

Trip Report: Sri Lanka December 2023

I visited Sri Lanka with my wife, daughter, and parents-in-law during December 2023. The itinerary was as follows:

Place near Mirissa: 26-27/12/2023

I was under the impression our hotel could organise Blue Whale whale-watching for us. Sadly, this was not the case – the hotels, at best, just facilitate transfers to the wharf. Bookings must be done yourself, and well in advance!

Yala National Park: 27-30/12/2023

We stayed in Yala National Park for 3 nights, at the XXX. There are no barriers between the lodge and the park, and as a result escorts are required to leave the residential pods at night. Mammals I saw on the grounds were generally **Three-striped Palm Squirrels**, although I did see one **Wild Boar** on one of the nights, and there was an **Asian Elephant** on the beach near the lodge (about 50-100m from the dining area) on the final morning.

I went on one game drive per day. There were 2 game drives allotted per person, but I was generally the only one interested in going (my wife came on the last one), so I was able to go on 3 by using a game drive that my wife was not interested in using. I left my daughter, and on 2 out of 3 drives, my wife, to spend some time with my mother-in-law and father-in-law. My deepest thanks to them for managing the little one so I could go on the game drives.

Most of the game drives seemed to go to Zone 5 of the park. This is an area characterized by relatively open terrain of scrub, grassland, rocky outcrops and wetlands. Unsurprisingly, it is therefore the best place in the park to see the large mammal species present. The first two game drives I went on took place in this zone.

On the first game drive, the first mammals I saw were **Wild Water Buffalo**, soaking in some of the waterholes near the entrance gate. Around 20 minutes later, after some driving and *whisper: birding* the guide found a sounder of **Wild Boar** – they initially looked like piles of small boulders until they got up and walked away from the track back into the scrub. **Ruddy Mongoose** was the next mammal seen, and I saw one individual crossing the track ahead of us. Afterwards, we made our way to a large wetland area where we were treated to the sight of 3 Mugger Crocodiles contesting with each other over a dead buffalo (photo below). The buffalo was apparently a Leopard kill that had been appropriated by the crocodiles, but there was no sign of the original owner.



We hung around some herds of **Chital** on some grassy flats and looked in some rock outcrops that Leopards in the area are known to heavily use. No luck on the Leopard front. Eventually, the guide and driver decided to change tack and pursue a different target, so we went back the way we came, past the wetland, based on some reports of a herd of **Asian Elephants** by the road. We saw them there, a herd of about 6-8 individuals. Half the herd was on each side of the road, and one half eventually crossed to join the other half. They were smaller than I thought they would be, but the herd was composed entirely of females and juveniles. I would see on later game drives that the males (especially with tusks) could be substantially bigger.

Eventually, we ran out of time on the first game drive and had to leave the park, although we picked up **Black-naped Hare** on the way to the park gate and **Tufted Grey Langur** shortly afterwards outside the gate (photos below).



On the second game drive the next day, mammals appeared thinner on the ground. At the time, the park was being subject to some unseasonably heavy rains, and this was resulting in widespread flooding. Many vehicles became bogged on the muddy tracks, and although we avoided this fate, we wound up staying in the park after dark waiting for bogged vehicles ahead of us nearer the entrance gate to be pulled out from the muddy track. During the game drive, I saw more **Wild Water Buffalo** at very close quarters (I could have reached out and touched some of them, although this would undoubtedly be a terrible idea). I also saw, on 2-3 different occasions, solitary “tuskers” (mature male **Asian Elephants** bearing tusks). One of them walked right by the jeep, about 2 m away, after approaching us steadily, head-on, along the track for some time. He was much larger than the females and juveniles, with the top of his back probably about 2.5 m off the ground (see photo below):



The elephants could act unpredictably if the guides and drivers did not act responsibly. Thankfully, mine did. Some other drivers would approach the elephants too closely, rather than allowing them to approach, and one of the elephants ended up reaching into the jeep cabin with its trunk and doing who-knows-what to the guests within as a result. Hopefully nobody was harmed, but our guide and driver quickly moved us away so I did not see what happened afterwards.

We did briefly observe **Chital** and **Wild Boar** again, but as mammals were pretty quiet, the guide focussed a bit more on birds. His ID skills were superb – I must have asked him to identify more than 30 species, including some notoriously difficult ones to

identify like migratory shorebirds, and he did so without batting an eye. We got good looks at more Mugger Crocodiles as well. No luck with Sloth Bears or Leopards.

My wife decided to accompany me on the final game drive, which was on the last afternoon of our stay, for better or for worse (or, as it transpired, both at the same time). The huge amount of rain had caused the normal Zone 5 to be closed. As a result, we went to Zone 1 instead. Our guide knew I really wanted to see a Leopard, and a Sloth Bear if possible, and fortunately there was a reasonable chance of a Leopard sighting in Zone 1. However, it took the better part of an hour just to arrive at the park gate, and we drove through villages, plantations, crops, stock, and unprotected jungle along the way.

There were a few Indian Grey Langurs seen along the way, very many feral dogs, one Ruddy Mongoose, and a pair of un-tusked elephants we got very close to. They did not have tusks, but judging by the glands on the sides of the head, one of them was evidently a male in musth. A scrum of jeeps congregated around them on the road, and as we were trying to get through, somehow we wound up right in front of them. The male in musth then stuck his trunk into the open-air jeep cabin, about 20 cm from my body, and took a good whiff of me. His companion did the same to my wife. Those were 5 of the most intense seconds of our lives – I don't think I breathed while the elephant was sniffing me, and my wife and I were both glad once we managed to get back to a respectable distance from them.



Upon entry to the park, I saw the terrain was very different – there was a large lake or dam near the park gate, and open grassland and shrubland extending about 30 m either side of the main track, but most of the vegetation was dense rainforest. I had been wondering where some of the wet forest species on the park list, like Purple-faced Langur, would live in the park, and this zone is probably where they would live.

We saw a herd of Chital grazing by the side of the track, when our guide got a radio-call that a Leopard had been seen. He got the driver to try and take a shortcut through a muddy track in the rainforest to get to the sighting.

Unfortunately, one particularly muddy hole bogged our jeep (photo below), so we were stuck there. Initially, some of the other jeeps attempted to tow us out from the front, but we were so firmly entrenched that they began to get pulled into the mud instead. So, they decided to go around us on one of the other tracks and tow us out from the back.



So, we waited. And waited. And waited some more. It was emotionally taxing for several reasons:

1. We were stuck in an open-air vehicle that could not move, so if anything like a Leopard or Sloth Bear or elephant decided to approach us, the vehicle could not move away. Luckily, we were in the middle of dense rainforest, which made encounters with these larger animals less likely, but it was still nerve-wracking.

2. As the time dragged on, I was painfully aware my chances of seeing a Leopard were steadily decreasing. This was our last game drive, and with our young daughter and more young kids in our foreseeable future, I had no idea when I would next be able to go on any kind of safari. Who knew when my next chance to see a Leopard would be?
3. I glimpsed a monkey as it flashed away through the canopy. I thought it might have been a Purple-faced Langur, but did not get a good enough look to confirm. This sank my spirits even further.

Eventually, after 1.5 hours being stuck in the mud hole, a tractor appeared and managed to successfully tow us out. Apparently, a convoy of 5 different jeeps had approached us from behind to attempt to rescue us, only for each of them to successively get bogged themselves. The tractor therefore had to free each of them first, and only got to us at the end.

By the time we were out, there were 15 minutes before the park closed, and I had resigned myself to a Leopard-less fate. I made a quick prayer to St Francis of Assisi (Catholic patron saint of animals and ecologists), but events seemed to have already been set in motion. However, right as the driver got to the main track, instead of turning left towards the gate, he turned right to drive a bit deeper into the park. At this, my wife and I stilled. Could it be...? Were our driver and guide about to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat?

The jeep stopped, and our guide told us there was indeed a Leopard around us, somewhere. Shortly after this, my wife cried out something I won't repeat here, and pointed at some shrubs right by the road, less than 10 m away from our car. And sure enough, peering out of the shrubs, was a **Leopard**.

I was over the moon (and, incidentally, saying far stronger things than my wife had – I'm very careful not to let the audio play when I show family and friends the video of the Leopard that my wife took). But it only got better. The Leopard got out of the shrub and walked in the open, parallel to the road, for a couple of minutes, before emerging onto the road no more than 5 m in front of us and prowling/stalking across (photo below). Right after, we heard the alarm calls of a herd of Chital that had escaped our notice, on the other side of the road. It then became apparent that the Leopard had been attempting a hunt and had been using the jeeps of the safari-goers as cover. Unfortunately, the hunt ended in failure, and the Leopard melted back into the forest on the other side of the road. Afterwards, the Chital herd ran away. The guide later told us that was his best Leopard sighting all week.



And so, our safari at Yala National Park came to an end. I dipped on the Sloth Bear, but after our glorious Leopard encounter, I hardly cared. I am wanting to go on safari in India one day (as soon as the kids are old enough, really), and hopefully I'll pick one up then.

As for St. Francis, I can only say that he came through for me, big-time. I must admit, I don't always get what I ask for when I ask him, but almost invariably something cool does turn up. So for what it's worth, I definitely recommend asking him for some assistance when mammalwatching!

Colombo: 30/12/2023-01/01/2024

I did not do any mammalwatching in Colombo. However, there are some research groups there that study Fishing Cat, so they are evidently around in some of the city's wetlands. I would expect otters to be hanging around as well.

Mammal List (all seen at Yala National Park, * indicates a lifer):

Wild Boar *Sus scrofa*

Wild Water Buffalo *Bubalus arnee* *

Chital *Axis axis*

Leopard *Panthera pardus* *

Ruddy Mongoose *Urva smithii* *

Asian Elephant *Elephas maximus* *

Three-striped Palm Squirrel *Funambulus pulmarum* *

Black-naped Hare *Lepus nigricollis* *

Tufted Grey Langur *Semnopithecus priam* *

Possible Purple-faced Langur *Semnopithecus vetulus* * – but not counting it as I was not sure.