

Sri Lanka - Blue Whales & Leopards

With Sinharaja Extension

Naturetrek Tour Report

7th – 18th March 2020



Blue Whale



Leopard



Asian Elephant



Spinner Dolphin

Report & Images by Dhanushka Perera & Niran Coonghe



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Highlights

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.

Day 1

Saturday 7th March

The tour started with an overnight flight from the UK to Sri Lanka.

Day 2

Sunday 8th March

Arrive Colombo; travel to Koggala

The group of four arrived at Colombo international airport on time and, after being welcomed by the leader, we left for Koggala Beach Hotel. We had a small comfort stop en route and reached the hotel by 4.30pm. We were just in time to enjoy the sunset and have a walk along the beautiful Koggala beach.

We met up at 7pm for the checklist and the next day's briefing, and proceeded for dinner thereafter.

Day 3

Monday 9th March

Koggala to Weligama

With packed breakfasts, we left the hotel at 5.45am to Mirissa harbour for our first whale-watching excursion. We were on board the whale-watching boat at 6.20am and set off from the harbour at 7am. During this time, we observed a few tern species especially Greater Crested Tern and Whiskered Tern. First, we encountered a small pod of Spinner dolphins at around 7.30am and we had really good sightings of them closer to the boat. We had two more very good sightings of Spinner Dolphins during the day.

We travelled further out to the sea in search of Blue Whales, and at 9.50am after travelling about seven nautical miles, we encountered the first sightings of two Blue Whales; one was a very large animal whilst a smaller one was also seen swimming alongside it. We managed to stay with the both of them for about an hour and had plenty of good sightings. We reached the harbour at 11.45am and proceeded to the hotel and had our lunch. After a relaxed afternoon we again met at 3.15pm to pay a visit to the Kiralakele Sanctuary for a birdwatching experience.

We reached Kiralakele at 3.55pm and during our visit we encountered many species of birds including Brahminy Kite, White-bellied Sea Eagle, Yellow Bittern, Striated Heron, Indian Pond Heron, Eastern Cattle Egret, Darter, White-breasted Waterhen, Grey-headed Swamphen (now split from Purple Swamphen), Red-wattled Lapwing, Whiskered Tern, Sri Lankan Swallow, Blue-tailed Bee-eater, Common Kingfisher, Stork Billed Kingfisher, Black-hooded Oriole, White-bellied Drongo, Large-billed Crow, Red-vented Bulbul, White-browed Bulbul, Plain Prinia, Purple-rumped Sunbird. We also had good sightings of a Green Garden Lizard.

We left from Kiralakele at around 6pm and reached the hotel at 7pm and then met up for the evening briefing and checklist before the dinner.

Day 4

Tuesday 10th March

Koggala to Weligama

Another morning whale-watching excursion yielded fantastic views of a Blue Whale, and we were also very lucky to see a pod of Spinner Dolphins which happened to be spinning and cruising alongside our boat. After another very successful morning of whale watching but a long boat trip, we returned to the hotel for our lunch.

Our visit to the Galle Fort in the afternoon took us back to the colonial past of the island, as we traversed through the fort's narrow roads, surrounded by Portuguese, Dutch and British architecture of a bygone era.

Upon returning to the hotel we did our checklist and had dinner before calling it a night. Apart from the Blue Whale and dolphins, today we were also able to see birds such as Greater Crested Tern, Spotted Dove, Common Myna, Yellow-billed Babbler and Red vented Bulbul.

Day 5

Wednesday 11th March

Koggala to Weligama

We continued our whale-watching session for the third day. Today we were greeted by hundreds of Spinner Dolphins on multiple occasions. We continued our journey into the deeper waters in search of whales, and to our surprise, we came across a rare sighting of a Fin Whale. We returned to the harbour around 2.30pm and had a quick lunch at the hotel and spent the rest of the day relaxing by the beach.

Then we had our usual routine of marking the checklist and had a relaxed dinner and called it a day.

Day 6

Thursday 12th March

Koggala to Yala

We had our breakfast at 7.30am before checking out of the hotel and leaving for Yala. We reached the perimeter of Bundala National Park where we did some birding as well. During our journey we enjoyed sightings of many birds.

We reached the Cinnamon Wild Hotel for a late lunch. In the afternoon we did a bird walk around the hotel premises and we saw many bird species such as Lesser Whistling Duck, Painted Stork, Spot-billed Pelican, Asian Openbill, Woolly-necked Stork, Common Moorhen, Pin-tailed Snipe, Orange-breasted Green Pigeon, Purple Sunbird and Loten's Sunbird. Apart from the many birds we were also able to see Grey Langur, Wild Boar, Water Buffalo, Bengal Land Monitor, Indian (Black-naped) Hare, and Mugger Crocodile which was seen very close our hotel garden.

Day 7

Friday 13th March

Yala

Today we decided to visit Yala National Park, instead of Lunugamwehera NP, as sightings of Leopards at Lunugamwehera had reduced due to the availability of water from the recent rains deep inside the forest. We left the hotel at 5.30am after tea/coffee and entered the park at 6.am, encountering many birds as well as other species. We were following many alarm calls trying to track a Leopard, which paid off when we finally found it resting under a thick shrub just a few yards away. We stayed with the leopard for about 10 minutes until it stood up and went into the jungle.

Throughout the day we were able to see many birds such as Sri Lanka Junglefowl, Lesser Adjutant, Crested Hawk-Eagle, White-bellied Sea Eagle, Grey-headed Fish Eagle, Crested Treeswift, Malabar Pied Hornbill, Jerdon's Bush Lark and Indian Robin to name a few. And our day was greeted by plenty of Elephant sightings which were incredibly satisfying.

We returned to the hotel at 6.15 pm and met up for the checklist at dinner at 7.15pm.

Day 8

Saturday 14th March

Yala

Today also we decided to visit Yala National Park for our half-day safari. Again, we left the hotel at 5.30am, after a cup of coffee/tea, and entered the park at 6.15am. We continued to follow alarm calls and pug marks, and our search efforts paid off when a Leopard appeared just in front our safari jeep for an incredible sighting. It continued to walk for about 15 minutes along the road and the disappeared into the bush. We were over the moon about the amazing sighting.

We continued our search for other animals and had sightings of Elephants, Indian Hare, Wild Boar, Water Buffalo, Ruddy Mongoose etc. We also enjoyed some birding as well. At 11am we finished the safari and returned to the hotel and had our lunch.

In the evening we did a birdwatching walk in the hotel garden and then we met up for the usual checklist and dinner at 7.15pm.

Main Tour Day 9 / Extension Day 1

Sunday 15th March

Katunayake (Main tour); Sinharaja (Extension)

Today we had a relaxed breakfast at the hotel and left for Colombo at 8.45am. On the way we stopped at Tissamaharama for some birding around lake and witnessed the thriving colony of Indian Fruit Bats. Then we stopped for the lunch and handed two clients over for their extension to Sinharaja and the rest travelled to the Airport Hotel and had a relaxing dinner and good night's sleep before the flight to London next day.

The Sinharaja extension group reached the Sinharaja village by 4.30pm and immediately went in search of the Serendib Scops Owl which was seen in its day roost. We also saw Crested Serpent Eagle, Sri Lanka Spot-winged Thrush, Indian Blue Robin, Sri Lanka Blue Magpie, Sri Lanka Green Pigeon, Layard's Striped Squirrel and Dusky Striped Squirrel.

We checked in to the Blue Magpie Lodge at 6pm and met for the checklist at 7.15pm which followed with the briefing for the next day and our dinner.

Main Tour Day 10 / Extension Day 2

Monday 16th March

Sinharaja

The main group proceeded to the airport in time for their flight after enjoying their breakfast at the hotel.

After having our early breakfast at 5.30am at the restaurant we set off to the Sinharaja rainforest buffer zone village where we encountered the elusive Sri Lanka Spurfowl along with Emerald Dove, Green-billed Coucal, Sri Lanka Drongo, Ashy-headed Laughingthrush, Indian Pitta, Small Minivet, Scarlet Minivet, Dark-fronted Babbler, Sri Lanka Swallow, Indian Blue Robin, Brown Fish Owl, Black-capped Bulbul, Chestnut-backed Owlet, Layard's Parakeet, Plum-headed Parakeet, Sri Lanka Frogmouth, Brown Mongoose and Green Garden Lizard.

We met up for the checklist at 7pm and had our dinner after the briefing for the next day was discussed.

Extension Day 3

Tuesday 17th March

Sinharaja

Due to the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic all National Parks and Rainforests were closed for the public for two weeks from today. Therefore, we decided to re-visit the buffer zone again for some birding and enjoyed views of Black-capped Bulbul, Legge's Flowerpecker and Crested Treeswift along with many other birds seen before.

We returned to the hotel for lunch and subsequently went on a drive along the village in the evening where we had many interesting wildlife encounters of species already seen before. We met for our usual evening routine at 7.15pm.

Extension Day 4

Wednesday 18th March

Sinharaja to Katunayake

We had breakfast at 6.30am at the hotel and did some birding near the hotel and encountered many species seen before. We checked out of the hotel at 9.30am and proceeded to Beruwala where the clients stayed on for a private beach extension.

We reached the Vivanta by Taj hotel at 12.30pm and after saying our goodbyes, the clients checked in to the hotel.

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Species Lists

Mammals

	Common name	Scientific name
1	Grey Langur	<i>Semnopithecus (Presbytis) entellus</i>
2	Purple-faced Leaf Monkey	<i>Trachypithecus (Presbytis) vetulus</i>
3	Ruddy Mongoose	<i>Herpestes smithii</i>
4	Brown Mongoose	<i>Herpestes fuscus</i>
5	Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus kotiya</i>
6	Asian Elephant	<i>Elephas maximus</i>
7	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>
8	Spotted Deer	<i>Cervus axis</i>
9	Sambar	<i>Cervus unicolor</i>
10	Water Buffalo	<i>Bubalus Bubalis</i>
11	Indian Palm Squirrel	<i>Funambulus palmarum</i>
12	Grizzled Giant Squirrel	<i>Ratufa macroura</i>
13	Layard's Striped Squirrel	<i>Funambulus layardi</i>
14	Dusky Striped Squirrel	<i>Funambulus sublineatus</i>
15	Indian Hare, Black-naped Hare	<i>Lepus nigricollis</i>
16	Indian Flying Fox	<i>Pteropus gigantea</i>
17	Blue Whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>
18	Spinner Dolphin	<i>Stenella mulla</i>
19	Fin Whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>

Birds (Endemics in bold)

	Common name	Scientific name
1	Lesser Whistling Duck	<i>Dendrocygna javanica</i>
2	Garganey	<i>Spatula querquedula</i>
3	Sri Lanka Spurfowl	<i>Galloperdix bicalcarata</i>
4	Sri Lanka Junglefowl	<i>Gallus lafayettii</i>
5	Indian Peafowl	<i>Pavo cristatus</i>
6	Painted Stork	<i>Mycteria leucocephala</i>
7	Asian Openbill	<i>Anastomus oscitans</i>
8	Woolly-necked Stork	<i>Ciconia episcopus</i>
9	Lesser Adjutant	<i>Leptoptilos javanicus</i>
10	Black-headed Ibis	<i>Threskiornis melanocephalus</i>
11	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>
12	Yellow Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus sinensis</i>
13	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>
14	Striated Heron	<i>Butorides striata</i>
15	Indian Pond Heron	<i>Ardeola grayii</i>
16	Eastern Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus coromandus</i>
17	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
18	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>

19	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>
20	Intermediate Egret	<i>Ardea intermedia</i>
21	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
22	Spot-billed Pelican	<i>Pelecanus philippensis</i>
23	Little Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo niger</i>
24	Indian Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax fuscicollis</i>
25	Darter	<i>Anhinga melanogaster</i>
26	Crested Serpent Eagle	<i>Spilornis cheela</i>
27	Crested Hawk-Eagle	<i>Nisaetus cirrhatus</i>
28	Brahminy Kite	<i>Haliastur indus</i>
29	White-bellied Sea Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucogaster</i>
30	White-breasted Waterhen	<i>Amaurornis phoenicurus</i>
31	Grey-headed Swamphen (split from Purple)	<i>Porphyrio poliocephalus</i>
32	Barred Buttonquail	<i>Turnix suscitator</i>
33	Great Stone-curlew, Great Thick-knee	<i>Esacus recurvirostris</i>
34	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>
35	Yellow-wattled Lapwing	<i>Vanellus malabaricus</i>
36	Red-wattled Lapwing	<i>Vanellus indicus</i>
37	Pacific Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis fulva</i>
38	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
39	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>
40	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>
41	Lesser Sand Plover, Mongolian Plover	<i>Charadrius mongolus</i>
42	Greater Sand Plover	<i>Charadrius leschenaultii</i>
43	Pheasant-tailed Jacana	<i>Hydrophasianus chirurgus</i>
44	Pin-tailed Snipe	<i>Gallinago stenura</i>
45	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>
46	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
47	Marsh Sandpiper	<i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>
48	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
49	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>
50	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
51	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>
52	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>
53	Brown-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus brunnicephalus</i>
54	Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>
55	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>
56	Greater Crested Tern	<i>Thalasseus bergii</i>
57	Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>
58	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>
59	Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>
60	Common Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
61	Spotted Dove	<i>Spilopelia chinensis</i>
62	Emerald Dove	<i>Chalcophaps indica</i>
63	Orange-breasted Green Pigeon	<i>Treron bicinctus</i>
64	Sri Lanka Green Pigeon	<i>Treron pompadora</i>
65	Green Imperial Pigeon	<i>Ducula aenea</i>

66	Green-billed Coucal	<i>Centropus chlororhynchus</i>
67	Greater Coucal	<i>Centropus sinensis</i>
68	Asian Koel	<i>Endynamys scolopaceus</i>
69	Serendib Scops Owl	<i>Otus thilobhoffmanni</i>
70	Chestnut backed Owlet	<i>Glaucidium castanotum</i>
71	Sri Lanka Frogmouth	<i>Batrachostomus moniliger</i>
72	Crested Treeswift, Gray-rumped Treeswift	<i>Hemiprogne coronata</i>
73	Indian Swiftlet	<i>Aerodramus unicolor</i>
74	Asian Palm Swift	<i>Cypsiurus balasiensis</i>
75	Stork-billed Kingfisher	<i>Pelargopsis capensis</i>
76	White-throated Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>
77	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
78	Green Bee-eater	<i>Merops orientalis</i>
79	Blue-tailed Bee-eater	<i>Merops philippinus</i>
80	Chestnut-headed Bee-eater	<i>Merops leschenaulti</i>
81	Malabar Pied Hornbill	<i>Anthracoceros coronatus</i>
82	Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill	<i>Ocyrceros gingalensis</i>
83	Brown-headed Barbet	<i>Psilopogon zeylanicus</i>
84	Yellow-fronted Barbet	<i>Psilopogon flavifrons</i>
85	Crimson-fronted Barbet	<i>Psilopogon rubricapillus</i>
86	Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker	<i>Yungipicus nanus</i>
87	Plum-headed Parakeet	<i>Psittacula cyanocephala</i>
88	Layard's Parakeet	<i>Psittacula caltbrapae</i>
89	Rose-ringed Parakeet	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>
90	Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot	<i>Loriculus beryllinus</i>
91	Indian Pitta	<i>Pitta brachyura</i>
92	Bar-winged Flycatcher-Shrike	<i>Hemipus picatus</i>
93	Common Iora	<i>Aegithina tiphia</i>
94	Black-headed Cuckooshrike	<i>Coracina melanoptera</i>
95	Small Minivet	<i>Pericrocotus cinnamomeus</i>
96	Orange Minivet, Scarlet Minivet, Flame Minivet	<i>Pericrocotus flammeus</i>
97	Brown Shrike	<i>Lanius cristatus</i>
98	Black-hooded Oriole	<i>Oriolus xanthornus</i>
99	White-bellied Drongo	<i>Dicrurus caerulescens</i>
100	Sri Lanka Drongo	<i>Dicrurus lophorinus</i>
101	White-browed Fantail	<i>Rhipidura aureola</i>
102	Asian Paradise Flycatcher	<i>Terpsiphone paradisi</i>
103	Sri Lanka Blue Magpie	<i>Urocissa ornata</i>
104	House Crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>
105	Large-billed Crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchus</i>
106	Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark	<i>Eremopterix griseus</i>
107	Jerdon's Bush Lark	<i>Mirafra affinis</i>
108	Black-capped Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus melanicterus</i>
109	Red-vented Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>
110	Yellow-eared Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus penicillatus</i>
111	White-browed Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus luteolus</i>
112	Yellow-browed Bulbul	<i>Acritillas indica</i>

113	Square-tailed Bulbul	<i>Hypsipetes ganeesa humii</i>
114	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
115	Sri Lanka Swallow	<i>Cecropis hyperythra</i>
116	Clamorous Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus stentoreus</i>
117	Blyth's Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus dumetorum</i>
118	Plain Prinia	<i>Prinia inornata</i>
119	Common Tailorbird	<i>Orthotomus sutorius</i>
120	Orange-billed Babbler	<i>Turdoides rufescens</i>
121	Yellow-billed Babbler	<i>Turdoides affinis</i>
122	Ashy-headed Laughingthrush	<i>Garrulax cinereifrons</i>
123	Oriental White-eye	<i>Zosterops palpebrosus</i>
124	Sri Lanka Hill Myna	<i>Gracula ptilogenys</i>
125	Lesser Hill Myna	<i>Gracula indica</i>
126	Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>
127	Spot-winged Thrush	<i>Geokichla spiloptera</i>
128	Indian Robin	<i>Copsychus fulicatus</i>
129	Oriental Magpie-Robin	<i>Copsychus saularis</i>
130	Brown-breasted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa muttui</i>
131	Indian Blue Robin	<i>Larvivora brunnea</i>
132	Legge's Flowerpecker, White-throated Flowerpecker	<i>Dicaeum vincens</i>
133	Pale-billed Flowerpecker	<i>Dicaeum erythrorhynchos</i>
134	Purple-rumped Sunbird	<i>Leptocoma zeylonica</i>
135	Purple Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris asiaticus</i>
136	Loten's Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris lotenius</i>
137	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
138	Streaked Weaver	<i>Ploceus manyar</i>
139	Indian Silverbill, White-throated Silverbill	<i>Euodice malabarica</i>
140	Scaly-breasted Munia	<i>Lonchura punctulata</i>
141	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
142	Paddyfield Pipit	<i>Anthus rufulus</i>

Reptiles & Other species

	Common name	Scientific name
1	Hump-nosed Viper	<i>Hypnale hypnale</i>
1	Bengal (Land) Monitor	<i>Varanus bengalensis</i>
2	Asian Water Monitor	<i>Varanus salvator</i>
3	Oriental (Common) Garden Lizard	<i>Calotes versicolor</i>
4	Green Garden Lizard	<i>Calotes calotes</i>
5	Mugger Crocodile	<i>Crocodylus palustris</i>
6	Common House Gecko	<i>Hemidactylus frenatus</i>
7	Spotted Tree Frog	<i>Pohypedates maculatus</i>

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