

# Sri Lanka - Blue Whales & Leopards

Naturetrek Tour Report

11 - 20 February 2012

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Dolphins by Helen Pugh



Blue Whale by Ian Hunt



Water Monitor by Ian Hunt



Dramatic sky by Ian Hunt

Report compiled by Dhammithera Samarasinghe with input from Ian Hunt  
Images courtesy of Helen Pugh and Ian Hunt



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## Days 1 - 2

## Saturday 11th - Sunday 12th February

I met the group on arrival at airport and welcomed them. Having spent nearly ten hours in the flight the group was tired. A diversion to the Airport Garden Hotel gave the chance to freshen up and rest. We had breakfast at 6am and began the long drive to Mirissa. We headed south through Colombo and at Hikkaduwa, we stopped for a tea break and stretch our legs. Coconut palms grow in abundance along this coastal strip, and as the road hugged the coastline we could see brightly coloured fishing boats. Reminders of the 2004 tsunami were along the roadside, which brought it into reality for us. We made good progress and arrived at the Paradise Beach Hotel in Mirissa with time to settle into our rooms and explore the beautiful gardens. Lizards, Palm Squirrels, tree climbing Hermit Crabs in decorative shells, and alluring flowers caught our attention. After our journey we idled away the early afternoon relaxing by the pool, on the beach strolling around looking for birds or napping peacefully in the cool of our hotel rooms.

## Days 2 - 5

## Monday 12th - Thursday 15th February

Our main target for the next three days was to see the largest mammal on earth – the Blue Whale. In the morning we had a short drive to Mirissa Harbour to board our vessel. Our first sighting was of a pair of Green Turtles mating. After nearly five nautical miles, the boat crew shouted “Dolphins” - we were all excited as a school of 12 Spinner Dolphins frolicked around the boat.

We will never forget our first encounter with a Blue Whale. Towering blows were seen before it started to roll its massive form into a dive. We waited with baited breath for its huge flukes to appear but its back seemed to go on forever - the tail finally appeared, and it looked more like the wings of jet aircraft taking off!

“Another one at 3 o’ clock.... another one at 9 o’ clock... and another one .... it must be a cow and a calf”. We had about 7 different Blue Whales and one Bryde’s Whale. We had as many as 15-16 sightings! The boat turned for port but that was not the end of our excitement. We had another unexpected treat in store for us - we saw more Spinner Dolphins on the way back .

In the afternoon we went to an eco-tourist reserve at “Kerala Kele” for a nature walk where we saw a lot of water birds such as Yellow Bitterns, Purple Swamp-hens, Pied-Kingfishers and Stork-billed Kingfisher. The sight of a Water Monitor was an added complement.

The second day trip surpassed the previous day we had at least 7-8 different Blue Whales and 18 -19 sightings! Spinner Dolphins were again plentiful on the way out.

The weather was not kind for us on day 4 as it was raining in the early morning. A decision was taken not to go out on the boat, so a late breakfast was had. Later on that day we went to Galle Fort which is a World Heritage Site.

On the 5th day we did another boat trip before departing to Yala and we had 12 Blue Whales and Spinner Dolphins and enjoyed sightings many of which were prolonged and simply breathtaking. The number of Blue Whale sightings we had for those three days reinforced my awareness of Sri Lanka's standing as one of the worlds hotspots for Blue Whales.

## Days 5 - 8

## Thursday 15th - Sunday 18th February

### LEOPARDS AT YALA

Our maritime adventures were over and on day 5 we re-located to the dry zone reserve of Yala National Park. Over the next two days we did two all day safaris.

The group had heard so much about Leopard encounters at Yala and we were hopeful that one would cross our path. Early morning is normally a better time for such an encounter. The park opened at 6am and shortly afterwards our jeep was driving along the track to reach the core area of the park, which is home to one of the highest densities of Leopards on the planet. In the morning we saw Spotted and Barking Deer, an occasional Wild Boar and many exciting birds including Great Thick-knee and Yellow-wattle Lapwing, but of the magnificent spotted cat, there was no sign.

By 2.30pm most of us had seen some impressive mammals such as Spotted Deer, Sambar Deer, Asian Elephants and Golden Jackal. At last, a large lithe Leopard lay on a rock. We watched him for the next 15 minutes, initially resting regally, then up on his hunches, and finally he stood and climbed down from the rock and sauntered into the undergrowth. Another Leopard was spotted in a tree some distance from the track, but too far for photos...

We were heading back to the main gate and we are only 500m from the entrance, and the light was very low, when suddenly a magnificent male Leopard crossed the road. Three Leopard sightings for the first day - we were lucky!!

On day seven, we were not lucky with Leopard but we saw some wonderful birds such as a large flock of Malabar Pied Hornbills, and Brown Fish Owl. Mammals such as Elephants, Wild Boar, Golden Jackals, Ruddy Mongoose, Spotted Deer and Mugger Crocodiles all featured in the day's tally.

## Day 9

## Monday 19th February

Before the drive to Colombo we did a morning nature walk around the hotel garden. In front of the hotel, nearly 2 kms away in a rocky area, two Leopards were sat on a rock and we watched them with our binoculars - it was a nice farewell to Sri Lanka...

## Day 10

Tuesday 20th February

Return flight to the UK.

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## Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

|    |                           |                                    |
|----|---------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1  | Little Grebe              | <i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>      |
| 2  | Indian Cormorant          | <i>Phalacrocorax fuscicollis</i>   |
| 3  | Little Cormorant          | <i>Phalacrocorax niger</i>         |
| 4  | Darter                    | <i>Anhinga melanogaster</i>        |
| 5  | Grey Heron                | <i>Ardea cinerea</i>               |
| 6  | Purple Heron              | <i>Ardea purpurea</i>              |
| 7  | Great White Egret         | <i>Ardea alba</i>                  |
| 8  | Intermediate Egret        | <i>Egretta intermedia</i>          |
| 9  | Little Egret              | <i>Egretta garzetta</i>            |
| 10 | Cattle Egret              | <i>Bubulcus ibis</i>               |
| 11 | Indian Pond Heron         | <i>Ardeola grayii</i>              |
| 12 | Striated Heron            | <i>Butorides striata</i>           |
| 13 | Black-crowned Night Heron | <i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>       |
| 14 | Yellow Bittern            | <i>Ixobrychus sinensis</i>         |
| 15 | Black Bittern             | <i>Ixobrychus flavicollis</i>      |
| 16 | Painted Stork             | <i>Mycteria leucocephala</i>       |
| 17 | Asian Openbill            | <i>Anastomus oscitans</i>          |
| 18 | Black-necked Stork        | <i>Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus</i>  |
| 19 | Lesser Adjutant           | <i>Leptoptilos javanicus</i>       |
| 20 | Black-headed Ibis         | <i>Threskiornis melanocephalus</i> |
| 21 | Eurasian Spoonbill        | <i>Platalea leucorodia</i>         |
| 22 | Lesser Whistling-Duck     | <i>Dendrocygna javanica</i>        |
| 23 | Brahminy Kite             | <i>Haliastur indus</i>             |
| 24 | White-bellied Sea Eagle   | <i>Haliaeetus leucogaster</i>      |
| 25 | Grey-headed Fish Eagle    | <i>Ichthyophaga ichthyaeus</i>     |
| 26 | Crested Serpent Eagle     | <i>Spilornis cheela</i>            |
| 27 | Shikra                    | <i>Accipiter badius</i>            |
| 28 | Changeable Hawk-Eagle     | <i>Spizaetus cirrhatius</i>        |
| 29 | Sri Lanka Junglefowl      | <i>Gallus lafayetii</i>            |
| 30 | Indian Peafowl            | <i>Pavo cristatus</i>              |
| 31 | Barred Buttonquail        | <i>Turnix suscitator</i>           |
| 32 | White-breasted Waterhen   | <i>Amaurornis phoenicurus</i>      |
| 33 | Watercock                 | <i>Gallicrex cinerea</i>           |
| 34 | Purple Swampphen          | <i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>         |
| 35 | Moorhen                   | <i>Gallinula chloropus</i>         |
| 36 | Pheasant-tailed Jacana    | <i>Hydrophasianus chirurgus</i>    |
| 37 | Black-winged Stilt        | <i>Himantopus himantopus</i>       |
| 38 | Great Thick-Knee          | <i>Esacus recurvirostris</i>       |
| 39 | Yellow-wattled Lapwing    | <i>Vanellus malabaricus</i>        |
| 40 | Red-wattled Lapwing       | <i>Vanellus indicus</i>            |
| 41 | Pacific Golden Plover     | <i>Pluvialis fulva</i>             |
| 42 | Kentish Plover            | <i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>     |
| 43 | Lesser Sand Plover        | <i>Charadrius mongolus</i>         |
| 44 | Pin-tailed Snipe          | <i>Gallinago stenura</i>           |
| 45 | Black-tailed Godwit       | <i>Limosa limosa</i>               |
| 46 | Common Sandpiper          | <i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>          |
| 47 | Marsh Sandpiper           | <i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>          |
| 48 | Wood Sandpiper            | <i>Tringa glareola</i>             |
| 49 | Common Redshank           | <i>Tringa totanus</i>              |
| 50 | Ruddy Turnstone           | <i>Arenaria interpres</i>          |
| 51 | Little Stint              | <i>Calidris minuta</i>             |

|     |                              |                                   |
|-----|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 52  | Curlew Sandpiper             | <i>Calidris ferruginea</i>        |
| 53  | Little Tern                  | <i>Sternula albifrons</i>         |
| 54  | Gull-billed Tern             | <i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>      |
| 55  | Whiskered Tern               | <i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>         |
| 56  | White-winged Tern            | <i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>     |
| 57  | Common Tern                  | <i>Sterna hirundo</i>             |
| 58  | Lesser Crested Tern          | <i>Thalasseus bengalensis</i>     |
| 59  | Great Crested Tern           | <i>Thalasseus bergii</i>          |
| 60  | Rock Dove                    | <i>Columba livia</i>              |
| 61  | Spotted Dove                 | <i>Streptopelia chinensis</i>     |
| 62  | Orange-breasted Green Pigeon | <i>Treron bicinctus</i>           |
| 63  | Pompadour Green Pigeon       | <i>Treron pompadora</i>           |
| 64  | Rose-ringed Parakeet         | <i>Psittacula krameri</i>         |
| 65  | Asian Koel                   | <i>Eudynamys scolopaceus</i>      |
| 66  | Greater Coucal               | <i>Centropus sinensis</i>         |
| 67  | Indian Scops Owl             | <i>Otus bakkamoena</i>            |
| 68  | Brown Fish Owl               | <i>Ketupa zeylonensis</i>         |
| 69  | Indian Swiftlet              | <i>Aerodramus unicolor</i>        |
| 70  | Asian Palm Swift             | <i>Cypsiurus balasiensis</i>      |
| 71  | Little Swift                 | <i>Apus affinis</i>               |
| 72  | Crested Treeswift            | <i>Hemiprocne coronata</i>        |
| 73  | Stork-billed Kingfisher      | <i>Pelargopsis capensis</i>       |
| 74  | White-throated Kingfisher    | <i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>         |
| 75  | Common Kingfisher            | <i>Alcedo atthis</i>              |
| 76  | Pied Kingfisher              | <i>Ceryle rudis</i>               |
| 77  | Little Green Bee-Eater       | <i>Merops orientalis</i>          |
| 78  | Blue-tailed Bee-Eater        | <i>Merops philippinus</i>         |
| 79  | Chestnut-headed Bee-Eater    | <i>Merops leschenaulti</i>        |
| 80  | Indian Roller                | <i>Coracias benghalensis</i>      |
| 81  | Hoopoe                       | <i>Upupa epops</i>                |
| 82  | Malabar Pied Hornbill        | <i>Anthracoceros coronatus</i>    |
| 83  | Brown-headed Barbet          | <i>Megalaima zeylanica</i>        |
| 84  | Coppersmith Barbet           | <i>Megalaima haemacephala</i>     |
| 85  | Yellow-crowned Woodpecker    | <i>Dendrocopos mahrattensis</i>   |
| 86  | Lesser Yellownappe           | <i>Picus chlorolophus</i>         |
| 87  | Black-rumped Flameback       | <i>Dinopium benghalense</i>       |
| 88  | Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark    | <i>Eremopterix griseus</i>        |
| 89  | Barn Swallow                 | <i>Hirundo rustica</i>            |
| 90  | Red-rumped Swallow           | <i>Cecropis daurica</i>           |
| 91  | Paddyfield Pipit             | <i>Anthus rufulus</i>             |
| 92  | Common Wood-Shrike           | <i>Tephrodornis pondicerianus</i> |
| 93  | Red-vented Bulbul            | <i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>           |
| 94  | White-browed Bulbul          | <i>Pycnonotus luteolus</i>        |
| 95  | Common Iora                  | <i>Aegithina tiphia</i>           |
| 96  | Oriental Magpie-Robin        | <i>Copsychus saularis</i>         |
| 97  | Indian Robin                 | <i>Saxicoloides fulicatus</i>     |
| 98  | White-browed Fantail         | <i>Rhipidura aureola</i>          |
| 99  | Asian Paradise-Flycatcher    | <i>Terpsiphona paradisi</i>       |
| 100 | Common Tailorbird            | <i>Orthotomus sutorius</i>        |
| 101 | Plain Prinia                 | <i>Prinia inornata</i>            |
| 102 | Yellow-billed Babbler        | <i>Turdoides affinis</i>          |
| 103 | Purple-rumped Sunbird        | <i>Leptocoma zeylonica</i>        |
| 105 | Purple Sunbird               | <i>Cinnyris asiaticus</i>         |
| 106 | Long-billed Sunbird          | <i>Cinnyris lotenius</i>          |
| 107 | Pale-billed Flowerpecker     | <i>Dicaeum erythrorhynchos</i>    |

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|     |                      |                              |
|-----|----------------------|------------------------------|
| 108 | Black-hooded Oriole  | <i>Oriolus xanthornus</i>    |
| 109 | Brown Shrike         | <i>Lanius cristatus</i>      |
| 110 | White-bellied Drongo | <i>Dicrurus caerulescens</i> |
| 111 | House Crow           | <i>Corvus splendens</i>      |
| 112 | Large-billed Crow    | <i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>  |
| 113 | Rosy Starling        | <i>Pastor roseus</i>         |
| 114 | Brahminy Starling    | <i>Sturnia pagodarum</i>     |
| 115 | Common Myna          | <i>Acridotheres tristis</i>  |
| 116 | House Sparrow        | <i>Passer domesticus</i>     |
| 117 | Baya Weaver          | <i>Ploceus philippinus</i>   |
| 118 | Nutmeg Mannikin      | <i>Lonchura punctulata</i>   |

## Mammals

|    |                         |                              |
|----|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1  | Toque Macaque           | <i>Macaca sinica</i>         |
| 2  | Grey Langur             | <i>Presbytis entellus</i>    |
| 3  | Ruddy Mongoose          | <i>Herpestes smithii</i>     |
| 4  | Leopard                 | <i>Panthera pardus</i>       |
| 5  | Indian Elephant         | <i>Elephas maximus</i>       |
| 6  | Wild Boar               | <i>Sus scrofa</i>            |
| 7  | Spotted Deer (Chital)   | <i>Cervus axis</i>           |
| 8  | Sambar                  | <i>Cervus unicolor</i>       |
| 9  | Water Buffalo           | <i>Bubalus arnee</i>         |
| 10 | Indian Palm Squirrel    | <i>Funambulus palmarum</i>   |
| 11 | Grizzled Giant Squirrel | <i>Ratufa macroura</i>       |
| 12 | Indian Hare             | <i>Lepus nigricollis</i>     |
| 13 | Indian Flying Fox       | <i>Pteropus gigantea</i>     |
| 14 | Blue Whale              | <i>Balaenoptera musculus</i> |
| 15 | Bryde's Whale           | <i>Balaenoptera edeni</i>    |
| 16 | Spinner Dolphin         | <i>Stenella longirostris</i> |