

Sri Lanka's Elephants & other Wildlife

Birds and Mammal tour

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Dates

Day 1	Depart London
Day 2/4	Sigiriya; Minneriya National Park
Day 5	Kandy
Day 6	Nuwara Eliya
Day 7/8	Lunugamwehera National Park
Day 9	Uda Walawe National Park
Day 10	Uda Walawe Elephant Orphanage/Colombo
Day 11	Fly London



Sinharaja Forest Reserve extension

Days 10/12	Sinharaja Forest Reserve
Day 13	Colombo
Day 14	Return London



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Dates**2024**

Saturday 7th – Tuesday 17th September 2024
Extension: Monday 16th – Friday 20th September 2024

2025

Saturday 6th – Tuesday 16th September 2025
Extension: Monday 15th – Friday 19th September 2025

Cost

£3,495 (London/London); £2,995 (Colombo/Colombo)

£795 for Sinharaja Forest Reserve extension

Single room supplement

£695 (Add: £295 for extension)

Grading

A. Gentle Day Walks

Focus

Indian Elephants but also other Sri Lanka Natural History and Culture



Ruddy Mongoose



Asian Elephants

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction

Everyone loves Elephants, or so it seems, but in a world with ever increasing human demands for space and natural resources the wild Elephant is inevitably the loser. Elephants are self-evidently big creatures, with a capability of devouring 200kg of green matter each day it is not surprising that just a few animals can wreak tremendous damage to farmland creating disastrous potential for conflict with local villagers. There is evidence that Asian Elephants were once widely distributed throughout the Indian sub-Continent but almost inevitably it has proved impossible for large numbers of elephants to live alongside man and today the mighty tusker is regarded as an endangered species with only small numbers surviving in widely fragmented remnants of their former range. Despite a growing human population significant numbers of Asian Elephants may still be seen on the tropical island of Sri Lanka and this is the destination of our exciting new tour which aims to not only observe wild elephants in their natural habitat but also to provide some insight into the cultural importance of the animal and how the conflicts with humans are being addressed by conservationists. The elephant is intrinsically part of the history, tradition, myths and culture of the island, a status celebrated by the annual Perahera ceremony which takes place in Kandy each August during which ornately decorated elephants parade through the streets of the city.



This tour is a celebration of all things elephantine but along the way we are guaranteed to see a splendid selection of Sri Lankan birds, mammals, reptiles and butterflies as well as many glimpses of Sri Lankan culture.

Day 1

Saturday

In Flight

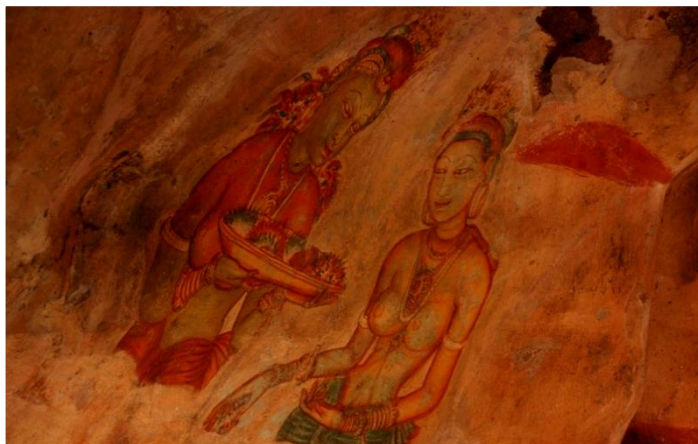
We depart London in the evening on a direct Sri Lankan Airlines scheduled flight to Colombo. We will be in-flight overnight. If you would prefer to fly on any other airline from London to Colombo, we can arrange this for you (availability permitting), though this is likely to involve extra cost. Call Rajan on 01962 733051 for details.

Day 2

Sunday

Sigiriya

We arrive in Colombo early this afternoon and will be met at the airport by a Sri Lankan naturalist escort who will be with us throughout the tour. Later as we head north towards Sigiriya, a light meal stop will no doubt be welcome after the overnight flight and will give us an opportunity to make the acquaintance of some characteristic Sri Lankan birds such as Common Myna, Koel, Coppersmith Barbet and Purple Sunbird. Continuing along the coastal road through endless rows of Coconut palms, we soon turn inland and pass through areas of paddy fields and scattered woodland, before reaching the ancient capital of Sigiriya which is our base for three nights.



Sigiriya rock paintings

King Kasyapa was responsible for the building of a city fortress on Sigiriya rock in 477 AD. Standing at the foot of the rock today it seems a staggering achievement but a palace and complex of gardens were constructed on the three-



Hotel Sigiriya

acre summit and for eighteen years served as a royal citadel. Visitors can reach the site by ascending flights of steps hewn in the rock but it is a stiff climb and not recommended for anyone with a fear of heights. A few frescoes are all that remain of some 500 paintings that formerly graced the rock walls and these can be viewed during the ascent. Shahin Falcons nest on the rock and the surrounding primary forest is superb for birds, containing many interesting species which keen birders may find an attractive alternative to scaling the rock. Birds to look for include Woolly-necked Stork, Crested Serpent-Eagle, Emerald Dove, Orange-breasted Green Pigeon, Alexandrine Parakeet, Grey-bellied Cuckoo, Racket-tailed Drongo, Black-crested Bulbul, Paradise Flycatcher, White-browed Fantail, White-rumped Shama, Forest Wagtail, Oriental White-Eye, Brown-capped Babbler and Pale-billed Flowerpecker. Asian Elephants do occur in this forest, and occasionally a lone bull will emerge from cover to register his annoyance at passing traffic but the more frequently seen elephants are those used by a local company to take tourists on elephant-back 'safaris' into the jungle. Mammals more likely to be encountered include several species of mongoose, Toque Macaque, Grey Langur, Palm Squirrels, Giant Squirrel and Indian Flying Fox. Among the rarer local inhabitants are the lowland race of Purple-faced Leaf Monkey and the nocturnal Slender Loris.

We stay overnight in the Sigiriya Hotel, which is sufficiently close to the rock for those favouring a restful afternoon to sit drink in hand and watch the exertions of the climbers or perhaps sample the hotel swimming pool. Birdlife in the gardens and surrounding scrub often includes several Indian Pittas, Brown-capped Babblers and most winters, one or more Orange-headed Ground Thrushes.

Day 3 – 4

Monday – Tuesday



Asian Elephants and Spotted Deer as well as a few Leopards. The reserve fauna also includes the endemic Red-lipped Lizard among 25 reptile species and a splendidly named, but endangered, amphibian, the Sri Lanka Greater Hour-glass Tree Frog!

We enjoy two full day excursions to Minneriya, Kaudulla or Kalawewa National Park, the choice depending upon latest reports of elephant movements. These three are important elephant sanctuaries and at peak times the total population may exceed two hundred animals. We tour the reserve by jeep and will use local expertise to take us to the largest concentrations. The interface between reserves and farmland is also a scene of conflict between villagers and the elephants where we will see platforms in trees used by farmers for all night vigils to scare away marauding elephants trying to invade the sugar plantations.

Minneriya comprises extensive forest fringing a large 'tank' or lake which supplies the water so essential to elephant life. The lake is usually the best place to find the pachyderms and the largest herds are to be found feeding on the shore or bathing in the water. This is ideal terrain to observe elephants and they are well used to seeing vehicles bringing visitors each day. Not surprisingly the National Park is also a great place for birdwatching and other mammalian residents include Sambar

Kaudulla is a smaller, and more recently established, Reserve with similar habitats to Minneriya. It is also possible to see up to 200 Asian Elephants frequenting the reserve between June and December whilst the rare Rusty Spotted Cat features among the other notable residents.

Kalawewa comprises of two reservoirs which are linked together. It is much shallower than Kaudulla and Minneriya, and unlike both Minneriya and Kaudulla most of the herd's comprise of tuskless and much larger elephants than seen in the other areas. Bird life is also remarkable here with large numbers of Asian Open bills known to roost on the trees at the edge of the reservoir.

Day 5

Wednesday

Kandy

We leave Sigiriya after breakfast and drive south towards Kandy but as we pass through the island's main spice growing area around Matale, we will pause briefly to look around one of the numerous spice gardens beside the main road. Here many kinds of spice are cultivated and it is possible to purchase some of the produce, although in many instances it is actually cheaper to buy them in a British supermarket! As we head to Kandy the vegetation becomes very luxuriant and green, signifying our departure from the Dry Zone into the edge of the hill country. Before reaching the city of Kandy we will stop for lunch at Peraduniya Rest House, which is conveniently just across the road from the Botanical

Gardens where we spend the afternoon. Once the pleasure gardens of a Kandyan Queen, the 150 acres of gardens are full of interesting trees and plants set out in a very attractive style and the orchid house is particularly worth a visit. Birds flock to enjoy the many fruiting trees in the gardens and we may find two endemic parrots, the diminutive Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot and Layard's Parakeet. Other regular visitors include Hill Myna, Velvet-fronted Nuthatch and Tickell's Blue Flycatcher. A large colony of Indian Flying Foxes can be watched in the heart of the gardens and as dusk approaches, the giant fruit bats become increasingly active as they prepare for their nocturnal forays into the surrounding country. Kandy is steeped in history and was the capital for a succession of Kandyan Kings until captured by the British in 1815. The famous 'Temple of the Tooth' beside Kandy lake is one of the best known Buddhist temples in the country and attracts thousands of visitors every year. Kandy is traditionally a centre of music and dance and most nights it is possible to witness demonstrations of both art forms at special performances, which will be advertised in our hotel. Tour members wishing to attend a performance of dancing will probably need to leave Peradeniya Gardens a little earlier than the rest of the group to get to the theatre in time.

Day 6

Thursday

Nuwara Eliya

The 70 kilometre drive from Kandy to Nuwara Eliya will take us deeper into the hill country passing through a succession of tea estates. We will stop at one of these to join a tour of the factory, where we can see the various processes leading to the production of top quality Ceylon tea and sample the finished product.

Nuwara Eliya is the capital town of the hill country and a delightful place to stay for one night. A golf course and



Waterfall on the Horton Plains

racecourse are reminders of its popularity as a resort for the British during the days of the Raj and there are other resonances of a bygone era in the quaint Hill Club and the Victorian style of architecture. Stands of pines are a feature of the area and there is a distinctly cooler feel to the air as might be expected at an altitude of 1,890 metres. After lunch at our hotel we will stroll into the town and visit Victoria Park, a small public gardens very reminiscent of similar areas in many British towns. The birdlife is, however, startlingly different and despite the afternoon crowds we can

expect to see a number of interesting species including two more endemics, the handsome Yellow-eared Bulbul and Sri Lanka Hill White-Eye. An untidy little stream running through the park is usually frequented by one or two Pied Thrushes, long distance migrants from the Himalayas, and it is often possible to find Indian Pitta and Indian Blue Robin in the same unsavoury ditch. Other birds, which might be seen, include Common Sandpiper, Brown Shrike, Grey Wagtail, Blyth's Reed Warbler and Kashmir Flycatcher.

Mammal interest is limited but the highland race of Purple-faced Leaf Monkey is fairly numerous in the surrounding forests and we may see a troupe at the nearby Hakgala Botanical Gardens.



Indian Pitta



Asian Elephants



Rhino-horned Lizard



Ruddy Mongoose

Day 7

Friday

Kataragama

A long descent to the plains involves endless hairpins and frequent photographic opportunities, as the changes in elevation present different views of the hills stretching away to the east. We will punctuate the long drive to the coast with several stops including one at Ella where a superbly situated rest house affords spectacular views down a deep valley with rugged hills on every side. This makes an ideal lunch stop and in addition to the chance of raptors sailing over the valley, we should see a good selection of birds during our break including Chestnut-headed Bee-eater and all three sunbirds. Several hours after leaving Ella we will reach the hot and dry southern plains, and as we continue south, the dominant scrub jungle is gradually replaced by increasingly frequent palms. Eventually after this long and hot drive we enter beautifully located Grand Tamarind Lake Hotel in Kataragama, which sits by a tank teeming with wildlife. The spacious rooms overlook the waterfront will be our stop for the next two nights as we explore the nearby Lunugamwehera National Park from here. Lunugamwehera National Park is a sought out alternative to the Yala National Park.

Day 8

Saturday

Lunugamwehera

In the morning we will drive for half an hour to the impressive Lunugamvehera National Park with our packed breakfast and lunch for a full day safari. This National Park was declared in 1995 with the intention of protecting the catchment area of the Lunugamvehera reservoir. Ghostly white dead trees decorate the reservoir and its rotting remains make perfect watch towers for nesting White-bellied Sea Eagles. The recent spike in Leopard populations in this park has made it a sought out alternative to Yala National Park. Mosaic of scrubland and grassland make up the forest which is home to Sloth Bear, Muntjac, Mouse Deer, Stripe-necked Mongoose and an array of birds including the rare Racket-tailed Drongo and common water birds such as the Grey Heron, Black-headed Ibis, Asian Openbill, Painted Stork and Spot-billed Pelican. We return to the hotel later in the evening and will enjoy an array of cuisines including the local cuisine which the hotel is famous for.



Leopard

Day 9

Sunday

Udawalawe

Taking leave of Kataragama after a final morning at the hotel we begin a two hour drive to an overnight stop at Udawalawe. The road passes by several interesting tidal inlets and our progress is sure to be delayed by birdwatching stops. Herons, egrets, Painted Storks, Openbill Storks and Spoonbills are all likely to be encountered and large flocks of Pintail and Garganey assemble during the winter months. Waders abound and should include Black-winged Stilts, Marsh, Wood and Curlew Sandpipers, Little Stint, Kentish, Greater Sand and Lesser Sand Plovers.

Centauria Wild is ideally situated for our visit to Uda Walawe National Park which we will visit after lunch. This mix of abandoned teak plantations, grassland, forest and wetlands in the catchment area of a vast reservoir, is in many respects a smaller version of Yala and is similarly excellent for wildlife. The open water of the reservoir forms the central part of the reserve but to the north the towering formations of the hill country massif forms an impressive background. It is possible to see over 100 bird species during a game drive in Uda Walawe, a selection which could include Sri Lanka Junglefowl, Barred Button-Quail, Malabar Pied Hornbill, White-bellied Fishing Eagle, Changeable Hawk-Eagle, Sirkeer and Blue-faced Malkohas. This will also be another excellent opportunity to see herds of browsing Indian Elephants as several hundred frequent the reserve and it is easily possible to see 40 or 50 in a visit. As experienced at the reserves visited earlier in the tour, it is often possible to observe the creatures at very close range.

Day 10

Monday

Uda Walawe

This morning we will visit the Udawalawe Elephant orphanage. Here we will be able to see the work that is being done to care for orphaned youngsters which will eventually be returned to the wild. After a week of observing elephants in the wild, now is the opportunity for some 'hands-on' experience as we assist the staff in feeding or watering their boisterous charges! After enjoying these final close-ups of these endearing and extraordinary creatures we drive to Katunayake where we will check into our 4-star The Gateway Airport Garden Hotel Katunayake for some rest and a good night's sleep!



The Gateway, Colombo

Day 11

Tuesday

London

We have a mid-morning transfer to Katunayake airport to catch our afternoon Sri Lankan direct flight to London. We are due to arrive in London by early evening.

Sinharaja Forest Reserve extension

Cost: £795

Single room supplement: £295

Day 10

Monday

Blue Magpie Lodge, near Sinharaja

Today after visiting the Elephant orphanage, we leave the group and travel by road to our accommodation at the Blue Magpie Lodge near Sinharaja Forest but hopefully the prospect of three nights at this pleasant location, and the magnificent scenery en route, will compensate for the long journey into the hills.

Days 11 & 12

Tuesday – Wednesday

Sinharaja Forest Reserve (Blue Magpie Lodge)

One of the highlights of this extension tour will be the excursions to Sinharaja Forest Reserve, the largest and most important lowland rainforest in Sri Lanka. Unfortunately, a fairly early start is necessary to reach the forest by first light but the effort is worthwhile to catch the early morning activity, which greatly increases our chances of seeing the forest inhabitants. The approach roads are of very poor quality and despite being only a few kilometres from the lodge, the journey by jeep can take almost an hour. Sinharaja is something of a stronghold for endemic birds and its importance was acknowledged by recognition as a World Heritage Site in 1988. Old logging trails facilitate access into the primary forest and from these we will be looking for such species as Mountain Hawk Eagle, Crested Goshawk, Sri Lanka Spurfowl, Layard's Parakeet, Red-faced Malkoha, Green-billed Coucal, Malabar Trogon, Brown-backed Needletail, Chestnut-backed Owlet, Yellow-fronted Barbet, Black-crested Bulbul, Yellow-browed Bulbul, Spot-winged Thrush, Orange-billed Babbler, Ashy-headed Laughingthrush, Sri Lanka Blue Magpie, White-faced Starling, Hill Myna, Sri Lanka Myna and Black-throated Munia. Inevitably we are unlikely to see all of these in a single visit but Sinharaja is one of those magical places that can suddenly be alive with birds following periods of relative quiet. Even at mid-day it is possible to encounter one of the



Blue Magpie

mixed species 'bird waves' which usually comprise Orange-billed Babblers in association with Crested Drongos, Malabar Trogons, Red-faced Malkohas and a miscellany of other species.



Blue Magpie Lodge

Everything about Sinharaja is special and the flora contains many species found nowhere else. Pretty Bamboo Orchids grow commonly beside the trails and many of the trees are adorned with epiphytes. A wonderful diversity of butterflies occur in the forest, including the spectacular Blue Morpho and Tree-Nymphs, dancing like windblown paper through the high canopy. Lizards are plentiful and the residents include a number of rare endemics. Although plenty of mammals inhabit Sinharaja, sightings are always a matter of luck but troupes of Purple-faced Leaf Monkeys are likely to reveal their presence by the fearsome roaring calls of the males.

It will be a long and tiring two full days at Sinharaja involving uncomfortable jeep journeys but the forest is truly unique and represents a privileged view of a fast disappearing habitat, along with a selection of species that will also become extinct if their fragile eco-system is eventually destroyed.

Day 13

Thursday

Katunayake

We return to Katunayake today but before leaving the Blue Magpie we will enjoy another morning of birding in the vicinity of the hotel where Green-billed Coucals are often easy to find at first light and other interesting residents include Spot-winged Thrush, Chestnut-backed Owlet, Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher and Black-throated Munia.

Eventually we can postpone the moment no longer and will set off on the southern highway for a three hour drive north. Upon arrival in Katunayake, we will check into our 4-star The Gateway Airport Garden Hotel Colombo for some rest and a good night's sleep!



The Gateway, Katunayake

Day 14

Friday

London

We have a mid-morning transfer to Katunayake airport to catch our afternoon Sri Lankan direct flight to London. We are due to arrive in London by early evening.

How does this tour benefit the local community and wildlife?

On this tour we will visit many interesting historic and cultural places; everywhere we go we will be met with smiling faces of the locals going about their day to day activity or providing a service in an area we visit. Tourism is the main income for many of these local communities and life has evolved around the people who come to visit this beautiful island. We will also spend time in local villages searching for wildlife that has been looked after by young wildlife enthusiasts who ensure that the habitat that these birds, mammals and reptiles live in are protected for the future of the species and viewing pleasure of wildlife lovers.

Many research and conservation projects are launched every year in Sri Lanka that help students to learn about the island's flora and fauna. These projects are collaborations between the wildlife departments and the tourism departments of Sri Lanka as tourists visiting National Parks and forests generate a large income for the country.

With the increasing interest in Whale watching around our waters, many Sri Lankans have now diverted their attention to studying marine biology, and the feedback and recommendations coming from these new minds are helping to shape policies about the subject, and learning more about these animals. The most recent outcome of this was to change the shipping lanes further into international waters, thereby decreasing the fatalities and injuries caused to whales due to collisions with vessels.

Climate

Generally hot and sunny with temperatures in the low country ranging from 25°C to 35°C with high humidity, particularly in the Wet Zone. Temperatures decrease in the hills to a range of 10°C-16°C around Nuwara Eliya. Rain can occur at any time and may be prolonged and of tropical intensity on occasions.

Accommodation & food

We use standard tourist hotels throughout the itinerary and these are of three or four star standard, most with swimming pools and other amenities. Accommodation for this tour is in twin rooms with private facilities (single rooms being available on request). All food is included in the price of the tour.

Grading

This tour is graded A. Most of the walks are gentle and suitable for any age and level of fitness.

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to Sri Lanka. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – www.fco.gov.uk/travel or telephone 0870 6060290 regularly prior to travel.

Entry requirements

All UK passport holders and most other nationalities require an Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) visa for Sri Lanka, which is obtainable in advance by filling the ETA form on <http://www.eta.gov.lk/slvisa/>. We recommend that you contact your doctor for the latest up-to-the-minute advice on the relevant vaccinations needed for Sri Lanka. Updated information on vaccinations is also available on <http://www.fitfortravel.nhs.uk/>.

Flights

We use scheduled Sri Lankan Airlines direct flights for all our tours to Sri Lanka. All these flights depart from London Heathrow. If you wish to travel from Manchester, Newcastle, Edinburgh, Glasgow or Aberdeen there will be an additional charge of around **£295** and these flights will be with British Airways.

The sole disadvantage of Sri Lankan Airlines flights to Sri Lanka is that sometimes the service is slow and special requests for seats and meals are not easily available. If you would prefer to fly with Emirates or Qatar Airways, please note that these flights are not direct. If you wish to fly with Emirates or Qatar Airways, we will gladly arrange it for you, but please give us plenty of warning and you can expect to pay between £100 and £200 extra for these indirect flights. Due to a difference in arrival and departure times, you will also be expected to pay an extra £150 per person (minimum two people are required) for the additional transfer fees.

If you would prefer to travel in Business class (normally available at a supplement charge of around **£3,495**).

Return flights with Sri Lankan Airlines are scheduled to arrive at London Heathrow at 1900. Please note that, your return flight might not connect with British Airways flights to regional airports, and you may require an extra night in London.

If you would like to travel from one of the above regional airports and/or book business class flights, please let us know at the time of booking so that we can make the necessary arrangements.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking. Please note that our Sri Lanka trips tend to book up a long time in advance. Please book as early as possible to avoid disappointment.

Highlights from our previous tour

The tour started with good sightings of Elephants in Kaudulla National Park, along with Toque Macaque, Grey Langur and Purple-faced Leaf Monkey. Kandy yielded a beautiful sighting of a pair of Giant Grey Flying Squirrels. Yala National Park was full of Leopards and we enjoyed a number of sightings; one being a sleeping male under a rock cavern. The Sloth Bear showed itself twice on our safaris, and birds and reptiles were also plentiful. This tour normally lasts for 11 days, however on this occasion it included a pre-arranged extension at Yala National Park.

Highlights from our previous tour

This was an all-round wildlife experience and sightings of almost 100 Elephants and the early arrival of Indian Pitta were highlights of this tour. There were close encounters for some superb photographic opportunities, and the sighting of the rare Stripe-necked Mongoose elevated the experience of this tour.