

Sri Lanka - Blue Whales & Leopards

Naturetrek Tour Report

24 November - 3 December 2012



Blue Whale



Leopard



Common Jezebel (*Delias eucharis*)



Chestnut-headed Bee-eater

Report compiled by Susantha Weerappuli
Images courtesy of Ian Harper



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Day 1

Saturday 24th November

Travel from the UK

Day 2

Sunday 25 November

Colombo/ Mirissa

The group arrived to Colombo Airport at 09.30am and directly transferred to Paradise Beach Hotel at Mirssa, on the south coast of Sri Lanka. On the way we had various stops, finding Oriental Honey Buzzard, Whiskered Tern, and Pied Kingfisher were amongst others. A Water Monitor also was seen in the Colombo suburbs, right in front of the Parliament complex! We drove along the newly built Colombo – Galle motorway enjoying the scenic countryside which included tea, rubber, coconut & cinnamon plantations and paddy fields along the way.

In the afternoon we had a walk in the village and found Purple-faced Leaf Monkeys, Toque Macaques, Indian Palm Squirrels were seen as well, and some bird species including Brown-headed Barbet, Indian Pond Heron, and Asian Koel. The Indian Flying Foxes (Fruit Bats) were also was a good sighting at the dusk, when they all started to leave their roosts.

Day 3

Monday 26th November

Mirissa

This morning we started our whale watching expedition. We sat on the upper deck of the boat and found our first pod of Bottlenose Dolphins after about 45 minutes sailing, and within a short time, we encountered a Blue Whale! First we saw the whale from a distance, but later on we saw it right next to our boat moving towards us. The gap between the whale and our boat was maybe less than 25 meters. It was a brilliant encounter! After lunch we had break and in the late afternoon we made our way to a Mangrove marsh and had some good bird sightings including Stork-Billed Kingfisher, Black-Hooded Oriole, Blyth's Reed Warbler, and Purple Swamphen amongst some other birds.

Day 4

Tuesday 27th November

Mirissa

On our second day of the whale watching we had a single Blue Whale sighting, it was also a very close view, the whale moved towards our boat and swam almost underneath it! All were excited! On the return journey to the harbour we had a sighting of two Sei Whales swimming together.

In the afternoon we paid a visit to the Galle Fort which is one of the World Heritage Sites in Sri Lanka. We saw some Rosy Starlings flying past, over the Galle International Cricket Stadium, towards their roosting sites, at the end of the day.

Day 5

Wednesday 28th November

Mirissa

It was the last day of the whale watching part of the tour, and we were little worried as the sea started a bit choppy at the beginning, but in a short while, it was calm. Today we saw a Blue Whale mother and a newborn calf. The mother whale also had a fairly different behaviour, staying on the surface for a rather longer time because of the little baby.

In the afternoon we went to the same mangrove marsh again but to a different part of it. Today we got some “crackers” there, Watercock, Black Bittern and Yellow Bittern.

Day 6

Thursday 29th November

Mirissa / Yala

Today we were travelling slowly towards Yala National Park in the south-east of the country, watching birds, Buddhist Temples, paddyfields, big water tanks in the dry zone and enjoying the countryside of this part of Sri Lanka. On the way we stopped at several places, and the Bundala Lagoon was the best as we saw hundreds of waders there.

After checked in at the Chaaya Wild Hotel near Yala National Park, almost everyone in our group got busy taking photographs of the Asian Elephant which was roaming around the chalets. Late afternoon we had a walk in the hotel garden, which has almost the same habitat and wildlife as inside Yala Park. We watched Marsh Muger Crocodiles, Wild Boar, and Spot-billed Pelicans in the waterhole right in front of the main restaurant.

Day 7

Friday 30th November

Yala

By 05.30 in the morning, we all gathered to the main lobby and collected our packed breakfast and lunch boxes and jumped in to two safari vehicles. We started our safari in the best National Park in Sri Lanka to see Leopards; Yala National Park. We moved slowly in the park watching abundant bird life in the dry zone.

Amazingly each and every waterhole we passed was full of waders and water birds and the forest patches in between the waterholes were filled with passerines and other forest bird species. In addition to that there were mammals; reptiles; butterflies; dragonflies and so on. There was plenty to see....and no rest for the eyes! Everybody had happy faces as the park was full of wildlife and different kinds of habitats.

While we were having our picnic lunch at one of the resting places near the beach, our park guide shouted that there was a bear on the distant rock! We focussed our binoculars on the rock, where a large Sloth Bear was sitting next to a waterhole on the top of the huge rock. What luck! The Sloth Bear is even rarer than a leopard in Sri Lanka!

In the late afternoon, we were worried as our main target hadn't been seen yet, but at the last moment we spotted a large male Leopard moving through the bushes next to a waterhole. The showing didn't last for long but everybody had the chance to see it.

Plenty of highlights for the day are worth a mention; Leopard, Sloth Bear, Marsh Mugger Crocodile, Hornbills, Hoopoe, Thick-knees, and Pelicans are only a few of them.

Day 8

Saturday 1st December

Yala

As most of the group members wanted to have another full day drive, we spent the whole day in the park again. Today we had more and closer Elephant sightings than yesterday. We also got a Leopard in a tree! Today the group enjoyed their wild life experiences as yesterday...

Day 9

Sunday 2nd December

Yala / Colombo

We had our breakfast at the hotel restaurant and started the long journey to Colombo. On the way we had a couple of stops, the first to see a Buddhist Temple at Tissamaharama. Later we were driving through Udawalawe National Park which is famous for wild Asian Elephants and then we had our lunch at the place called Ratnapura which means City of Gems. We visited a Gem Museum as well. After that we made our way straight to the hotel near the airport to spend the last night of the tour...

Day 10

Monday 3rd December

Return to the UK

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Species List

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name
Toque Macaque	<i>Macaca sinica</i>
Grey Langur	<i>Presbytis entellus</i>
Purple-faced Leaf Monkey	<i>Presbytis vetulus</i>
Golden Jackal	<i>Canis aureus</i>
Sloth Bear	<i>Melursus ursinus</i>
Indian Grey Mongoose	<i>Herpestes edwardsii</i>
Ruddy Mongoose	<i>Herpestes smithii</i>
Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus</i>
Indian Elephant	<i>Elephas maximus</i>
Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>
Spotted Deer (Chital)	<i>Cervus axis</i>
Sambar	<i>Cervus unicolor</i>
Water Buffalo	<i>Bubalus arnee</i>
Indian Palm Squirrel	<i>Funambulus palmarum</i>
Grizzled Giant Squirrel	<i>Ratufa macroura</i>
Indian Hare	<i>Lepus nigricollis</i>
Indian Flying Fox	<i>Pteropus gigantea</i>
Blue Whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>
Spinner Dolphin	<i>Stenella longirostris</i>
Sei Whale	<i>Balaenoptera borealis</i>

Birds

Common name	Scientific name
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
Spot-billed Pelican	<i>Pelecanus philippensis</i>
Indian Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax fuscicollis</i>
Little Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax niger</i>
Darter	<i>Anhinga melanogaster</i>
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>
Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>
Intermediate Egret	<i>Egretta intermedia</i>
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
Western Reef Egret	<i>Egretta gularis</i>
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
Indian Pond Heron	<i>Ardeola grayii</i>
Striated Heron	<i>Butorides striata</i>
Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>
Yellow Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus sinensis</i>
Black Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus flavicollis</i>

Painted Stork	<i>Mycteria leucocephala</i>
Asian Openbill	<i>Anastomus oscitans</i>
Woolly-necked Stork	<i>Ciconia episcopus</i>
Lesser Adjutant	<i>Leptoptilos javanicus</i>
Black-headed Ibis	<i>Threskiornis melanocephalus</i>
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>
Lesser Whistling-Duck	<i>Dendrocygna javanica</i>
Cotton Pygmy-Goose	<i>Nettapus coromandelianus</i>
Garganey	<i>Anas querquedula</i>
Crested Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis ptilorhynchus</i>
Brahminy Kite	<i>Haliastur indus</i>
White-bellied Sea Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucogaster</i>
Grey-headed Fish Eagle	<i>Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus</i>
Crested Serpent Eagle	<i>Spilornis cheela</i>
Crested Goshawk	<i>Accipiter trivirgatus</i>
Shikra	<i>Accipiter badius</i>
Black Eagle	<i>Ictinaetus malayensis</i>
Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>
Changeable Hawk-Eagle	<i>Spizaetus cirrhatus</i>
Sri Lanka Junglefowl	<i>Gallus lafayetii</i>
Indian Peafowl	<i>Pavo cristatus</i>
Barred Buttonquail	<i>Turnix suscitator</i>
White-breasted Waterhen	<i>Amauornis phoenicurus</i>
Watercock	<i>Gallicrex cinerea</i>
Purple Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>
Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>
Pheasant-tailed Jacana	<i>Hydrophasianus chirurgus</i>
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>
Great Thick-Knee	<i>Esacus recurvirostris</i>
Yellow-wattled Lapwing	<i>Vanellus malabaricus</i>
Red-wattled Lapwing	<i>Vanellus indicus</i>
Pacific Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis fulva</i>
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
Little Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>
Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>
Lesser Sand Plover	<i>Charadrius mongolus</i>
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>
Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
Marsh Sandpiper	<i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>

Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>
Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>
Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>
Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>
Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>
White-winged Tern	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>
Lesser Crested Tern	<i>Thalasseus bengalensis</i>
Great Crested Tern	<i>Thalasseus bergii</i>
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>
Spotted Dove	<i>Streptopelia chinensis</i>
Orange-breasted Green Pigeon	<i>Treron bicinctus</i>
Pompadour Green Pigeon	<i>Treron pompadora</i>
Green Imperial Pigeon	<i>Ducula aenea</i>
Alexandrine Parakeet	<i>Psittacula eupatria</i>
Rose-ringed Parakeet	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>
Pied Cuckoo	<i>Clamator jacobinus</i>
Grey-bellied Cuckoo	<i>Cacomantis passerinus</i>
Asian Koel	<i>Eudynamys scolopaceus</i>
Blue-faced Malkoha	<i>Phaenicophaeus viridirostris</i>
Greater Coucal	<i>Centropus sinensis</i>
Jerdon's Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus atripennis</i>
Indian Swiftlet	<i>Aerodramus unicolor</i>
Brown-backed Needletail	<i>Hirundapus giganteus</i>
Asian Palm Swift	<i>Cypsiurus balasiensis</i>
Little Swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>
Crested Treeswift	<i>Hemiprocne coronata</i>
Stork-billed Kingfisher	<i>Pelargopsis capensis</i>
White-throated Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
Pied Kingfisher	<i>Ceryle rudis</i>
Little Green Bee-Eater	<i>Merops orientalis</i>
Blue-tailed Bee-Eater	<i>Merops philippinus</i>
Chestnut-headed Bee-Eater	<i>Merops leschenaulti</i>
Indian Roller	<i>Coracias benghalensis</i>
Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>
Malabar Pied Hornbill	<i>Anthracoceros coronatus</i>
Brown-headed Barbet	<i>Megalaima zeylanica</i>
Crimson-fronted Barbet	<i>Megalaima rubricapillus</i>
Coppersmith Barbet	<i>Megalaima haemacephala</i>
Yellow-crowned Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos mahrattensis</i>
Black-rumped Flameback	<i>Dinopium benghalense</i>

Indian Pitta	<i>Pitta brachyura</i>
Jerdon's Bushlark	<i>Mirafra affinis</i>
Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark	<i>Eremopterix griseus</i>
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>
Paddyfield Pipit	<i>Anthus rufulus</i>
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
Small Minivet	<i>Pericrocotus cinnamomeus</i>
Common Wood-Shrike	<i>Tephrodornis pondicerianus</i>
Red-vented Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>
White-browed Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus luteolus</i>
Common Iora	<i>Aegithina tiphia</i>
Oriental Magpie-Robin	<i>Copsychus saularis</i>
Indian Robin	<i>Saxicoloides fulicatus</i>
White-browed Fantail	<i>Rhipidura aureola</i>
Asian Paradise-Flycatcher	<i>Terpsiphone paradisi</i>
Common Tailorbird	<i>Orthotomus sutorius</i>
Grey-breasted Prinia	<i>Prinia hodgsonii</i>
Jungle Prinia	<i>Prinia sylvatica</i>
Plain Prinia	<i>Prinia inornata</i>
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>
Clamorous Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus stentoreus</i>
Yellow-billed Babbler	<i>Turdoides affinis</i>
Purple-rumped Sunbird	<i>Leptocoma zeylonica</i>
Purple Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris asiaticus</i>
Long-billed Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris lotenius</i>
Pale-billed Flowerpecker	<i>Dicaeum erythrorhynchos</i>
Black-hooded Oriole	<i>Oriolus xanthornus</i>
Brown Shrike	<i>Lanius cristatus</i>
Ashy Drongo	<i>Dicrurus leucophaeus</i>
White-bellied Drongo	<i>Dicrurus caerulescens</i>
Ashy Woodswallow	<i>Artamus fuscus</i>
House Crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>
Large-billed Crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>
Rosy Starling	<i>Pastor roseus</i>
Brahminy Starling	<i>Sturnia pagodarum</i>
Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Baya Weaver	<i>Ploceus philippinus</i>
White-throated Munia	<i>Euodice malabarica</i>
Black-throated Munia	<i>Lonchura kelaarti</i>
Nutmeg Mannikin	<i>Lonchura punctulata</i>
Tricolored Munia	<i>Lonchura malacca</i>
Bridled Tern	<i>Onychoprion anaethetus</i>

Red-necked Stint

Calidris ruficollis

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Grey Langur