Sri Lanka's Tropical Flora

Naturetrek Tour Report

24 March - 4 April 2013

Report compiled by Dhammithera Samarasinghe



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton T: +44 (0)1962 733051 Alresford

Hampshire SO24 0NG

England

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

F: +44 (0)1962 736426
W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour Leader: Dhammithera Samarasinghe

Participants: David Hartill

Mackenzie Rose Fochs Robert Snellgrove Sandra Snellgrove

Day 1

Sunday 24th March

The flight arrived on time. We drove 10 minutes to our nearby Airport Garden Hotel to spend our first night. After settling into the hotel and having lunch, our afternoon plan was to do the boat ride in the Muthurawela which is a mangrove eco-system but we decided to postpone the boat ride to the last day due to heavy rain, and drive back to the hotel for dinner where I did the briefing for the following day.

Day 2

Monday 25th March

After breakfast we made our way north to our next destination, Sigiriya. After a short distance we stopped at an abundant paddy field to see a pair of Blue-tailed Bee-eaters and a wealth of wetland species including various Herons and Egrets. Though this is a botanical tour, the group was very interested in birding and other wildlife as well. Just after the rain lots of Butterflies started to migrate. Thousands of Common Emigrants and Albatross took part in this migration following the direction of the wind. During the drive we passed different natural habitats and some man-made habitats, like rice fields, coconut plantations and gardens.

After two hours' drive we stopped to freshen up by re staurant in a nice location where the garden had a lot of medicinal plants. The group had a rare chance of observing a Blue- tiger Butterfly laying eggs on her food plant. We later stopped in a forest plantation by the road side. This plantation is dominated by Jack trees and Mahogany trees. We had nice view of a land snail. We reached Hotel Sigiriya for lunch.

During the afternoon we visited the Sigiriya rock fortress. First we walked around the water garden and Macenzie and David decided to climb the Rock. Other two joined me to do bird watching around the rock. It was a nice afternoon, and within a very short time we managed to record more than 20 species of birds. The "rock climbers" completed their challenge within two hours and they were very happy. They said it was well worth the effort. We finished another splendid day with plants, birds, and butterflies.

Day 3

Tuesday 26th March

The dawn patrol was enjoyable, and we left the Hotel Sigiriya after breakfast and began the fairly short journey to Kandy. En route we paid our customary visit to the Spice Garden near Matale and we were given a conducted tour of the garden. Threading our way through the traffic we made our way to Hotel Suisse located in the heart of the city, our accommodation for the next three nights. The elegance of this old colonial hotel gave us a taste of former splendour. After lunch we set off for nearby Udawattakele Sanctuary. This forest is dominated by *Artocarpus nobilis* (Wild Jack tree) and *Artocarpus heterophyllus* (Jack). Most of the large trees were covered by *Pilodandramue creeper* (Devil's Ivy). There are many vine and liana species growing in the Udawattakele forest most notable is the giant creeper (*Entada rheedii*). We spent a few minutes at a view point overlooking the city.

Later, as dusk settled in, hundreds of Egrets began flying in to roost on an island in Kandy Lake, filling the tree tops as we passed by on our way to the hotel.

Day 4

Wednesday 27th March

After breakfast we headed towards Knuckles forest with our packed lunch. The area was named 'Knuckles' by British surveyors due to the prominent landscape feature, a group of five peaks that resemble the knuckles of a clenched fist seen from many viewpoints. Knuckles forest reserve is very unique due to its diverse range of climatic and landscape features; it harbours highly diverse species of flora and fauna, in a variety of habitats. Lots of butterflies were flying along the road side and Robert and Sandra were happy taking photos of them. We had our lunch at the Courbet's gap, a very famous view point in the Knuckles. At the view point, we recorded some flowering orchids. After lunch we slowly walked through the gap and the forest under-growth was dominated by cultivated cardamom plants. The giant Calophyllum sp. trees dominate the forest canopy. Callophyllum inophyllum, Loxoc- occus rupicola, Magifera zeylanica, Calophyllum walker, Canarium zeylanicum, and Macaranga peltata were the other common species we recorded before returning to the hotel in the evening.

Day 5

Thursday 28th March

Today after breakfast, we drove to the Botanical Gardens, and spent an absorbing few hours wandering through the acres of beautifully maintained gardens. This is an idyllic location, set amid thickly forested hills, and is a great place to observe hundreds of large Fruit Bats in their day roosts. Some bats hang asleep while others are grooming their fur, and a few neighbours squabble with each other in some dispute over space. It is an impressive spectacle. First we walked along the spice garden. The Cinnamon (Cinnamonum verum) is a very popular spice, one of the chief export crops of Sri Lanka. One of the main attractions was the Orchid House. It exhibits hundreds of captivating blooms. It is impossible to list all interesting species and hybrids but among them were Onicidium var. "Golden shower" locally called the "Kandyan dancer" because of the resemblance of its lip petal to the form and costume of a kandyan dancer. Near the orchid house is the plant house, which represents the collection of indoor plants.

The Cannon ball Tree (*Couroupita surinamensis*) from South America was very interesting. This tree produces large, waxy, cream and pink, sweet scented flowers on long woody stalks arising from the trunk. These are followed by the large, brown, globular, hard-shelled fruits which resemble cannon balls. Various kinds of Bamboos are planted on the river bank and they help to control soil erosion while at the same time adding a distinct charm to the surroundings. The most significant bamboo in the Garden's collection is the Giant Bamboo of Burma (*Dendrocalamus giganteus*). The stem attains a height of about 30m, while the base measures about 20-25cm. New shoots grow at the rate of about 25-30 cm a day reaching their full height in about 2 to 3 months!

We walked in the Garden's Arboretum of about 22 hectares and it contains well over 10,000 trees. Around the Great Circle, is the memorial tree collection. Some trees were planted to commemorate visits of Royalty, Heads of State and religious dignitaries and events of national importance which dates back to the colonial era, and continues to-date. One tree was planted in 1875 by King Edward VII. Other places we visited were, the Palm Avenue, Medicinal and Student's Gardens and the collection of Cycads.

We drove back to hotel for the lunch. We changed clothes in preparation for an early evening visit to the place where the Kandian dancing is performed. The hour long program, which includes juggling and fire walking as well as traditional dances, was voted a hit by the tour members.

Day 6

Friday 29th March

After breakfast, we visited the Temple of Tooth Relic. We left the city at 9.30am and drove along the winding road to Nuwara Eliya, the capital of the hill country. The lushness of the vegetation around Kandy gave way to a succession of tea estates as we gradually climbed into the hills, seeing the huge factory buildings surrounded by tea plantations. We paid a visit to the tea factory and spent an interesting 45 minutes being shown the various processes of tea production by one of the staff, followed by a complimentary cup of tea as a prelude to some serious tea buying!

Having been educated in the mysteries of tea production, and clutching packets of tea, we continued on our way to Nuwara Eliya the road twisting ever higher through a series of hairpins affording splendid views of deep forested valleys, and distant ranges of hills. We enjoyed a fine lunch then drove back to Victoria Park, in the heart of Nuwara Eliya. This is an unlikely hot-spot, a busy town park of tidily manicured flower-beds and shrubs, but with a rubbish-strewn muddy stream, but it regularly attracts a splendid mix of both resident hill country birds and winter visitors from the Himalayas.

Day 7

Saturday 30th March

After breakfast, we left the hotel at 7.30 with a packed lunch for the excursion to Horton Plains. After buying our entry tickets we walked along the main road which is very good for birds. We saw the Dull Blue Flycatcher an endemic bird, Sri Lanka white-eye another endemic. Later, patches of thick fog lifted and some grazing Sambar deer attracted our attention. When we walked along the world's end trail, we recorded two *Drosera* species (Tropical Sundew) and some red Rhododendrons. Robert, Sandra and I had a nice view of Purple-faced Leaf Monkeys - a bonus for the day. When we reached the worlds end it was not much clearer, so we rested, and stared our final walk to the main entrance.

The forest at Horton Plains consists of rather gnarled trees, with many epiphytes and mosses on their trunks. There is a rich undergrowth of shrubs and herbs. Many endemic and very beautiful plant species can be found here, such as *Osbeckia lanata*, *Hedyotis lessertiana* and various *Strobilanthes* species. After returning to hotel we had a nice cup of tea and then did the list before retiring to bed.

Day 8

Sunday 31st March

After breakfast we left for our next destination; Rathnapura. First we drove to Tangmalle forest reserve. This forest has a rich bio-diversity and a large number of fauna and flora species. The road through the reserve leads to a bungalow called Adisham. This bungalow belonged to a Tea planter and was built in 1929. The house was designed in the Tudor style along the lines of Leeds Castle in Kent, with stout granite walls of locally quarried stone, long, narrow turret windows and chimneys. The roof is covered with flat Burma teak shingles. Here we had cup of tea and walked along the beautiful garden.

As we were early for lunch; we decided to drive to a waterfall which is 10 km away called Diyaluma. After the previous rains, it was full of water. We had lunch at Belihul Oya rest-house and drive to Ratnapura for the night.

Day 9 Monday 1st April

After breakfast, we made our way to Sinharaja which was an important site of this tour. With a couple of leg stretches along the way, we were at the hotel for the lunch. In the afternoon we walked along the village. The village garden is a traditional forest garden, with a mix of trees, palms, bushes and vines, is a truly wondrous agro-ecosystem. Here, in contrast to modern intensive agriculture, is a small yet highly productive and sustainable method of farming with the closest approximation to nature, which not only promotes biodiversity but also conserves water, soil and energy, requires no fertilizers or pesticides, and contributes little to global warming.

Day 10

Tuesday 2nd April

Our full day at Sinharaja commenced with breakfast at 06.00 and we took a jeep to the park ticket office and then, for 30 minutes, up a rough and winding road to the core area of the rainforest reserve. The rest of the morning was spent slowly walking on the three kilometre trail to the old research station, an early highlight being a very obliging pair of Junglefowl that came running along the trail to greet us! After about 30 minutes we came across a mixed species feeding flock containing a lot of new and mostly endemic species, with Orange-billed Babblers, Sri- Lanka Drongo and Ashy-headed Laughingthrush.

Our focus was inevitably on the birdlife but it is not possible to visit Sinharaja without marvelling at the sheer profusion of plants and insects or being conscious that so much of the natural history is endemic to this vast dipterocarp forest. Bright pink Bamboo Orchids were a numerous sight growing beside the path and further splashes of colour were provided by countless butterflies dancing over the flowers. Among these were some of the largest and rarest of the island species but the insect that epitomizes Sinharaja is perhaps the exotic Tree Nymph, a huge black and white butterfly which floats over the forest trees like a scrap of paper blown by the wind. As we made our way along the trail, Sri Lanka Blue Magpie made a visit and waited for us to feed them. A couple of Frogmouths were roosting in a tree.

Slowly making our way back to the barrier, we suddenly heard the unmistakable sound of a feeding flock heading our way through the forest and there followed a frantic few minutes as a wave of Orange-billed Babblers flowed through the canopy filling the air with a cacophony of calls as they followed a relentless search for prey. These babblers never travel alone and I was delighted to find that at least one Red-faced Malkoha was accompanying the flock, initially presenting very close views before ascending higher into the canopy.

Sinharaja displays a unique floristic composition the *Dipterocarpus* family dominates the canopy species of the rainforest. These species of the genus *Shorea* are the giants of the Sinharaja. Another abundant canopy species is Keena (*Calopyhllum trapezifolium*), found mainly in the areas disturbed by logging in the past. A unique species of the sub-canopy is the Diya-na (*Mesua ferrea*), notable during the time of its spectacular pink flush of new leaves, which is a phenomenon common to many rainforest trees. The giant Tree Ferns (*Cyathea* sp.) here are often found growing in dense stands near water. After this highlight, we drove back downhill for lunch and spent the afternoon around the hotel.

Day 11

Wednesday 3rd April

Today we started early as we wanted to do the boat ride which we postponed from the first day due to rain. After lunch, we set off went to Muthurajawela Marsh. The boat ride took nearly one hour at Muthurajawela marsh, which is the island's largest saline peat bog. Along the canal we recorded different kinds of mangrove species. The most common ones were *Avicennia* sp, *Lumnitzera* sp and *Aegiceras* sp. We all had our lastl dinner together.

Day 12

Thursday 4th April

Punctual to the last, we all assembled in the lobby. After breakfast we drove to the air port for sad farewells...

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.

Naturetrek Facebook

We are delighted to launch the Naturetrek Facebook page so that participants of Naturetrek tours can remain in touch after the holiday and share photos, comments and future travel plans.

Setting up a personal profile at www.facebook.com is quick, free and easy. The Naturetrek Facebook page is now live; do please pay us a visit!

Species List

Plants

Mango- Mangifera indica

Alstonia macrophylla

Temple tree- *Plumeria rubra*Tabubia- *Tabebuia rosea*

Durian- Durio zibethinus

Ceylon Iron Wood- Mesua ferrea

Dillenia indica

Ebony Tree- Diospyros ebenum

Albizia flacataria

Himalayan Elder- Sambucus hookeri

Indian Mahogany- *Toona ciliate*Bread Fruit- *Artocarpus incises*

Banyan Tree- Ficus benghalensis

Hill Goose Berry- Rodomyrtus tomentosa Rose Apple- Syzygium samarangense.

Fish tail palm- Caryota Urens

Coconut- Cocos nucifera var.typica

Silver Oak- Grevillea robusta

Tea- Camellia sinensis

Orchid- Coelogyne odoratissima

Tropical Sundew- Drosera burmanni

Soap Bush- Clidemia hirta

Exacum walker Eriocaulon sp.

Nutmeg- Myristica fragrans

Tropical rose-mallow- Hibiscus vitifolius

Rattleweed- Crotalaria retusa

Hypericum mysorense

Cat's-ear- Hypochoeris radicata

Impatiens cuspidate

Grass Orchid- Arundina graminifolia

Osbeckia lanata Oxalis latifolia

Rain tree- Samanea saman

Strobilanthes pulcherrima Strobilanthes viscose

Christisonia lawii

Sea Holly- Acanthus ilicifolius

Queen of Flowers- Amherstia nobilis

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

Sri Lanka Junglefowl, Gallus lafayetii

Lesser Whistling-duck, Dendrocygna javanica

Black -headed lbis, Threskiornis melanocephalus

Amberralla - Spondias dulcis

Cerbera odollam

African flame- Spathodea campanulata

Kapok tree- Ceiba pentandra Melon tree- Carica papaya

Tropical Almond- Terminalia catappa

Dipterocarpus zeylanicus Rododendron arboreum

Cannon Ball Tree- Couroupita surinamensis

Mahogani- *Swietenia mocrophylla*Jack Fruit- *Artocarpus heterophyllus*Wild Bread Fruit- *Artocarpus nobilis*

Bo-tree- Ficus religiosa

Clove- Syzygium aromaticum

Betel-nut Palm- Areca catechu

King Coconut- Cocos nucifera var.aurantiaca Giant Bamboo- Dendrocalamus giganteus

Fern-leaf Tree- Filicium decipiens

Ganges primrose- Asystasia gangetica

Hedyotis lessertiana

Shield-leaved Sundew- Drosera peltata

Sri Lanka Jesmine- Tabernaemontana divaricata

Clerodendrum infortunatum

Giant Taro- Alocasia macrorrhizos

Banana- Musa paradisiacal

Trumpet flower- *Brugmansia candida* Yellow Balsam- *Impatiens repens*

Hibiscus furcatus

Lantana- *Lantana camara Justicia procumbens*Osbeckia parvifolia

Sensitive Plant- Mimosa pudica

Violet- Viola pilosa Strobilanthes diandra Plectranthus inflatus Exacum trinervium

Osbeckia octandra

Blue Dawn Glory- Ipomoea indica

Calophyllum inophyllum

Indian Peafowl, Pavo cristatus

Asian Openbill, Anastomus oscitans

Black-crowned Night Heron, Nycticorax nycticorax

Striated Heron, *Butorides striata*Grey Heron, *Ardea cinerea*Cattle Egret, *Bubulcus ibis*

Intermediate Egret, Mesophoyx intermedia

Little Grebe, Tachybaptus ruficollis

Indian Cormorant, Phalacrocorax fuscicollis

Brahminy Kite, Haliastur indus

Gray-headed Fish Eagle, *Lcthyophaga ichthyaetus*Changeable Hawk Eagle, *Spizaetus cirrhatus*White-breasted Waterhen, *Amaurornis phoenicurus*

Purple Swamphen, Porphyrio porphyrio Black-winged Stilt, Himantopus himantopus Common Sandpiper, Actitis hypoleucos

Little Tern, Sternula albifrons
Common Pigeon, Columba livia
Emerald Dove, Chalcophaps indica
Green Imperial Pigeon, Ducula aenea
Alexandrine Parakeet, Psittacula eupatria
Plum-headed Parakeet, Psittacula cyanocephala

Asian Koel, Endynamys scolopacerus Indian Swiftlet, Collocalia unicolor Alpine Swift, Tachymarptis melba

Crested Treeswift, Hemiprocne coronata Green Bee-eater, Merops orientalis

Chestnut-headed Bee-eater, *Merops leschenaulti* White-throated Kingfisher, *Halcyon smyrnensis*

Malabar Trogon, Harpactes fasciatus

Yellow-fronted Barbet, Megalaima flavifrons

Coppersmith Barbet, Megalaima haemacephala

Lesser Yellownape, Picus chlorophus

Sri Lanka Woodshrike, Tephrodornis (pondicerianus) affinis

Small Minivet, Pericrocotus cinnamomeus

Brown Shrike, Lanius cristatus

Black-hooded Oriole, Oriolus xanthornus

House Crow, Corvus splendens Barn Swallow, Hirundo rustica

Sri Lanka Swallow, Cecropis (daurica) hyperythra White-bellied Drongo, Dicrurus caerulescens Forest Wagtail, Dendronanthus indicus

Paddyfield Pipit, Anthus rufulus

Yellow-eared Bulbul, Pycnonotus penicillatus

Yellow-browed Bulbul, Acritillas indica

Plain Prinia, Prinia inornoata

Blyth's Reed Warbler, Acrocephalus dumetorum

Brown-capped Babbler, Pellorneum fuscocapillus

Black-naped Monarch, Hypothymis azurea

Dark-fronted Babbler, Rhopocichla atriceps

Indian Pond Heron, Ardeola grayii
Purpul Heron, Ardea purpurea

Great Egret, casmerodius albus Little Egret, Egretta garzetta

Little Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax niger* Black-winged Kite, *Elanus caeruleus*

White-bellied Sea Eagle, Haliaeetus leucogaster
Oriental Honey-buzzard, Pernis ptilorhynchus
Mountain Hawk Eagle, Spizaetus nipalensis

Watercock, Gallicrex cinerea

Pheasant-tailed Jacana, Hydrophasianus chirurgus

Red-wattled lapwing, Vanellus indicus

Common Tern, Sterna hirunda
Whiskered Tern, Chlidonias hybrida
Spotted Dove, Stigmatopelia chinensis

Sri Lanka Green Pigeon, Treron (Pompadora) pompadora

Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot, Loriculus beryllinus Rose-ringed Parakeet, Psittacula krameri Layard's Parakeet, Psittacula calthropae

Sri Lanka Frogmouth, Batrachostomus moniliger

Asian Palm Swift, Cypsiurus balasiensis

House Swift, Apus affinis

Indian Roller, Coracias benghalensis

Blue-tailed Bee-eater, Merops philippinus

Stork-billed Kingfisher, Pelargopsis capensis

Common Kingfisher, Alcedo atthis

Brown-headed Barbet, *Megalaima zeylanica*Crimson-fronted Barbet, *Megalaima rubricapillus*Sri lanka Grey Hornbill, *Ocyceros gingalensis*Lesser Goldenback, *Dinopium benghalense*

Black-headed Cuckooshrike, Coracina melanoptera Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike, Hemipus picatus

Common Iora, Aegithina tiphia

Sri Lanka Blue Magpie, Urocissa ornata Large-billed Crow, Corvus macrorhynchos Hill Swallow, Hirundo(tahitica) domicola Ashy Woodswallow, Artamus fuscus

Sri Lanka Drongo, Dicrurus (paradiseus) lophorhinus

Grey Wagtail, Motacilla cinerea

Red-vented Bulbul, Pycnonotus cafer
White-browed Bulbul, Pycnonotus luteolus
Black Bulbul, Hypsipetes leucocephalus
Common Tailorbird, Orthotomus sutorius
White-browed Fantail, Rhipidura aureola

Asian Paradise-flycatcher, *Terpsiphone paradise*Sri Lanka Scimitar Babbler, *Pomatorhinus melanurus*

Orange-billed Babbler, Turdoides rufescens

Yellow-billed Babbler , *Turdoides affinis* Lesser Hill Myna, *Gracula (religioosa) indica*

Oriental Magpie Robin, Copsychus saularis

tickell's Blue Flycatcher, Cyornis tickelliae

Pale-billed Flowerpecker, Dicaeum erythrorhynchos

Loten's Sunbird, Nectarinia lotenia

Indian Robin, Saxicoloides fulicatus

Sri Lanka White-eye, Zosterops ceylonensis

Great Tit, Parus major

Sri Lanka Hill Myna, Gracula ptilogenys
Common Myna, Acridotheres tristis

White-rumped Shama, Copsychus malabaricus

Pied Bushchat, Saxicola caprata

Legge's Flowerpecker, *Dicaeum vincens*Purple-rumped Sunbird, *Nectarinia zeylonica*Oriental White-eye, *Zosterops palpebrosus*Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, *Sitta frontalis*

Butterflies

Common birdwing - *Troides helena*Ceylon rose -*Atrophaneura sp.*Common mormon, - *Papilio polytes*

Blue bottle , - Graphium sarpedon

Psyche, - Leptosia nina

Chocolate albatross - Appias lyncida Lesser albatross, - Appias paulina Dark Wanderer, - Valeria ceylanica Common grass yellow- Eurema hecabe

Tree nymph, -Idea lynceus
Blue tiger, - Danaus limniace
Glassy tiger, - Danaus aglea
Plain tiger, - Danaus chrysippus
Common crow, - Euploea core
Angled castor, - Ariadne ariadne
Common Cerulean- Jamides alecto
Chestnut-streaked sailor- Neptis jumbah

Clipper, - Parthenos sylvia

Danaid Eggfly - Hypolimnas misippus Common evening brown- Melanitis leda

Nigger aka Smooth-eyed Bushbrown - Orsotriaena medus

White four-ring, - Ypthima ceylonica Ceylon palmfly, -Elymnias singala Indian Skipper, -Spialia galba Crimson rose -Atrophaneura hector

Red Helen -Papilio helenus

Blue mormon - Papilio polymnestor Green jay, - Graphium agamemnon

Jezebel, - Delias eucharis

Common albatross, - Appias albina
Lemon emigrant, - Catopsilia pomona
Small grass yellow - Eurema brigitta
Three-spot grass yellow- Eurema blanda

Blue glassy tiger, - Danaus similis

Dark blue tiger, -Danaus septentrionis Ceylon tiger, - Danaus taprobana

Common tiger, - Danaus genutia
King crow, - Euplocea klugii
Chocolate soldier - Precis iphita
Common sailor, - Neptis hylas
Commander, - Limenitis procris
Great eggfly, - Hypolimnas bolina
Tawny costor, - Telchinia violae

Common tree brown, - Lethe rohria
Gladeye bushbrown, - Mycalesis patina
Palmfly, - Elymnias hypermnestra

Plum Judy, -Abisara echerius

Mammals

Flying fox- Pteropus giganteus
Grey langur- Semnopithecus priam
Domestic water buffalo- Bubalus bubalis
Palm squirrel- Funambulus plmarum

Giant squirrel- Ratufa macroura

Toque monkey- Macaca sinica

Purple-faced leaf monkey- Trachypithecus vetulus

Sambar – Carvus unicolor

Dusky-striped jungle squirrel- Funambulus sublineatus

Black-naped hare- Lepus nigricollis