse (*M. mayori*; look for it around fallen logs). Hollow trees contain small colonies of greater false vampire bats. Almost-dry ponds in the unfilled part of the moat are regularly visited by ruddy mongooses during the day, and by painted bats at night. There is a very conspicuous afternoon roost of tufted grey langurs near the end of the filled part of the moat. This place is also excellent for birding and herping. The bat roosts in Pidurangala temples were almost vacant: I found only one great and one Schneider's leaf-nosed bats at night, and none during the day. The tunnel behind the reclining Buddha statue has been almost completely filled with bricks.

Dambulla. This town is famous for its cave temples. They are probably the most impressive “cultural” site in SL, but, unfortunately, they have no bats, just some toque macaques around.

An excellent place for spotlighting on foot is Popham Arboretum, located on Kandalama Rd. 3 km east of Dambulla (the sign is easy to miss). You can drive there from Sigiriya in less than an hour. It is the only protected area on the island where the personnel doesn't throw a fit if you ask to be allowed to spotlight by yourself. There is a network of color-marked trails; the yellow one is reportedly best for lorises, the blue one for cats and the red one for pangolins,

while the green trail is good for everything. I walked all trails alone and with the park biologist, and saw five Indian chevrotains, one Indian civet, three wild boars, a few very shy chital deer, and the eyeshine of two grey slender lorises in about six hours. In other times of year you can reportedly see up to thirty lorises per night, and one pangolin per week. During the day there was one very shy purple-faced langur in a band of toque macaques; the rest of its original group had probably been poached.

Minneriya National Park. A dry-forest park between Sigiriya and Polonnaruwa, famous for the annual gathering of elephants (up to 200) on the shores of the park lake. The gathering happens in August, mostly in late afternoons, and attracts a lot of tourists (but not as many as Yala). After a heated discussion with the park personnel we found that it is technically legal to self-drive there without a guide (although nobody ever does it). We did it and found Toyota Prius to be totally unfit even for very good dirt roads due to low clearance. Later we came to the conclusion that this car is generally unfit for SL roads.

There were dozens of very approachable elephants around the lake, and a few wild buffalo that looked closer to the “golden standard” of Kaziranga than those in Yala, probably because there are no feral buffalo in Minneriya. (Note: I have only seen Kaziranga buffalo on photos. The status of “wild” buffalo in SL is a subject of much debate, with most experts considering them to be ferals. I suspect that many of those experts have never seen the animals in question; the fact that they can remain distinct from “obviously feral” buffalo in places of regular contact such as Yala is, in my opinion, a strong argument against them being feral.)

The surrounding forest was amazingly devoid of wildlife: we saw only one white-tailed rat and one SL spurfowl on our drive back to the exit just before the closing time (which is 6 pm).

Polonnaruwa. Mostly known as a historic site, the city has a nice patch of dry forest on the eastern shore of the lake (accessible by driving along the dam), across the road from Sudu Araliya Hotel. I spent an hour spotlighting there and saw two Indian chevrotains and one Asian long-tailed tree mouse (*Vandeleuria oleracea*); I also heard some grey slender lorises. There was a small bat in the forest that kept flying along the flashlight beam, sometimes landing for a second or two on shrub branches to eat its catch. I eventually managed to get a good look at it and saw that, just as I had suspected, it was a common tube-nosed bat. I saw a couple of bats behaving in the same way around Sigiriya and think they were the same species. During the day we found one purple-faced langur with a baby in Island Gardens area, and a huge colony of fulvous fruit bats in Lankatilaka Temple.

Kandi. We stopped at one of numerous “spice gardens” along Dambulla-Kandi road, and found some Indian giant squirrels of intermediate type, plus one **Hasselt’s myotis** in the office. I don’t remember the name of the place, but the sign said “Spice garden number one”.

Nuwara Eliya. The highest city in SL, it has an excellent botanical garden and a large urban park. Unfortunately, on the way from Kandi we blew a tire, and I wasted all afternoon looking for replacement, only to learn that Toyota Prius uses a rare size that can’t be found anywhere in SL outside Colombo. We had to drive on a tiny spare wheel for the rest of the trip; it was very unnerving and made the clearance even lower. I managed to spend half an hour in downtown Victoria Park after sunset and saw a roof rat there. (Note: the systematics of *Rattus rattus* complex are in flux; it is likely that rats of SL highlands should be called *R. kelaarti*.)

Horton Plains National Park. The best mammal-watching park on the island (unless you are biased towards larger species), it has at least five of SL’s six endemic shrews, plus Kelaart’s shrew which is much more difficult to find in India. The gate opens at 6 am; you have to be there no later than 5:30 to make sure you are the first in line, because that enhances your chances a lot. Gate areas are also good for wildlife, so it wouldn’t hurt to be there even earlier. The park can be approached from either Nuwara Eliya or Ohiya. Ohiya road is much better because it has virtually zero traffic and passes through lots of native forest as opposed to eucalyptus plantations. The entrance gate on Ohiya side is often not manned and left open at night, but there’s no reason to break the law since there is some excellent habitat outside that gate as well.

Park grasslands (that look like typical paramos) are good for sambar deer (some very tame) and wild boar, while Nillu rat (*R. montanus*), Ohiya rat (*Srilankamys ohiensis*) and purple-faced langur can be seen crossing the road in native forests along Ohiya road, particularly near the entrance gate. Toque macaques of the highland race hang out around the small Hindu temple on Ohiya road.

Most people come to Horton Plains to hike to the viewpoint called World’s End. The view is pretty but not worth the trip (almost any road turn in the Himalaya has better vistas); however, the hike is very pleasant and there’s a lot of endemic flora and fauna in addition to shrews. The viewpoint is reached by a loop trail; the shorter approach is almost all forested, while the longer approach passes through grasslands, dense cloud forest and some deep ravines. We started with the longer side of the loop; it proved to be a good choice because shrews were still active in the grasslands at dawn, and also because we saw virtually no people for the first hour (almost everybody walks the loop in the opposite direction). But if you miss the two rat spp. while driving to the park, it might be better to start with the more forested shorter side of the loop. Note that it’s illegal to bring any plastic wraps or bottles on the trail; local tourists are even searched at the trailhead.

We ended up seeing four shrew species in the park! It was only the second time in my life that I saw four shrew spp. in one day, the first time having been on Nyiragongo Volcano. A coal-black, white-footed shrew that I think was **Kelaart's shrew** (*Feroculus feroculus*) was moving through the tall grass along a small stream just a few hundred meters from the trailhead. Fast, brown-colored SL long-tailed shrews (*C. miya*) were running between tussocks in marshy grasslands along lakeshores, and could be easily located because their movement was shaking dewdrops off the grass. You have to lie down to see them under the tussocks, so bring a rain jacket! In the deep ravine below the big waterfall there was yet another shrew, slowly moving between boulders. It was very dark and didn't have white feet, so I decided it was **Pearson's shrew** (*Solisorex pearsoni*). This place also had SL whistling-thrush, and I saw a dusky-striped squirrel a couple hundred meters down the trail from there.

Another Nilu rat was hiding under the wooden platform at the second viewpoint (called Little World's End), peeking out when there were no people around. On the shorter side of the loop we saw a small group of "bear monkeys" (the highland race of purple-faced langur); they looked even more haystack-like than those we saw along the access road). I also briefly saw a tiny dark-colored shrew at the end of one of numerous short trails leading into the forest that are made by diarrhea-stricken tourists. Unless it was a juvenile of some other species, it had to be SL pygmy shrew (*Suncus fellowes-gordonii*).

The most surprising mammal of the day was an Indian civet we saw in broad daylight near the entrance gate on Ohiya side. It was twice the normal size (I first thought it was a large fishing cat), very fluffy and cool-looking. I think it's only a matter of time before some unscrupulous soul describes this form as yet another "new species" based on a couple of specimens.

There is another trail that leads to the island's second highest peak, it's 4 miles long and is said to be better for dusky-striped squirrel and leopard.

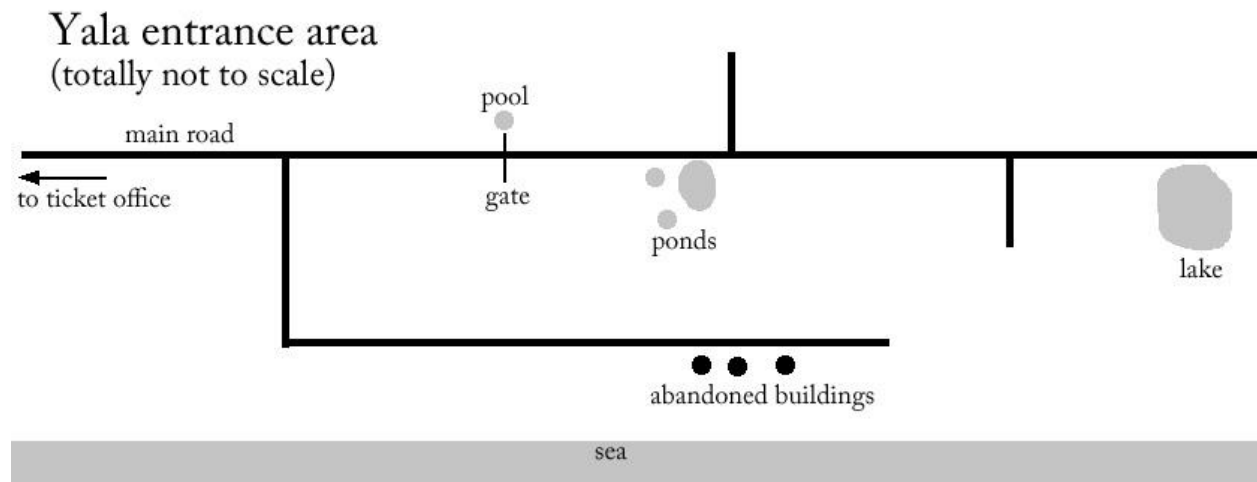
Velegama. We stopped in a barely-open roadside hotel in this little town directly below World's End. The place proved outstandingly good for birding, and had both species of yellow bats under the roof (the colony was not accessible, but you could see them emerging).

Tangalle. By the time we got there, Nastia was so exhausted from long drives through the mountains that I left her there for a couple days and went to Yala alone. We didn't see any mammals in Tangalle, but the hotel owner reported seeing dolphins (presumably Indo-Pacific bottle-nosed) right offshore in winter months. We saw a huge green sea turtle on the beach at night.

Yala National Park. The most popular national park in SL, it is also the only place outside Africa where seeing a leopard is relatively easy, August reportedly being the best month. People also see sloth bears there sometimes (I didn't). It is located in one of the two truly arid parts of SL (Wilpattu NP is in the other such area).

The access road is said to be good for night drives, but I didn't see anything there except for some chital, a few Indian gerbils, over twenty black-naped hares (the area around the park headquarters had the most of them), one Indian civet, and one scorpion of the size I would never have thought possible.

I got to the entrance gate (see map) and talked the guards into letting me sleep there. There is a tiny pool near the gate, frequented by chital and Indian porcupine (I saw the latter just before dawn). **Kelaart's pipistrelles** and great horseshoe bats feed around the lights and would sometimes hang under the roof for a second or two.



After midnight I walked into the park a little bit. Soon after the gate there were a few ponds, guarded by thick-knees and full of mugger crocs. The birds gave loud alarm calls as I was passing by. A few minutes later I heard them calling again, returned to the ponds and briefly saw a leopard walking along the forest edge on the other side. The rest of the walk produced only more chital, hares, Indian civets, and gerbils, plus a few wild buffalo.

I returned to the gate and walked in the opposite direction. Soon I found a road branching off towards the coast. This road is too rough for night drives, but is fantastic for walks (and I strongly suspect that it is legal to walk there at night). In less than an hour, I found an Indian pangolin by the sniffing sound (they don't have eyeshine), five Indian civets, more hares, three wild boars, and a few feral buffalo. There were also countless Indian gerbils; I patiently kept checking every small eyeshine and every rustling sound, and was finally rewarded for my persistence when one rodent proved to be not a gerbil, but a very rare SL spiny mouse (*M. fernandoni*). On the way back to the gate I saw a small red eye in very dense shrubs. After futile attempts to see what it was I used my mouse squeaker on it... and, to my great amusement, a

huge male elephant walked out of the shrubs to investigate. Most animals have their camouflage broken by artificial lights at night, but elephants always look flat and uniformly grey in flashlight beam, as if cut out of cardboard.

I was in the first jeep to enter the park at dawn, but it didn't give me much advantage: the only mammals to see were more chital, elephants, buffalo and boar, plus one ruddy mongoose. Soon the park roads filled with hundreds of jeeps, all looking for leopards. Once in a while someone would spot a leopard crossing a road or walking past a pond; all drivers would get notified by phone and rush to that place, creating the worse traffic jams I've ever seen in any park other than Ngorongoro and Yosemite. I soon got tired of this circus and persuaded the driver to go to more remote parts of the park, where we saw about twenty huge muggers engaged in spectacular cooperative fishing in a small pond.

Bundala. This small town off the highway leading to Yala is surrounded by a nature reserve created for wintering flamingos and other waterbirds. The roads in this area have too much traffic, except for a brief window between midnight and 4 am. During that time I saw a common palm civet, a jungle cat, and a pair of distant eyes that almost certainly belonged to a fishing cat. At dawn I spotted an otter crossing a dyke. It was very small for a Eurasian otter; if it was an adult, that would make SL otter another candidate for pseudo-scientific splitting.

Sinharaja. This rainforest reserve has three entrances: one on the northern side, one in the south and one in the east, the latter at much higher elevation. Most people use the northern entrance, which reportedly has an excellent trail network. Unfortunately, the logistics of our route forced us to use the southern side.

We pre-booked the only hotel at the southern entrance, but all people (about ten) we asked for directions gave us wrong advice, so we ended up driving all the way to the high-elevation entrance. The road there is really bad (a steep, narrow chain of switchbacks), and we got there at dusk, only to find out that we had to go all the way back. It wasn't a total loss of time because we saw a dark-brown, big-eared shrew that was most likely the recently described Sinharaja shrew (*C. hikmiya*) and some nice birds along the way, plus rare pygmy lizards in the temple at the pass. We finally found our way to the southern entrance, only to discover that the last 4 km were tuk-tuk only (tuk-tuk is SL word for a moto tricycle). We left the car at a friendly local's house and got to the hotel just before midnight.

The hotel was terribly overpriced, and it was the only place in SL where we had to resist constant attempts to rip us off. The forest can only be visited with a guide – a ridiculous requirement considering that the main trail is heavily used by local villagers on foot and on motorbike. Our guide knew the roosting sites of beautiful pit vipers, but was otherwise useless.

At night the guide was not available at all. I walked into the forest a bit, but saw only two nocturnal mammals the whole time: a SL long-tailed tree mouse (*V. nolthenii*) near the first treefall clearing, and a black, chunky, short-tailed shrew that I think was SL mountain shrew (*Suncus montanus*) in the place named “rock wall” on the trail map at the entrance. During the day there were toque macaques, purple-faced langurs of southern lowland race, and one dusky-striped squirrel, plus amazing numbers of Indian giant squirrels (obvious only at dawn) of the striking black-and-white race. A little garbage dump across the trail from the entrance booth had a shy stripe-necked mongoose at dawn. Birds were marginally better; I found a pair of very tame SL frogmouths and a few other goodies.

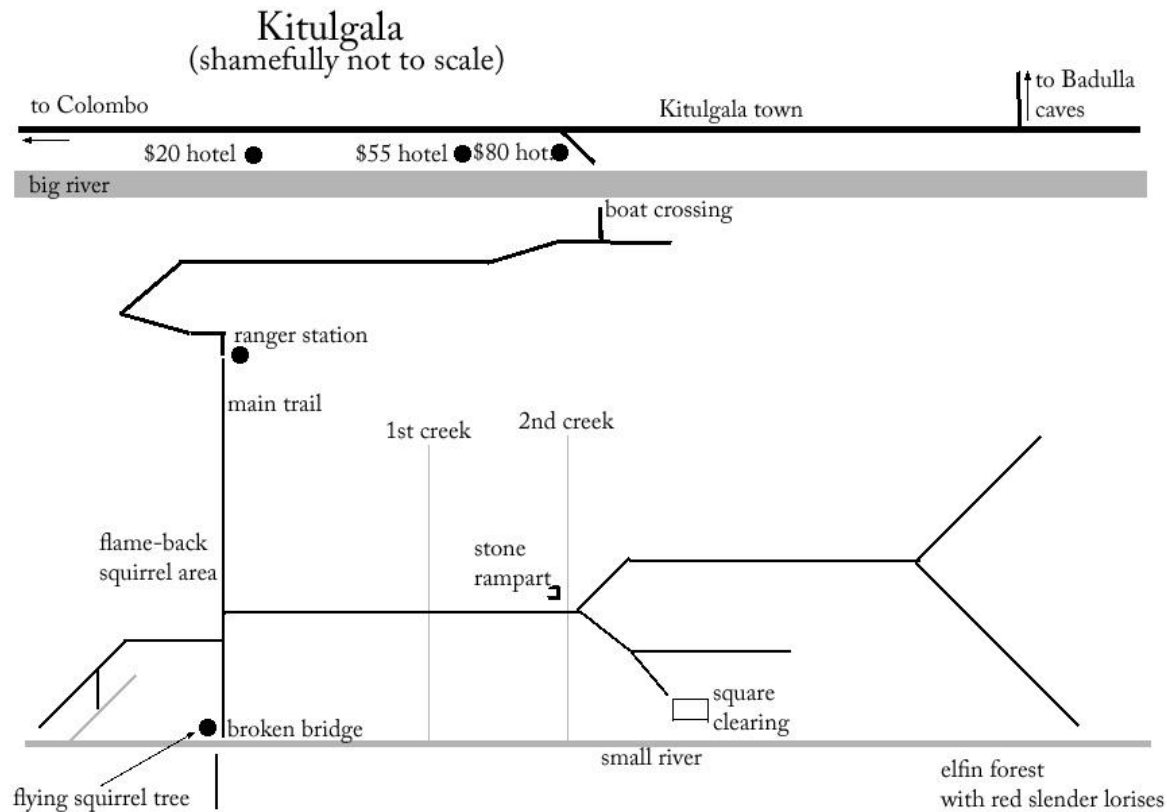
The guide told me that he had seen a black leopard at the forest edge near the research camp about a month before our visit, and that wild boar can often be seen there.

Bentota. A resort town on the southwestern coast where we stopped for Nastia’s last day in SL. It proved surprisingly good for birding, and also for brown mongoose: we saw three in one afternoon, all near the nice hotel called White Villa where we were staying. Indian flying fox was also common there. I also spotted a house mouse (presumably *M. musculus* sensu stricto) in a gutter.

Wilpattu National Park. Before the civil war, this huge arid park on the northwestern coast was much better than Yala: it was possible to see numerous leopards every day and watch them for hours at a time. Now the guards sadly informed me that there had been no bear or leopard sightings in three weeks prior to my visit.

I decided not to spend money on a jeep safari, but to do some nighttime self-driving on roads along the southern border of the park. It was a good choice: after just 20 minutes, I found a rusty-spotted cat sleeping in a tree junction (unfortunately, it was too high above ground for my camera to focus). Otherwise the fauna was similar to Yala (chital, wild boar, black-naped hare, wild and feral buffalo, elephant, ruddy mongoose and Indian civet), but I also saw an Indian chevrotain and a bush rat (*Golunda ellioti*).

Kitulgala. A small town just 2.5 hours from Colombo, it has a great nature reserve across the river, with some of the best hill rainforest in SL (see map). It is OK to walk the excellent trail system without a guide, and the guards don’t mind you staying in the forest for a couple hours after sunset or before sunrise, but being allowed to spotlight overnight requires some negotiating skills. Also, the boat for river crossing operates only from 5 am to 6 pm, unless you pay extra.



In addition to toque macaque, western-race purple-faced langur, wild boar, and Indian giant squirrel, I found a flame-backed squirrel (look in mixed bird flocks), red slender loris (some hiking required; binoculars needed since these stay higher above ground than grey slender lorises), Travancore flying squirrel (it flew across the river after taking off from a tree that looked like it could be its regular crossing point), golden palm civet of the brown morph (it briefly visits the bird feeder at the ranger station at least once per night if rice is provided), and a dark-colored shrew that I think was SL jungle shrew (*Suncus zeylanicus*) in a stone rampart that looked like an old bridge foundation. The forest has excellent birding, and you can see many endemic fish species, some very colorful, in the small river and the artificial pond at the ranger station.

There are three hotels in town, ranging in price from 15 to 80 USD per night. Each one is overpriced in its own way. The middle one, called Rafter's Retreat, has soft-furred field rats (*Millardia meltada*) around cabins, **Tickell's bats** living in the dining terrace roof, and Indian pipistrelles in the boarded-up building facing the highway. Its grounds are also good for birding.

About 1 km up the road from the hotels there is a turnout to Badulla Caves. The road to the caves is too bad even for a jeep, but can be accessed by a long tuk-tuk ride through rubber plantations. Along the road there are a few small caves where I found a shy bat that I think was a common bentwing. At the end of the road there are two large caves. The deeper cave had Indian

cave swiftlets, black-bearded sheath-tailed bats, fulvous fruit bats, one long-winged sheath-tailed bat and one rufous horseshoe bat. The second cave had two very large bats that I think were great leaf-nosed bats. Look for chestnut-backed owlets near cave entrances. A family of Veddhas (SL's original inhabitants, belonging to Australo-Papuan race) lives in the forest below the caves; this is probably the only place where you can see these remarkable people without a difficult trip to a remote area in the east of the island.

Negombo. This town is located just north of the airport. I arranged going out on a fishing boat in an attempt to see Bryde's whale (I've never seen one up close). We went out for about three hours and had to turn back due to rough seas. All we saw was a distant spout and dorsal fin of a blue whale, an even more distant pod of spinner dolphins, remarkable absence of seabirds, and a beautiful apparition of a dwarf sperm whale, suspended in a huge wave about to crash on our bow. If not for that lucky view angle, I would never be able to see it. I hadn't seen a *Kogia* before, and hadn't realized they were that cryptic. But people spot them regularly on whalewatching trips off SL and the Maldives, which makes me think there are probably thousands of them around. I wonder if they have some kind of acoustic signature that would allow estimating their actual abundance.

South of the town there is a large lagoon, surrounded by mangroves, swamps and patches of forest. I spent half an hour there before my flight home, and saw an Indian chevrotain, intermediate in appearance between dry-zone and wet-zone races. There were also saltwater crocs and a very tame Nepalese eagle owl. Until the last moment, I was hoping to see some house shrews (there are three distinctive races in SL), but this species, supposed to be the island's commonest shrew, proved elusive.

Then I had a long, difficult talk with the car hire company representative about the condition of the car... but that's another story.