

# Sri Lanka – Blue Whales and Leopards

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

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### Outline itinerary

Day 1	Depart London
Day 2	Colombo – Koggala (Mirissa)
Days 3/5	Koggala / Mirissa
Days 6/8	Lunugamvehera and Yala National Park
Day 9	Colombo
Day 10	Return London

### Sinharaja Forest Reserve extension

Days 9/11	Sinharaja Forest Reserve
Day 12	Colombo
Day 13	Return London

### 2024

Saturday 9th November – Monday 18th November 2024 Cost: £2,995  
Sinharaja Extension: Sunday 17th November – Thursday 21st November Cost: £795

### 2025

Saturday 1st February – Monday 10th February 2025 Cost: £2,995  
Sinharaja Extension: Sunday 9th February – Thursday 13th February Cost: £795

Saturday 1st March – Monday 10th March 2025 Cost: £2,995  
Sinharaja Extension: Sunday 9th March – Thursday 13th March 2025 Cost: £795

Saturday 8th November – Monday 17th November 2025 Cost: £2,995  
Sinharaja Extension: Sunday 16th November – Thursday 20th November Cost: £795

£500 reduction if booked without flights, land only trip.

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## 2026

Saturday 7th February – Monday 16th February 2026 Cost: £2,995  
Sinharaja Extension: Sunday 15th February – Thursday 19th February Cost: £795

Saturday 7th March – Monday 16th March 2026 Cost: £2,995  
Sinharaja Extension: Sunday 15th March – Thursday 19th March 2026 Cost: £795

Saturday 7th November – Monday 16th November 2026 Cost: £2,995  
Sinharaja Extension: Sunday 15th November – Thursday 19th November Cost: £795

£500 reduction if booked without flights, land only trip.

### Single room supplement

£695 (Add: £295 for extension)

### Grading

A. Easy day walks only.

### Focus

Mammals, particularly Blue Whales and Leopards, also birds and other natural history



Sri Lanka Green Pigeon



Grey Langurs



Mugger Crocodiles



Blue Whale

## How does the wildlife and community benefit from this tour?

This tour celebrates two of Sri Lanka's most sought-after animals, the Blue Whale & the Leopard. With visits to Yala and Lunugamwehera, we will be in the habitat where the Sri Lankan Leopards thrive and flourish, all due to the careful planning and conservation efforts supported by local communities. 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 department and the Tourism departments of Sri Lanka, as tourists visiting national parks and the forests generate a large income for the country.

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 and taken care of for the future of the species, and viewing pleasure of wildlife lovers.

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



Blue Whale fluke courtesy of Mark Clayden





Blue Whale with ramora courtesy of Geoff Harwood



Malabar Pied Hornbill courtesy of Geoff Harwood



Spinner Dolphin courtesy of Geoff Harwood



Male Leopard courtesy of Rob North



Blue Whale fluke courtesy of Gerald Broddez



Leopard courtesy of Gerald Broddez



Little Green Bee-eater courtesy of Gerald Broddez



Indian Elephant courtesy of Gerald Broddez

**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. We cannot guarantee a particular hotel, but always endeavor to book similar to the one mentioned in the itinerary.**

## Introduction

The Great Whales are a source of wonder and fascination to land-based humans as we struggle to comprehend their alien, unfettered existence roaming the mysterious depths of the world's oceans. There is a seemingly insatiable desire to savour the experience of being close to these magnificent creatures and wherever feeding or breeding imperatives bring numbers of whales to congregate in a particular area there will invariably be local boatmen taking visitors to enjoy a few precious moments sharing the ocean with these leviathans. The largest of all the cetaceans, indeed the largest of all mammals, the Blue Whale, has always been something of an enigma, a true ocean wanderer living a pelagic lifestyle which rarely brings them with any predictability close to land. Gradually however, scientists are beginning to gain some understanding of the enormous migrations undertaken by Blue Whales and one discovery has been their regular appearances close to the south coast of Sri Lanka between November and early April. It is this annual event that we will be taking advantage of during this tour in a country that has long been a Naturetrek favourite.



Blue Whale



Leopard

Common Jezebel (*Delias eucharis*)

Chestnut-headed Bee-eater

After this ultimate in whale-watching experiences we return to dry land to seek another highly impressive mammal in Lunugamvehera and Yala National Parks. In recent years diurnal Leopards have been a regular attraction in these superb Reserves and we will travel full day by jeeps for game drives with the possibility of suddenly coming upon a



The Beach at Mirissa

Leopard adding an exciting frisson to every visit. Wildlife abounds in Lunugamvehera and Yala and each drive is likely to produce sightings of Indian Elephant, Wild Boar, Spotted Deer, Sambar, mongooses, crocodiles and lizards as well as a stunning profusion of colourful bird life. No visit to these parks have ever disappoints but it is the sight of a somnolent Leopard draped across the branches of a tree or padding beside the track before disappearing into the undergrowth that creates a memory to last a lifetime. During the final three days of the tour we will be staying at a very comfortable hotel just outside the Park and with no fences to constrain the inhabitants it is by no means unusual to see a Wild Boar

wander through the grounds or even an elephant browsing in the garden! Yala is a magical place and a perfect venue to complete a tour that combines the best of Sri Lankan wildlife, both marine and terrestrial.

## Day 1

### 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

### Koggala/Mirissa

We arrive in Colombo early this afternoon and will be met at the airport by the Sri Lankan naturalist escort who will be with us throughout the tour. Later as we head south towards Koggala via the express way, a tea break will no doubt be welcome after the overnight flight and will give us an opportunity to become acquainted with some characteristic Sri Lankan birds such as Common Myna, Koel and Purple Sunbird. We leave the outskirts of Colombo and enter the southern express way to reach our destination, Koggala.

Areas of the south-west coastline were devastated during the Tsunami but the Sri Lankans are resilient people and much reconstruction has taken place since the tragedy in 2004. The delightful Koggala Beach Hotel was partly destroyed and rebuilt, and will be our base for the first four nights of the tour. The drive from Colombo will probably take three hours and after settling in to our rooms, a period of welcome relaxation will give us a chance to sample the resort's facilities or perhaps simply sit on the sandy beach watching the waves breaking on



Spinner Dolphins

the sand with binoculars ready in case a huge White-bellied Sea Eagle glides along overhead or terns begin fishing offshore. Sri Lanka is a remarkably lush, verdant tropical island and trees surrounding the hotel will offer further birdwatching opportunities which might perhaps be taken advantage of from the comfort of a lounge beside the swimming pool! Typical species of such forest edge include Magpie Robin, Yellow-billed Babbler, three species of sunbird and Koel. The local bird list is sure to grow with each day spent at Koggala.

## Day 3

### Mirissa

Thirty minute drive from the hotel is the small fishing port of Mirissa and it is here that we board a whale-watching vessel for around a four hour morning excursion in search of Blue Whales. The distance sailed will very much depend on whale sightings and sea conditions but we may go up to fifteen kilometers offshore although it is more likely that most observations will be much closer to land. The seas off Sri Lanka are rich in marine life but it is only comparatively recently that scientists have discovered the regular appearances of Blue Whales between November and early April. Up to a dozen or more of these enigmatic ocean wanderers may be lingering off the coast and we will rely on our skipper's expertise to locate as many individuals as possible during each excursion. Despite their huge bulk, Blue Whales have a very small dorsal fin and are not always easy to find on the surface but they do have an extremely tall columnar blow and it is this 9 metre high plume of condensed water vapour that usually betrays the presence of a whale. Blue Whales also tend to display their huge curved tail flukes before each dive and this again is an indicator of where to look. The captain will take the boat as close as he can without causing disturbance to the whales and we will hope that by drifting with the current we can allow the creatures to approach alongside the vessel, hopefully near enough to be able to smell their distinctive pungent breath! We may have to content ourselves with longer distance views on this first outing but there will be more chances for close-ups on the following days. Whilst Blue Whales will be our principal quarry, many other cetacea occur in these waters and species observed during the previous seasons included; Bryde's, Sperm and Short-finned Pilot Whales, Bottlenosed Dolphins, Rissos's Dolphins and Spinner Dolphins, the latter sometimes in pods numbering several hundred animals. Birdlife is less plentiful at this time of year but possibilities include Flesh-footed and Wedge-tailed Shearwaters, Pomarine Skua, Crested, Bridled and White-winged Terns & Sooty Terns.

The sailing will last for about 4 hours and on our return to land we will retire for a leisurely lunch before enjoying the birding around the resort. There are no boat rides in the afternoon as outings are less productive and the sea can be rough, please note boat rides are weather dependent and can be cancelled without prior notice. At the end of our boat trip as we return to the Koggala Beach Hotel we will hope to be celebrating some memorable encounters with the largest creature on earth.



Blue Whale and remoras



On one of the afternoons in Mirissa we will enjoy an excursion to Galle. Galle, on the southwest of the country was a thriving port long before colonial times; it attracted Arabs, Persians, Romans and Greeks on their way across the Indian Ocean. In 1505 the Portuguese attacked and settled in the town, 135 years later conceding it to the Dutch, who built the famous fort. In 1796 the British took over and used the fort as their headquarters. Today, Galle Fort is the old part of the city, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the best preserved colonial sea fortress in Asia. It is a cosy little town in its own right with narrow streets, churches, cloistered courtyards and shuttered mansions standing testament to their colonial past. Galle Fort has recently received a lot of investment from expatriates living in South East Asia and is now bristling with boutique hotels, art galleries, tiny shops, cafes and restaurants. There are several museums as well as the Dutch Reformed Church and the lively Arab Quarter. The entrances to Galle National Maritime Museum and Fort are not included and can be paid locally. At the time of writing there is no entrance fees to visit Galle Fort and £4 to visit Galle National Maritime Museum. However the museum is kept closed most of the times.

## Day 4 – 5

### Mirissa

Each morning we will repeat the whale-watching excursion from Mirissa and with the ever-changing ocean will hope for further Blue Whale sightings as well as appearances by other whales, dolphins and birds. In characteristic fashion, the dolphins often swim in the bow-wave of the vessel offering spectacular views as they do so. The huge pods of Spinner Dolphins are not a predictable phenomenon but if we are fortunate enough to witness one of these there will be plenty of employment for cameras as the seas become a turmoil of activity and scores, or even hundreds, of dolphins progress across the ocean in a loose assembly, leaping out of the water at great speed as they pursue their prey. Sea conditions in March and early April are usually calm allowing the best chances for observations and making whale 'spouts' visible over a long distance. Seas may however be a little rougher in November and December.

After lunch at the hotel we will spend the cooler end of the afternoon birdwatching in the local areas where a wide range of species is possible including Red-wattled Lapwing and White-breasted Waterhen, Purple Swamphen, terns and waterbirds as well as more forest inhabitants. Alternatively tour members may choose to relax or swim off the beach. Later in the day we can look for Indian Flying Foxes as the night settles and maybe witness enormous Indian Flying Foxes flapping off from their roost site to begin some nocturnal foraging. These huge, fruit-eating bats are widespread on the island but declining in numbers and colonies are always a welcome sight on our tours.

## Day 6

### Yala

Our plans today are somewhat flexible depending upon the success of the previous days. If necessary, a further whale-watching trip could be taken but hopefully we will have achieved our marine objectives and can transfer our focus towards land-based mammals for the next phase of the tour. Driving eastwards we head towards Yala National Park but en route will make various stops to break the journey. The route passes a number of large expanses of open water known in Sri Lanka as ‘tanks’, originally constructed for irrigation purposes. The proliferation of these tanks is one reason why waterbirds are so numerous and we will look for some of these in the vicinity of the ancient city of Tissamaharama. Storks, herons, egrets and cormorants may be seen on these bodies of water along with Black & Yellow Bitterns, Purple Swamphen, Pheasant-tailed Jacana, Oriental Darter, Brahminy Kite, White-bellied Sea-Eagle and many other species. Another stop will be made at the salt-pans and scrub which comprise Bundala Reserve (time permitting). The masses of birds which feed on the lagoons and often include rare waders or local specialities. We should finally reach Yala in late afternoon and check-in at the splendid Cinnamon Wild Hotel where we lodge for three nights.

## Day 7

### Lunugamvehera National Park

In the morning we will drive for over 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



Sloth Bear

## Day 8

### Yala National Park

Another early start will be necessary to enter the very popular and busy Yala National Park in jeeps for a morning of bird and mammal watching. We will leave the hotel with our packed breakfast and will return to the hotel for lunch after our half day safari. Yala is among the oldest and best known National Park in Sri Lanka and unlike many African parks with open plains, Yala has a diverse ecosystems ranging from moist monsoon forest, to dry monsoon forests, semi deciduous forests, thorn forests, grasslands, fresh water & marine wetlands, and sandy beaches, which possesses a large number of important plant species and smaller animals. Early morning is the best time to come across a Sloth Bear or Leopard but it is also the time of peak bird activity and there will be much to see in this wonderful reserve. A network of tracks criss-cross the accessible areas of the National Park embracing open country, where herds of Spotted

Deer and wild buffalo, secluded lakes and coastal mudflats. It is not permitted to drive out of tracks or walk inside the park except at designated areas but despite this restriction we should see many birds during the morning. Peacocks are common and in the first few hours after dawn Sri Lanka Junglefowl emerge from cover to display and call. Raptors include Changeable Hawk-Eagle, White-bellied Sea-Eagle, and Grey-headed Fish-Eagle.



Leopard, Yala

Black-necked and Adjutant Storks are among the many waterbirds inhabiting the reserve (albeit both very rare) along with Spot-billed Pelicans, Painted Storks, Openbill Storks and Purple Herons. Waders include the odd looking Great Thick-Knee, Black-winged Stilts, Yellow-wattled Lapwing and sandplovers. Not all the residents are associated with water and in the drier areas we will be looking for Blue-tailed and Little Green Bee-eaters, Hoopoe, Blue-faced Malkoha, Malabar Pied Hornbill, Black-headed Cuckoo-Shrike, Baya Weaver, White-throated Silver-Bill and Brahminy Myna. In places we emerge onto the coast and overlook magnificent stretches of deserted beach straight from the pages of a holiday brochure. One or two small fishing communities exist inside the park and where the catches are brought ashore we may find flocks of Brown-headed Gulls and a scan of offshore rocks could reveal both Great Crested and Lesser Crested Terns.

The Yala Leopards, like big cats everywhere, are unpredictable in their appearances but tales of obliging animals are frequent. Whether it is particular individuals becoming accustomed to human visitors, or a consequence of recent droughts, there is no doubt that diurnal sightings of Leopards in Yala have become much more common in recent years and we will hope that luck is on our side as we tour the Park. Sometimes the cats may be observed padding along the road, or disappearing into cover but the best views are obtained when one is discovered in a tree and such individuals may spend hours dozing on a convenient branch to the delight of the tourists.



Asian Elephants

Wild Boar are generally much more conspicuous than their predators and both Ruddy and Grey Mongooses occur, the former distinguished by a black tail tip. The larger Stripe-necked or 'Badger' Mongoose is also a Yala resident. Elephants are widespread inside Yala but surprisingly elusive and hard to see amid woodland. If we are lucky we may chance upon a family group bathing in one of the pools. To complete a dazzling array of creatures, Land and Water Monitors are numerous and large Mugger Crocodiles inhabit the bigger pools. As with all such excursions, luck will play a big part in what we see during our time in Yala but no visit is ever dull and we are certain to encounter an impressive variety of species.

Leopards will be high priority but we will also be seeking any of the inhabitants not seen during the morning visit. Another mammal not already mentioned is the powerful Wild Buffalo. Herds of these impressive beasts inhabit Yala and probably originate from wild stock although escapee feral Water Buffalo over the years make it difficult to be certain about the genetic purity of the wild population. These somewhat bellicose creatures are treated with due respect by their neighbours but when one dies through accident or natural causes, the carcass provides a rich feast for the crocodiles and other scavengers!



Cinnamon Wild Yala

The afternoon is free for relaxation at the hotel but there are more active options including hiring a jeep for another visit to Yala (at extra cost) or joining the leader in a birdwatching excursion to nearby areas.

## Day 9

### Katunayake

A leisurely return to Colombo with a few stops along the way and plenty of time for any diversions that we choose, whether cultural or for natural history. We pass through areas of open paddy fields, egrets will be present in numbers and we could glimpse other waterbirds such as Grey-headed Swamphens or White-breasted Waterhens. The religious life of the island is also revealed to us as the road passes by a number of Buddhist Temples, each one decorated with flags and flowers overlooked by a large gold-painted image of Lord Buddha. We will stop for lunch at a restaurant in Ratnapura before getting on to the express way to try and avoid the rush hour traffic. Upon arrival in Katunayake, we will check into our 4-star The Gateway Airport Garden Hotel Colombo or similar for some rest and a good night's sleep!



The Gateway, Colombo

## Day 10

### London

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

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## Sinharaja Forest Reserve extension

Cost from: £795

Single room supplement from: £295

(The minimum number of people required to run this extension is five; however, we may decide to operate it with fewer people, at our discretion, with local guides.)

## Introduction

For those who wish to stay longer on this beguiling island, we recommend a post-tour extension to Sinharaja Forest. Over 80% of the island's endemic bird species occur in the forest and resident species include the spectacular Blue Magpie, Red-faced Malkoha and Orange-billed Babbler. An astonishing 60% of the trees are found nowhere else in the world, and most of the other flora and fauna has a similarly high level of endemism.

## Day 9

### Blue Magpie Lodge, near Sinharaja

Today we leave the group after lunch at Ratnapura 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.

## Day 10 & 11

### 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 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.

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 Mormon 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



Blue Magpie Lodge

disappearing habitat, along with a selection of species that will also become extinct if their fragile eco-system is eventually destroyed.

## Day 12

### 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 four 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!

## Day 13

### 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.

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## 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/>.

## Extensions

If you would like to have any other extension to your holiday there are many other interesting places to visit in Sri Lanka. Possibilities include the 'golden triangle' of ancient archaeological sites at Anuradhapura, Sigiriya and Polonnaruwa in the north, the ancient capital of Kandy or the picturesque Hill Country around Nuwara Eliya. We will be glad to obtain quotations for the extension itinerary of your choice.

## Accommodation & Food

Accommodation will be in very comfortable tourist hotels, each room will have private facilities. The exception is the Blue Magpie Hotel near Sinharaja (on extension) which is a simple but comfortable Rest House. All meals are included in the tour cost although any snacks or meals eaten in transit at the airports are not included.

## Grading and focus

This tour is graded A. Most of the birdwatching walks are gentle and suitable for any age and level of fitness. On the extension in Sinharaja there are couple of slightly more strenuous longer walks included in the itinerary.

You will need to appreciate that mammals in Lunugamvehera and Yala National Parks and elsewhere are largely shy and retiring, present in low densities and often crepuscular or nocturnal in nature. Although this tour spends time and effort in looking for exciting and iconic mammal species such as Leopard and a range of cetaceans, participants should be aware that mammals will be on view for only a small percentage of our time in the field. Time between mammal encounters will largely be spent birdwatching (alert to mammals at all times of course), as birds are the most conspicuous members of the local fauna.

Some of the species we'll be looking for and enjoying are mentioned throughout the text above. There are no guarantees of seeing Blue Whale or Leopards on this tour. Other cetaceans, including Spinner Dolphins and Bottlenose Dolphins are more regular. Leopards in Yala are difficult to see, although our clients and tour leaders have taken some fantastic photographs over the years. In the same two-year period, we've had a 90% success rate with Leopards. If the success of your own individual holiday hinges on the sighting of one of Mirissa's Blue Whales or Yala's elusive Leopards, then there is a chance that you will leave Sri Lanka disappointed. We can recommend other 'big cat' holidays where a successful encounter is relatively guaranteed - do call us for advice.

This is a conventional wildlife holiday with a focus on mammals, birds and general natural history. If you would like a mammal (or photography) focused holiday in Sri Lanka with little or no focus on birds, then a tailor-made holiday could be right for you. Contact us for details - we'd be delighted to help.

## 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](http://www.fco.gov.uk/travel) regularly prior to travel.



Blue Whale by Mary Robins



Spinner Dolphin by Chris Hutchinson



Leopard by Anne-Marie Kalus



Green Bee-eater Chris Hutchinson

## 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 **£200** and **£300** extra for these indirect flights. Due to a difference in arrival and departure times, you will also be expected to pay an extra **£250** per person (minimum two people are required) for the additional transfer fees. These prices are only approximate and may vary according to availability and season. We will be pleased to approach the respective airline for you and offer a quote on request.

If you would prefer to travel in Business class (normally available at a supplement charge of around **£3,995**).

Return flights with Sri Lankan Airlines are scheduled to arrive at London Heathrow at 1945. 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 fly in business class, 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](http://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 – Blue Whales & Leopards departures tend to book up a long time in advance. Please book as early as possible to avoid disappointment.

A great many Sri Lankans enjoy Yala, especially during the Christmas season when they are on holiday, and that they are happy to enjoy Yala despite - perhaps even because of - the crowds, congestion and noise at this season, which is far less to the taste of visitors from overseas requiring the tranquility in national park that is not to be found in a popular park at Christmas.

Our December departure is during the Christmas holiday season and it will be very busy in the Yala National Park and on the whale-watching excursions! You will be sharing the Yala National Park with 100's of jeeps. I'm afraid there are no limit on the number of vehicles allowed inside the park.

### Written by Nick Acheson (Naturetrek Tour Leader on March tour)

*I don't know what to do. I really want to go whale-watching this year. But on the other hand I love big cats and I've always dreamed of going to see them in the wild. And I just can't do both. I really can't. What to do?*

Familiar thoughts? You're not alone, people: everyone drools over the glossy Naturetrek brochure or clicks through the website in an agony of wanting to go on all the tours at once. But if you're torn between whales and big cats – perhaps you're a husband who loves cetaceans and a wife with a thing for felines – we may have just the tour for you. In fact we definitely do. It's called 'Sri Lanka – Blue Whales and Leopards' and it's all about seeing, well, Blue Whales and Leopards. We spend three long mornings off beautiful Mirissa in the south-west of the island, where Pygmy Blue Whales gather for the winter, and we have extremely good chances of encountering these magnificent animals close at hand. And that's without mentioning the Spinner Dolphins we might see or the mixed flocks of terns all around (if you've never seen a Bridled Tern it really is time you did).



When we've had our fill of whales we trundle along the exquisite south coast of Sri Lanka to the dry south-east and Yala National Park. This has to be one of the best places in all Asia for seeing Leopards. It's also chock-a-block with Chital, Wild Boar, Ruddy Mongooses, Golden Jackals and barely believable birds such as Malabar Pied Hornbills and Orange-breasted Green-pigeons. Oh, and did I mention the Elephants? There are Asian Elephants all over Yala and they're amazingly placid and approachable.

So even if you don't see a Leopard (most of our clients do and on the tour I led in March this year some of our clients saw six!) you'll have your fill of spectacular Sri Lankan wildlife during the two days we spend here. What's more you'll be staying in a superb lodge where you can lie in the pool and gaze out over Mugger Crocodiles basking by the lake. (I've never managed to fathom how they keep the crocs out of the swimming pool but somehow they do.) At dusk you can sit on the verandah, gin in hand, watching Wild Boar wreck the beautiful flower-beds and listening to Jerdon's Nightjars clunk noisily in the surrounding jungle.

Still not convinced? Well we've now added an extension to the tour, which takes you to Sinharaja. This is a rainforest site, quite distinct from anything on the main tour, and it's also home to many of Sri Lanka's much sought-after endemic birds including the stunning Sri Lanka Blue Magpie. Also here are confiding Southern Purple-faced Leaf-monkeys (endemic and absurdly attractive), Brown Mongooses and – this one has to be the deal-clincher – families of disgruntled-looking Sri Lanka Frogmouths. 'Sri Lanka – Blue Whales and Leopards' quite simply has something for everyone.



Sloth Bear



Orca



Mugger Crocodile



Black-naped Hare

### Highlights from our February tour

In total we saw 20 species of mammals, 12 species of reptiles, amphibians and fish, and 159 bird species. Blue Whales were encountered on all three days of our sea excursions, which also included a sighting of a Bryde's Whale and many Spinner and Bottlenose Dolphins. The Leopards at Yala also graced our presence along with many other mammals including Asian Elephant, Samba and Spotted Deer, Wild Boar, Water Buffalo, Ruddy Mongoose, Grey Langurs and Toque Macaque.



Blue Whale



Asian Water Monitor



Leopard



Sloth Bear

### Highlights from our March tour

It's not often that a Blue Whale and her calf are sighted, and we were in the right place at the right time to experience the interaction of mother and calf during our first day of whale watching. Sightings kept getting better each day as more close encounters with Blue Whales were experienced, and on the second day we saw up to 12 different Blue Whales all around our boat.

Moving towards Yala, we visited a few owl roosts and came across Brown Fish Owl, Collared Scops Owl and Jungle Owlet. The very rare Black-necked Stork was sighted in Yala, and a close encounter with a curious Sloth Bear was the highlight of the morning safari session. It walked right up to our jeep and gently lifted its head up as if to say "hi" before continuing its journey. The day kept getting better as a lazy Leopard slept under a bush just a few metres from our jeep. We saw it rolling around, cleaning itself and occasionally sitting up to scan its surrounding. Towards the evening another young Leopard was sighted trying to improve its hunting skills by chasing Spotted Deer around a water hole. It tired soon and then climbed up a tree and relaxed, giving us some the best views of a Leopard anyone could want.

From encounters with huge Asian Elephants to small Indian Gerbils, it was a successful tour with sightings of 19 mammal species, nine of reptiles and amphibians, and 141 bird species to conclude another successful tour.



Leopard



Brahminy Kite



Glossy Ibis



Blue Whale

### Highlights from our November tour

This tour provided wonderful sightings of Blue Whales & Leopards, in addition to the other abundant wildlife of Sri Lanka. Every day at sea yielded plenty of Blue Whale encounters along with Bryde's Whales, Spinner Dolphins and a very rare sighting of the Giant Oceanic Manta Ray. The annual Blue Whale season off the southern coast of Sri Lanka was at its finest with blue skies and clear visibility.

Our search for Leopards, the apex predator of the island, was also fruitful as we enjoyed close encounters with the felines of Yala. Sloth Bears, Asian Elephants, Estuarine and Muggger Crocodiles were amongst the mix of wildlife we enjoyed her. The migrant Amur Falcon also graced us with its presence in Yala.

Overall we had sighting of 24 species of Mammals, 179 species of Birds and 13 other species.



Yala National Park



Leopard



Blue Whale



Sloth Bear

### Highlights from our December tour

Despite no luck of sighting any Blue Whales on this tour overall marine wildlife sightings were at its optimal with a very rare sighting of the Fin Whale along with Bryd's Whales, Killer Whale, Spinner & Rissos's Dolphins and Green Turtle. Further inland at Yala fantastic sightings of a Sloth Bear with its cub delighted the group and as the day progressed the Leopards of Yala displayed themselves in all their grandeur by walking right in front our jeeps. The impressive Elephants of Yala also made their appearance along with Wild Boar, Sambar Deer and Golden Jackal. In total we saw 23 mammal species, 07 species of reptiles, amphibians and fish and 120 bird species to make another successful trip.

### Highlights from our March tour

During this tour we saw 19 species of mammals, 142 bird species, and seven species of reptiles. Our sea trip in search of the whales was successful, with encounters of Blue Whales on two days and a very rare sighting of a Fin Whale on the third day. Spinner Dolphins were numerous, and we enjoyed their acrobatic displays and as they swam beside our boat and leaped into the air with a spin. The evening hours at Koggala were active, with visits to the Kirala kele sanctuary where we saw Yellow Bittern, Striated Heron, Blue-tailed Bee-eaters and many more fascinating birds. The stories surrounding the famous Dutch Galle fort kept us absorbed as we explored its fascinating city and walked along the sturdy ramparts that still protect this fort city.

Leopard sightings at Yala were remarkable and almost felt that it was an exclusive show for us as we gently followed a Leopard on the main road for almost 15 minutes. We had sightings of Leopards on both our safaris and both were

delightful sightings. Asian Elephants, Wild Boar, Samba, Spotted Deer and Ruddy Mongoose were amongst the many mammals we encountered at Yala during our safari.

During the Sinharaja extension we were able to see the Serendib Scops Owl, Chestnut-backed Owlet, Sri Lanka Frogmouth, Sri Lanka Spurfowl, Green-billed Coucal and Sri Lanka Drongo, along with Brown Mongoose and Purple-faced Leaf Monkey.



Blue Whale



Leopard



Asian Elephant



Spinner Dolphin