

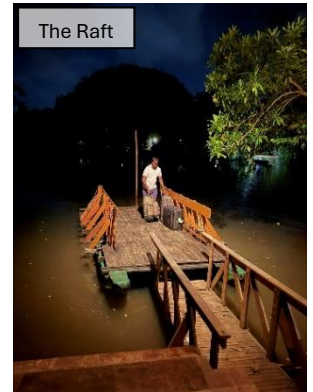
Sri Lanka: Birds and Wildlife 2025

TRIP REPORT

DAY 0 – Monday 3 and Tuesday 4 November

Our Sri Lanka adventure begins.

Over the first couple of days, the group assembled at Ranweli Holiday Village via the little raft crossing, and started to settle in, enjoying the grounds with a little birding with breezy views of the ocean and an introduction to Sri Lankan food and curd and treacle. On Tuesday we all gathered in the evening to enjoy our first dinner as a group, followed by a pre-trip meeting. We were ready for our adventure to begin.



The Raft

DAY 1 - Wednesday, 5 November

A few folks woke early to bird around the grounds focusing on the dock area with sightings that included **Stork-billed Kingfisher**, **White-breasted Waterhen**, and **Blue-tailed Bee-eater**. We also spooked a massive 6ft+ Water Monitor lizard as it slid into the creek. We met for breakfast at 6:30am, checked-out, and met Dulan, Prabath and Pubudu who will guide and take care of us while we tour Sri Lanka. It took two trips on the raft to cross the creek where the bus was waiting to whisk us away to our first birding spot.

A 1.5hr drive led us to Anawilundawa Bird Sanctuary RAMSAR wetland where we received a great presentation from Waruni and her colleagues Hashini and Dhananji on the Accelerated Natural Regeneration of Mangroves (ANRM) Project, an initiative that strives to bridge the gap between scientific conservation efforts and community prosperity. The project is restoring 45ha of former shrimp farmland to the native, natural mangrove forest it once was. The 1,400ha sanctuary was established in 1997 and designated a globally recognized RAMSAR site in 2001. Restoration work began in 2019 and focuses on two areas of work:

1. Removing anthropogenic barriers, like dams/walls that partition the shrimp canals, as well as additional issues that have negatively impacted the area.
2. Planting head-started mangrove trees to the former shrimp farming areas.

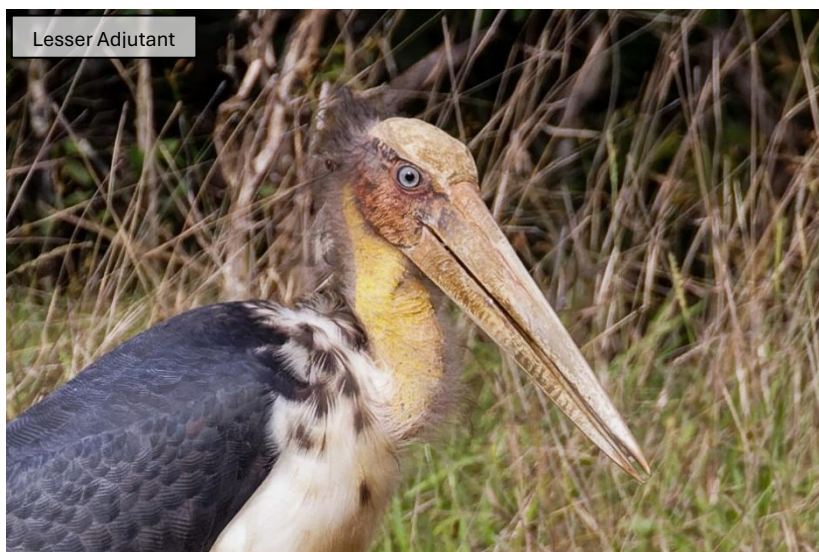


Our Hosts

Planting mangroves was conducted during Phase 1 of the project. Those first plantings are now 4-5ft tall and are providing the structure around which other plant sp. are establishing, which in turn are attracting native wildlife. As the saying goes, if you build it, they will come, and indeed they have. They are now focusing on monitoring work which includes monthly bird surveys (conducted by Dulan), butterfly counts, and assessments of gastropod populations – all important pieces of a well-functioning habitat. Mangrove forests are also excellent at sequestering Carbon, helping remove CO₂ from the atmosphere and storing it in leaves, roots, and tissues. A great way to reduce the impact of greenhouse gas emissions. Recent research at the site has included measuring the amount of carbon being sequestered by this conservation effort. The group is also working with local communities, bringing awareness to the importance of restoration projects like ANRM and how they, as individuals, can help. It was so great to see three young women working so hard on this project – we need more young female scientists like Waruni, Hashini, and Dhananji!

We spent a little time walking the road beside the huge lake checking out some great species like: **Cotton Pygmy-Goose**, **Eurasian Spoonbill**, **Spot-bellied Pelican**, and our first official Sri Lankan Endemic – **Red-backed Flameback**.

Our bus then took us about 1.5hrs north to Wilpattu where we had lunch at our hotel – Claughton Wild Hotel – and checked into our rooms. We didn't have much time though as the National Park and its Leopards were beckoning, actually the Sri Lankan subspecies. We clambered aboard 2 safari jeeps and drove the short distance to Wilpattu National Park, entrance tickets were purchased, and in we went. The whole group was excited by the prospect of seeing Sri Lanka's famous big cat, but the lure of birds was of course also high. As we drove the roads, we saw birds left and right. Pulling up next to a huge lake we saw our first **Lesser Adjutant**, **Painted Stork** rookery, or I suppose



Lesser Adjutant

“storkery”, which was being overlooked by **Brahminy Kites**, and **White-bellied Fish-Eagles**. Continuing on, we were initially very excited by the **Asian Green Bee-eaters** and fawned over their incredible colors, but after some great photo opportunities, and the eventual realization that they are VERY common in the park, we started to ignore them – which seems a little shameful seeing as they are so magnificently beautiful. Some of the other wildlife we encountered were a few Sri Lankan Star Tortoises trundling around, mowing the grass; Ruddy Mongoose dashing across the road, Chittal (Spotted Deer), a soaking Wild Water Buffalo (with one horn), and a few Bengal Monitors cruising around. We drove and drove

and found magnificent birds like the endemic **Sri Lanka Green-Pigeon**, **Asian Woolly-necked Stork**, **Malabar Pied-Hornbill**, **Jerdon's Bushlark**, and **Ashy Prinia**, but by the end of the day no Leopard. Maybe tomorrow...

DAY 2 - Thursday, 6 November

Today we had an early start in search of a big cat, and some birds. We started the day in the grounds of the hotel – **Indian Roller**, **Asian Koel**, **Indian Cuckoo**, and **Jerdon's Nightjar** among others. We then took our seats in the two jeeps and were off. The two groups soon split up searching in different parts of the park for our quarry. Driving along the one-lane sandy roads we saw a lot of birds like, **Indian Peafowl** (a.k.a. Peacock), **Painted Stork**, **Indian Thick-knee**, **Gray Heron**, and **Black-winged Stilt**. I'm sure our driver was getting a little tired of the 'tap tap tap' on the cab window so we could see every bird, but I guess they're used to it with birders! At around mid-morning we were continuing down a forested section of the road when we saw an incredible sight padding down the road – Leopard! Our driver quickly stopped and put the jeep in reverse to reduce our impact on this incredible predator. She (or he) seemed to completely ignore us, and without changing pace took a slight turn off the road and very quickly disappeared into the forest. It was incredible to see how, despite such bold markings, she blended into the forest perfectly, and when stopped still, totally melted away. Drunk on adrenalin the jeep occupants were jubilant and could barely believe what they had just witnessed. So grateful... and then the hordes descended.



Malabar Hornbill

We had turned around to potentially get another glimpse of the cat as it crossed another path, but in what seemed like minutes, fifteen-plus jeeps were suddenly surrounding us, pushing and squeezing past, the drivers exchanging descriptions with excitement. And then as we edged past another jeep, **BANG!** We drove into a tree stump, and our front tire made a loud hiss as the air escaped – we had a flat! Then the centuries old question: how many men does it take to change a tire? The answer appeared to be at least 8, but there was a lot of advice sharing and laughing, despite there being a top predator walking around in the forest nearby. It was quite entertaining. The tire fixed, we headed to lunch to retell our story. It was quite a feat to avoid being mugged by the Toque Macaques. Chocolate milk anyone?



In the afternoon the pressure was on for the other jeep to see one. The two jeeps set off but were soon separated again and it wasn't until the end of the day that we found out that they too were successful. Excellent! Their Leopard spent time chilling in the shade by the side of the road and so they had more time with their feline. Not bad for our second day of the tour! The other jeep spent the afternoon bugging the driver with umpteen stops to look at birds, many of which were shorebirds, with some highlights being **Pacific Golden-Plover**, **Tibetan Sand-Plover**, **Black-tailed** and **Bar-tailed Godwits**, **Common Sandpiper**, **Common Redshank**, and **Common Greenshank** (all the commons).

After an amazing and very successful day, we headed back to the hotel for another delicious meal, checklist, and well-earned sleep – although realistically we'd only taken about 500 steps, despite what our step counters might have said due to the bumpy roads.

DAY 3 - Friday, 7 November



Brown-headed Barbet

We headed early to the entrance gates of Wilpattu NP with a stop on the way for a **Baya Weaver** nesting colony, **Asian Palm Swifts** zooming overhead, and **Small Minivet**. At the Park we started in the parking lot which had a surprising amount of activity that exploded when Dulan played a mobbing call. The birds flooded in and it was bedlam! There were **Indian White-eye**, **Common Iora**, **Green Warbler**, **White-browed Fantail**, **Black-hooded Oriole**, and **Indian Robin**. We also had **Purple**, **Purple-rumped**, and **Loten's Sunbirds**, **White-rumped** and **Scaley-breasted Munias**, **Thick-billed Flowerpecker**, **Tickell's Blue Flycatcher**, **Brown-headed** and **Coppersmith Barbet**, the endemic **Sri Lanka Green-Pigeon** and **Green Imperial-Pigeon**, among others. We began walking down a small road toward one of the large lakes and somehow Dulan spied an incredibly camouflaged Bark Gecko on a tree. Further on we soon found one of the region's special species – **India Pitta** which everyone managed pretty good, close looks. Carrying on down the road, we heard a **Greater Coucal** coo-cooing nearby and then reaching the lake we saw **Lesser Whistling-Ducks**, **Whiskered Tern**, the endemic **Black-rumped Flameback**, the gorgeous **Jerdon's Leafbird**, and a spectacular Common Garden Lizard.

Dulan then disappeared into the yard of a nearby house and reappeared beckoning us to follow. In a tangle of trees and vines was a **Brown Boobook** calling in the gloom, and then a second nearby. Such cool birds. Heading back to the bus we spotted a **Tricolored Munia**, **Ashy** and **Grey-breasted Prinia**, and **Sri Lanka Woodshrike** (endemic). A quick photo op by the park sign and we were back in the bus heading to the hotel for breakfast and check-out from Claughton Wild Hotel which was naturally disturbed by a bird sighting – **Black-headed Cuckooshrike**.

After a quick stop for mangos on the side of the road, we spied waterbirds in a giant tank (reservoir) and so naturally pulled over. **Eurasian Moorhens** and a **Gray-headed Fish-Eagle** were new for the list, along with great views of **Gray-headed Swamphen**, giant **Spot-billed Pelican**, and **Stork-billed Kingfisher**. Back on the road, we headed to Sigiriya and the gorgeous Sigiriya Village Hotel with its spectacular food and accommodations. Lunch was welcome and with so many items on offer it was hard to choose, but somehow, we managed. After lunch Dulan had something special to show us. Contained in an empty water bottle was a Schneider's Shield-tail Snake. A super interesting species with tiny eyes and two large scales at the end of the tail forming, yes, you guessed it, a shield.

We gathered for our afternoon outing which took us to a few locations for various birds. The first was an unlikely spot on the edge of some farmland edged with an elephant-proof electric fence - that was so tempting to touch. Before long we had one of Paula's family lifers, one that she'd missed a few times in India and Sri Lanka already, but this time we had excellent looks – **Barred Buttonquail** – interestingly completely unrelated to the quail we're familiar with! **Alexandrine Parakeets** were new, whizzing around overhead screeching their lower pitched call than the Rose-ringed we'd seen already, **Indian Cuckooshrike** and **Pale-billed Flowerpecker** were also new. Our final stop of the day was a gentle stroll down one of the roads that circled Lion Rock. Our main target was the Brown Fish-Owl, we unfortunately missed that species, but we did find a **Spot-bellied Eagle-Owl** which was a great substitute. We headed back in the dark to the hotel, but on the way Prabath stopped suddenly in the road and we were beckoned once again off the bus. In the headlights before us was a Giant Forest Scorpion in strike pose - thought to be the world's largest scorpion at 9". Such a cool critter. After another delicious meal, we fought through the live saxophonist and line-dancers to work through the checklist.



Giant Forest
Scorpion
© Peter D

DAY 4 - Saturday, 8 November

Up and out by 6am this morning, starting with a short walk around the hotel grounds that gave us looks at **Crimson-fronted Barbet***, **Brown-capped Babbler***, and **Sri Lanka Shama***, all endemic species to Sri Lanka. We returned to the road along the moat at the foot of Lion Rock in search again for the Brown Fish-Owl and other great birds. We enjoyed the cool early morning temperature as we walked the road, Dulan playing various calls in the hopes of bringing some targets into view. The usual suspects made appearances – **Indian Peafowl** (heard), **Sri Lanka Junglefowl***(endemic), **Little Swift**, and **White-throated Kingfisher**, but there were also some less familiar species including the endemic **Black-capped Bulbul***, **Black-naped Monarch**, **Tickell's Blue Flycatcher**, and skulking in the shadows **Indian Blue Robin**. Midway through the morning Dulan finally found what he was looking for. In the shadows of a tree on the other side of the moat, a grumpy looking owl peered out from the gloom at us. We had found our **Brown Fish-Owl**.

It was time for breakfast and the discovery of a new-to-us fruit resembling a grape or gooseberry - but oh no it wasn't. Yikes! It was a Nelli fruit or Indian Gooseberry, apparently prized for its medicinal properties – no thank you! Dulan found a snake and kept it for us to admire - Common Wolfsnakes resemble venomous Kraits so most people avoid them and will actively kill them on sight. This one got a lucky reprieve and was released safely into some log piles.

After breakfast we visited another seemingly random spot that Dulan knew of. This location provided a few interesting birds including **Fork-tailed Drongo-Cuckoo**, **Coppersmith Barbet**, a gaggle of **Prinias – Gray-breasted, Jungle**, and **Ashy**, as well as reasonable looks at the gorgeous **Golden-fronted Leafbird**.



Another amazing meal at the Sigiriya Village hotel was followed by a drive to Popham's Arboretum where we met Mr. Chanaka who showed us a video that explained the history of the place and his research work. The arboretum is a good example of assisted natural regeneration. The initial 7.5acre plot, originally a jungle of scrub, was allowed to regenerate by itself without the need for specific planting or planning. Weeds were removed to help the indigenous saplings and Nature did the rest, turning the plot into dry zone woodland with a closed canopy. Mr. Chanka then gave us a tour of the property and pointed out some of the interesting plants and trees. We also saw some of the wildlife that inhabit the facility including Kangaroo Lizards and Bats. After this interesting visit we headed to a couple of places on the way back to the hotel where we had previously looked for owls and this time found the gorgeous **Orange-headed Thrush** and 4 **Indian Nightjars** which were amazing finds. Our final dinner at the hotel was slightly overtaken again by the live music and so we skipped the checklist to do the next day.

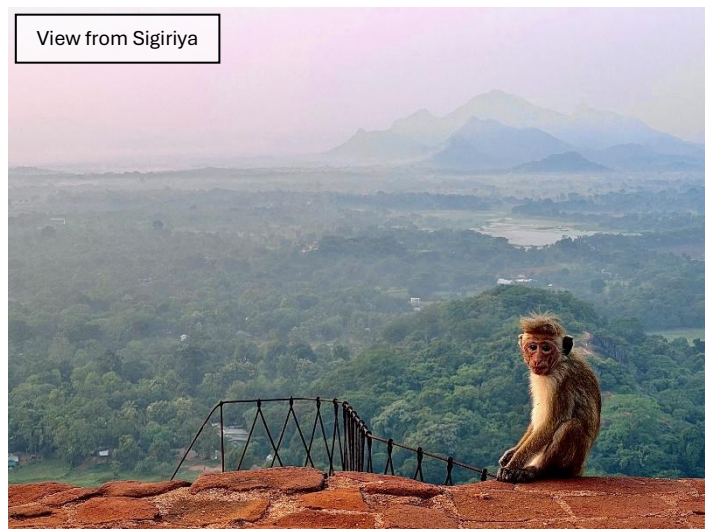
DAY 5 - Sunday, 9 November

Today started early for Peter D, Liz, Don, and Toby who climbed Lion Rock. Although our hearts raced and thighs burned it really didn't take long, and the views from the top were spectacular and worth the occasional grab from the Toque Macaques. Seeing **Malabar Pied Hornbills** from above and **Little Swifts** with their nests was cool too. We caught up with the rest of the group who had been birding the moat area again. A filling of bellies back at the hotel, check-out, and we were on the road to Kandy.

On the way we stopped at Ranweli Spice Garden (I believe no relation to the hotel) and received a speed-tour. A multitude of spices were presented along with their various original plant sources and medicinal benefits. The tour may have been a little too fast paced, and we may not have retained much of the information, but it was cool to see the original plants from which the powders we usually use in our cooking are derived. It was also a great opportunity

to purchase some Sri Lankan flavors that we can add to our attempts at replicating the amazing local food when we get home.

Back on the road for a few hours and we finally found ourselves in Kandy at an altitude of 2,000ft. The Tree of Life hotel greeted us with mango and earthapple juice and a warm welcome ceremony that had us each lighting a wick on an ornate gold tower topped by a golden Sri Lanka Jungle Fowl. After another buffet meal we were shown to our rooms, including Peter and Liz's split-level palace. At lunch we were issued green leech socks with a smirk from Dulan. We were initially unsure how to wear them (perhaps on the arms proposed Peter Z) and not convinced that they were needed, but we dutifully donned the knee-high green socks – at least they were locally made by a friend of Dulan's. Little did we know at the time that they would become crucial later in the trip.



Dressed in our new fashion items, off we trudged for our afternoon birding excursion around the hotel gardens and along the nearby road. It was surprisingly birdy and we added a number of birds to our list - **Chestnut-headed Bee-eater**, **Yellow-fronted Barbet***(endemic), **Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker**, **Lesser Yellownape**, and endemic **Sri Lanka Hanging-Parrot*** to name a few. Prabath also found a **Spot-bellied Eagle-Owl** for us, with its bizarre looking “eyebrows”. We tried for a very vociferous **Common Hawk-Cuckoo**, but flyover glimpses are all we managed. As darkness approached, we walked off the road and started to play for Brown Wood-Owl. In the near darkness we could hear owls and a few shapes flying overhead, but we never did see our target; hopefully another day.

Despite the leech socks a few folks still managed to entice a few of the bloodsuckers to cozy up – they obviously had sweeter blood than the rest of us. Dinner was once again serenaded by what some people call music - I just felt bad for the original artists! We managed checklist review for the past two days with Lionel Richie's “Hello” in the background, and a hope that the “music” would end so we could sleep.

DAY 6 - Monday, 10 November

The day started with our fashionable green socks and a search for the **Common Hawk-Cuckoo** again calling directly outside our rooms. This time we were lucky and managed great looks. We continued on-foot along the road and saw a few of the same birds as the previous day, but this time with better looks, including **Indian Blue Robin**, **Tickell's Blue Flycatcher**, and for some, the dazzling **Black-backed Kingfisher**.

Another breakfast, check-out, and we're on the road again up to 6000ft Nuwara Eliya in the hill country of the Central Province. But before we could get too far, we stopped in Kandy to contribute to the local economy by purchasing batik's, jewelry, and a carved elephant! Then onwards to the hills. On arrival at The Blackpool Hotel we were again welcomed with a wick lighting ceremony, and a cup of spinach soup. A sumptuous meal was provided, overflowing with bread, and with a brief break we were ready to venture out birding.

We made our way through Nurawa Eliya town and up some smaller side roads until we found our way to a small hillside home with a very welcoming family and an incredible vegetable garden. The creek that ran down the mountain and through their small property was the perfect habitat for **Sri Lanka Whistling-Thrush***, another one of the country's endemics. We waited patiently as rain began to fall and Dulan played the bird's call. There were few other birds aside from a small family of **Scaly-breasted Munia** visiting a likely nest and some **House Crows**. After about an hour of standing around one of the family members brought us a small, harmless Common Roughsided



Sri Lanka Whistling-Thrush

Snake endemic to Sri Lanka which was great. But then Pubudu suddenly beckoned to Dulan that he had found a bird. Excitedly, Dulan rushed over, but it turned out to be an **Indian Blue Robin**, a species we'd seen before – but then Dulan did spot the **Whistling-Thrush** nearby and our attention quickly shifted to the Thrush. At first a female bird skulked around the creekside and gobbled down a worm, but then a male briefly joined her. She was also observed picking moss off a rock and so maybe they were nestbuilding nearby. We left them and the kind family in peace, happy that we'd seen another target bird. The next stop was to find a **Kashmir Flycatcher** but only a few people saw it briefly as it flew overhead. We had more chances for that

species, and because we were starting to lose light, we decided to head back to the hotel. En route we stopped at the Bale Market to check out some knock-off clothing. Dulan trusts one stall holder in particular and so we shopped with him. Shirts were haggled for, and we were back on the bus and transported to the hotel for another delicious meal and checklist review.

DAY 7 - Tuesday, 11 November

A 6am start had us visiting the Bomburuella Forest Reserve where we walked the road in search of endemics and new birds. Our main target for the morning was the **Sri Lanka Bush Warbler***. While searching, we came across **Indian Blue Robin** near the creek, a **Gray Wagtail** surprisingly high in a tree, and many continuously calling **Gray-headed Canary-Flycatchers**. We also found 4-5 spectacularly bizarre-looking Rhino-horned Lizards with their amazing nasal protuberance and the biggest millipedes any of us had ever seen. In the distance we heard **Indian Peafowl** which Dulan suggested was not a good sign. This species didn't use to be at this high an elevation and the lizards, snakes, and other invertebrates they eat are not adapted to these predators. Continuing birding, a **Sri Lanka Scimitar-Babbler*** made an appearance, as well as many **Sri Lanka White-eyes***, both endemic species. Eventually, in the shadows, we found the bird we were looking for - **Sri Lanka Bush Warbler***, and everyone managed at least a glimpse of this very skulky bird. A few of the other species we found along the way included **Orange Minivet**, **Yellow-fronted Barbet***, **Bar-winged Flycatcher-Shrike**, **Velvet-fronted Nuthatch**, and **Large-billed Leaf Warbler**. Bonus birds were all endemics: **Dull-blue Flycatcher*** that was tricky to see, a brief glimpse of **Yellow-eared Bulbul***, and best of all, a pair of **Crimson-backed Flamebacks*** that drummed and called. We had a bit of a tight schedule today and so we headed back to the hotel for breakfast.



Rhino-horned Lizard

After breakfast we headed back to the same forest reserve and the nearby dump – initially a strange place to go birding, but as we have all experienced, trash dumps can be a good place to find birds (and it turns out Monkeys!). Some of the species that have become familiar to us greeted us there – **Spotted Dove**, **Large-billed Crow**, **Gray-headed Canary-Flycatcher**, **Sri Lanka White-eye***, but we also had good looks at some other species, including **Asian (Cinereous) Tit**, **Oriental Magpie-Robin**, and **Gray Wagtail**. The stars of the morning were **Forest Wagtail**, **Paddyfield Pipit**, and great looks at **Dull-blue Flycatcher*** and **Yellow-eared Bulbul***. Believe it or not, it was time to eat again and so we headed back to the hotel for our set lunch.

After a brief break we were on the road again, this time to Horton Plains National Park – a park located at 7,000ft that contains montane grassland and cloud forest habitats and looked like the highlands of Scotland or the Páramo of Colombia and central America. There were grasses and dwarf bamboos, a few Rhododendrons, and a few beautiful flowering shrubs that I know the Peters could identify for us. The weather on the way and when we got there was

pretty atrocious with considerable rain and fog, but it just added to the mystical feeling of the place. Birds were a little hard to come by, but we got out of the bus on a few occasions to explore. Our first bird was an **Indian Blackbird** that was stunning in its simplicity – jet black with bright orange eye-ring, bill, and feet. As we continued down the road the rain intensified and so we clambered back onto the bus to move deeper into the park. Along the way we saw a herd of Sambar Deer in the fog, a few **Pied Bushchats** perched on top of low shrubs, a large flock of **Tricolored Munia**, and a couple of **Red-wattled Lapwings**. At the ranger station there were a few Sambar Deer in the parking lot clearly accustomed to visitors. Continuing on our way through the park we picked up a few more **Indian Blackbirds**, **Asian Tit**, **Hill Swallows**, **Large-billed Crows**, and **Sri Lankan White-eyes***. Dulan was working hard to find us a **Sri Lanka Thrush*** (aka Scaly Thrush) and although we did find one, only a couple of folks had fleeting views before it flew off. It was starting to get dark and so time to head back to Nuwara Eliya and our hotel. A brief stop at a washroom and Dulan once again found something cool – Pygmy Lizard and a Gunther's Golden-backed Frog.

We all thought the day was done and so settled into the hour drive home. But then the most unexpected thing happened – all day we had seen signposts for Leopard but thought that due to our repeated explorations on foot, assumed the population was very low and we were very unlikely to see one. But then, as we were heading out of the park we chanced upon a magnificent feline padding along the road in front of us. It was pitch black but our headlights and Dulan's powerful flashlight lit the cat for us. We followed it down the road for 200ft or so until an oncoming car forced it into the undergrowth on the side of the road. What a magnificent animal and what a truly incredible privilege! But the journey was STILL not over – as we drove in the dark Dulan was still keeping his eyes peeled and suddenly the bus stopped. Somehow, Dulan had spotted a **Brown Wood-Owl** perched in a tree. This time we were done. Back to the hotel, dinner, checklist, and bed. What a day!

DAY 8 - Wednesday, 12 November

We started the day with a visit to Victoria Park – a classically British urban park with ornately mowed grass, orderly flowerbeds, and carp ponds. The number of **Indian Pond Herons** was impressive, and they acted like Robins running around the grass picking up worms. **Eastern Cattle Egrets** were common, as were **Large-billed Crows**, and **Common Mynas**. There were a couple of **Gray Wagtails** shaking their butts, **Oriental Magpie Robins** singing loudly, and **Gray-headed Canary-Flycatchers** with their “Come on, Peter” calls. A **Brown Shrike** perched up, **Asian (Cinereous) Tits** explored for bugs, and **Loten's Sunbird** paused briefly for looks. Our targets for the morning were **Kashmir Flycatcher** and Sri Lanka (Scaly) Thrush. With some perseverance Dulan found a couple of the Flycatchers, the male, in blue and red livery, gave us fleeting looks as it flew from low branches to the ground for a second, and then back to cover. The Thrush on the other hand really tested Dulan, and despite a lot of time searching, we came up short. Thankfully there was still one more location where we might find this species.

Back to the hotel for breakfast and check-out, and we get on the road to Tissa and the south coast. Dulan tried a number of times along the way to call up a Streak-throated Woodpecker, but it wasn't playing ball. We arrived at EKHO Safari Hotel in Tissa and tucked into a late lunch. Our birding outing in the afternoon took us along back roads and small villages until we reached the yard of one particular house. Dulan knew the owner who liked birds and who tried to manage his property in a way that attracts birds – one species in particular. It wasn't long before Dulan beckoned us into the property and pointed out a **Jungle Owlet**, a cute little diurnal owl that was very vocal. We then searched for another species that is reliable in the area. The property backed onto Lake Debarawewa (he would have an amazing yard list!!) which had a lot of birds, including **Lesser Whistling Duck**, **Cotton Pygmy-Goose**, **Pheasant-tailed Jacana**, **Whiskered Tern**, **Common** and **White-throated Kingfishers**. We walked along the shore and were quickly beckoned to some tall coconut palms and there was our second target – **White-naped Woodpecker**. A large woodpecker with a red crest, white nape, and orange/red wings. Of the 10 species in the genus, this is the only one without Flameback in its name – weird! Either way, they were very attractive. As we headed back to the bus, what appeared to just be a couple of **Red-vented Bulbuls** in a dead tree suddenly turned into a pair of **Jerdon's Leafbird**, **Common Iora**, **Black-hooded Oriole**, and **White-browed Fantail**, all in a matter of minutes.



Lake Debarawewa

Back on the bus we headed to a couple of places with views over paddy fields on one side and Lake Debarawewa on the other. The first had **Terns** of various varieties including **Whiskered**, **White-winged**, and **Gull-billed**. Other waterbirds included **Black-headed Ibis**, **Painted Stork**, **Indian Pond-Heron**, **Eastern Cattle Egret**, **Great Egret**, and the mysterious **Medium Egret**. The second location had similar birds, but a few not seen at the previous spot – **Lesser Whistling Duck**, **Gray-headed Swamphen**, **White-breasted Waterhen**, and **Gray Heron**. But as we were losing light, we spotted a very special bird, **Greater Painted-Snipe**! This bird is particularly interesting because it's a monotypic species, meaning it's the only member of its Genus, therefore quite a unique bird. It also happened to be Paula's 203rd bird family. As the light was fading fast, we

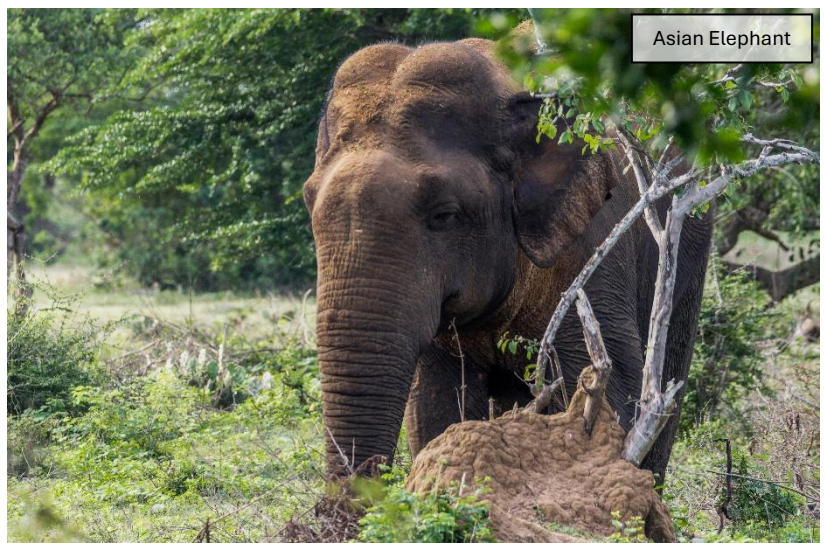
managed reasonable looks but hoped for better looks the following day. With the night and a lightning storm approaching Indian Fruit Bats were streaming across the sky looking for fruiting trees.

Our last stop of the day in the rain were a few trees on the shore of the lake. Dulan peered up with his flashlight and called for us to join him. High up in the tree was an **Eastern Barn Owl** looking down at us. A familiar bird, but actually now split from the more familiar *Tyto alba* to *Tyto javanica*. It was time for dinner with a side of live music, checklist review, and bed.

DAY 9 - Thursday, 13 November

Today was generally split between Bundala and Yala National Parks, two parks famed for their Leopards, birds and other wildlife. An early start had us returning briefly to the Debarawewa Lake rice paddies for better views of Greater Painted-Snipe in the light. Unfortunately, there were no new views, but we did have a **Yellow Bittern**. We then headed to the Embillikala Kalapuwa Wetlands where there were a lot of birds (53 species) and much better luck with **Snipe**, but of the **Pin-tailed** variety. Other wetland birds we saw there were **Gray-headed Swamphen**, both **Red-** and **Yellow-wattled Lapwings**, **Gull-billed**, **Whiskered**, and **White-winged Terns** (don't they all have white wings??), **Eurasian Spoonbill**, **Black-crowned Night Heron**, and a few new birds for the trip – **Garganey**, **Great Thick-knee**, **Pied Kingfisher** (although some saw at Ranweli), **Zitting Cisticola**, and **Rosy Starling**.

We then moved onto Bundala National Park and before driving more than 100ft from the entrance a full-grown Asian Elephant was feasting by the side of the road – the second largest land-animal on the planet! Cool! The rest of the morning provided great views of both courting **Indian Peafowl**, and the incredible **Orange-breasted Green-Pigeon**. We saw **Sirkeer Malkoha** with its bright red bill, and a quick view of a **Blue-faced Malkoha** nearby. There were many shorebirds, including **Little-ringed Plover**, **Eurasian Whimbrel**, **Common Sandpiper**, and **Marsh Sandpiper**. There were many other bird sightings but **Brahminy Starlings** were the only new ones to the trip. We stopped for breakfast at



Asian Elephant



Orange-breasted Green-Pigeon

the end of the road next to the beach where some “friends” were photographing a very snazzy-looking Pondichery Fanthroat Lizard with its blue and yellow throat. After a quick breakfast we were on the road again exploring other areas of the park. More shorebirds included **Black-bellied Plover**, **Pacific Golden-Plover**, **Tibetan Sand-Plover**, **Kentish Plover**, **Black-tailed Godwit**, our first **Red-necked Phalarope** of the trip, **Common**, **Green**, and **Marsh Sandpipers**, **Common Shanks** of both **Red** and **Green**, **Rudy Turnstone**, **Curlew Sandpiper**, and **Little Stint**. Phew! We had 5 Terns – **Little**, **Gull-billed**, **Caspian**, **Whiskered**, **White-winged**, **Left**, and **Right** :) There was a full compliment

of **Cormorants** – **Little**, **Great**, and **Indian**, our first **Osprey** of the trip, and many other birds.

In the afternoon, after lunch, we headed to Yala National Park. This park is the busiest in the country, but Dulan knew a quieter section that we could explore. The bird fauna was very similar to our morning at Bundala, but there were a number of highlights. We saw our first and only **Black-necked Stork** of the trip which appeared to be nestbuilding. A **Gray Heron** ate an unbelievably huge Jerdon’s Bullfrog. **Yellow-crowned Woodpeckers**, **Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Larks** with their black collars and faces, and lanky **Oriental Skylarks** were all new for the trip. A VERY large male Asian Elephant pushed us down the road in our jeep. We saw lots of other wildlife in the park, including India Hare (Black-naped), mud-bathing Water Buffalo, Ruddy-nosed Mongoose, a Mugger Crocodile, and a Water Keelback Snake. After this great visit to Yala NP we returned to the lovely EKHO Safari Tissa hotel for dinner, checklist, and rest.

DAY 10 - Friday, 14 November

This morning, before breakfast, we headed once more to Bundala NP to see what the park could provide. In less than an hour, we had nearly 50 species with highlights including huge flocks of **Glossy Ibis** flying overhead, our first **Black Bittern** and **Lesser Whitethroat** of the trip. A brief 30-minute stop, this time at Embilikala Kalapuwa Wetlands brought us 54 species, including great views of roosting male **Indian Peafowl** in trees, a **Eurasian Collared-Dove**, and **Asian Koel** out in the open. Heading back to the hotel we stopped at a wetland which provided a huge Water Monitor plodding along the road, an amorous **Indian Peafowl** showing off his finery, and a couple of **Clamorous** (no, not amorous) **Reed Warblers**. After driving a little further, we found some interesting shorebirds – **Pacific Golden-Plover**, **Tibetan Sand-Plover**, **Kentish Plover**, and a lonely **Ruddy Turnstone**.

After a hearty breakfast and hotel check-out we were on our way to Uda Walawe; but Dulan wanted one last stop at a paddyfield near Debarawewa Lake. We were hoping for good looks at **Greater Painted-Snipe** and that’s what we got. Aside from watching the modern machinery that prepares the paddies get stuck in the mud, we were treated to great views of at least 3 feeding Snipe. Now we were off to Uda Walawe.

After a delicious lunch at the Grand Uda Walawe Safari hotel we headed to the nearby Uda Walawe National Park where we boarded jeeps and headed into the park. Unfortunately, the weather was against us, and we were forced to roll down the canvas sides of the open-sided jeeps, thereby obscuring the world around us. In breaks in the rain we did see some great wildlife, like **Barred Buttonquail** in short grass, great views of **Coppersmith Barbets**, **White-tailed Iora**, and **Lesser Whitethroat**. The park is also famous for its large Asian Elephant population, and we were treated to a few sightings of these magnificent creatures enjoying the rain.

In the evening, before dinner, we received a presentation about the issue of Human-Elephant Conflict from Sameera Weerathunga. Sameera has worked tirelessly for nearly two decades to create harmony between elephants and farming communities around Uda Walawe National Park. Elephants are known to roam great distances to find mates and food, and with farming communities surrounding the National Park, it's inevitable that there will be conflicts when elephants leave the park. Farmers in search of more land continue to encroach into the park adding additional pressure on elephant habitat. Elephants consequently leave the park and raid agricultural fields and enter communities looking for rice (their favorite food). Locals hit back with poison, snares, and shooting the elephants.

Elephants need grassland to eat. When they feed, they cut the top of the grass with their trunks, promoting regrowth. Communities illegally graze cattle in the park. These cattle churn up the ground with their hooves leading to erosion, and when they feed they pull the grass including the roots, furthering erosion. Bare ground invites fast-growing invasive plant species like Lantana which elephants don't eat. The Lantana shade out the grass enabling the bushes to spread. Something had to be done and in stepped Sameera. He set up a project to try to alleviate the issue. Using ear-shape and other unique marks Sameera catalogued nearly 2,000 elephants in the park, enabling the identification of "trouble-maker" elephants that could be managed to avoid conflicts with the neighboring communities. The project also identified a mosaic of land that could be used as a corridor to nearby protected areas, eventually getting the land parcels gazetted as protected areas. Outreach and education is also a very important piece to the puzzle and Sameera spends a lot of time in the communities explaining the issues and solutions like planting alternative cash crops that have high value, but that elephants don't eat.

Through camera traps, community partnerships, and innovative alternative crop programs, Sameera's proving that people and elephants can thrive together. His deep understanding of both wildlife behavior and local needs makes him exactly the kind of leader conservation desperately needs. From distributing 8,475 alternative crop saplings to building trust with 300 farming families, Sameera's work shows that coexistence isn't just possible – it's both profitable and sustainable.

DAY 11 - Saturday, 15 November

Today we transferred to Sinharaja. A quick stop at Udawalawa Reservoir gave us opportunities to see a few birds that included **Indian Swiftlet**, **Little Swifts**, and **Asian Palm Swift**, as well as **Wood Sandpiper**, a swooping **White-bellied Sea-Eagle**, and **Tawny-bellied Babblers**. As we continued our journey, we passed paddy fields which gradually changed into tea plantations as we started to ascend in elevation. Dulan conducted a research project at a tea plantation called Depedene Estate located at around 2,500ft and we took a break here to look around. Naturally there's always birds to find and this was a good place to see **White-faced Starling** and **Plum-headed Parakeets**. We also had great views of perched **Crested Treeswifts** which is not always easy.

We eventually reached the small town of Kudawa where we would spend the next few days. We checked-in to the delightful Blue Magpie Lodge, had lunch, and settled in. This afternoon's excursion introduced us to the Sinharaja Forest Reserve and some very special birds indeed. A couple of 1950's American jeeps with very suspect steering and no seatbelts, or doors, showed up and shuttled us to the entrance of the park. If anyone has been to Disneyland recently and taken the Jurassic Park ride, you'd be mistaken in thinking they modeled the ride on this journey from the lodge – old-style jeep ✓ incredibly narrow road ✓ hills and bumps ✓ creek crossings ✓ None of which we had to pay extra for.





We walked into the park on a mission to find one species in particular. Luckily for us, Dulan had sent a local guide out earlier in the day to track down our quarry. We were led to a spot along the trail and ushered into the wall of undergrowth. It was not an established trail, and the steep incline, intense humidity, heat and muddy climb was not easy, but one by one we made our way. We followed our local guide who eventually invited us to look into some dense bamboo where we saw a brown blob perched on a branch. On closer inspection we could see a pair of tiny **Sri Lankan Frogmouths** looking right at us. Such amazing birds, but we didn't have long to admire them as we were urged to continue along the trail. We didn't have to go far before we were instructed to duck down and look up at some more bamboo. And there it was, the newest endemic bird to science in Sri Lanka, the **Serendib Scops-Owl***. This species has a good story - the prominent Sri Lankan ornithologist Deepal Warakagoda and Dulan's friend and colleague, was first alerted to the Serendib Scops-Owl by its poo-ooo call in the rainforests of Kitulgala in 1995. Six years later, the owl was observed for the first time in Sinharaja, again by Warakagoda, and formally described new to science in 2004. The previous new bird species was described in 1868 (Sri Lanka Whistling-Thrush). One of the rarest owls in

the world at between 150-700 individuals, the new owl species is tiny, at only 6.5" tall, and is known locally as පබුවන් බස්සා (panduwan bassā or small rufous-colored owl) in the Sinhala language.

After that amazing experience we continued birding in the area and had some great birds that were new for the trip, including **Green-billed Coucal***, **Sri Lanka Drongo***, the magnificent **Sri Lanka Blue-Magpie***, and a riot of **Orange-billed Babblers*** all endemic species to Sri Lanka. We had another theme park ride back to the lodge for dinner, checklist, and bed. Such a great day!

DAY 12 - Sunday 16, November

This morning, we were up early to find another special bird of the forest. But before we even left the lodge, we heard a new bird – **Chestnut-backed Owlet*** (endemic). Our target bird this morning was the endemic **Sri Lanka Spurfowl***, a skittish, secretive bird that lives deep in the forest. Luckily for us, a local family has set up a simple blind and habituated some Spurfowl by feeding them each morning. We only had to wait a short time before a few female **Sri Lankan Jungle Fowl*** appeared, and then our target bird showed up pecking at the ground with the Jungle Fowl. We put the work in the previous day to get the endemic Scops-Owl, today the endemic bird was virtually delivered on a plate.

During the rest of the morning, we had some amazing animal encounters. Some of the highlight birds were a **Black Eagle** soaring overhead, the endemic **Sri Lanka Gray Hornbill*** (Hornbills, always a treat!), good views of **Yellow-fronted Barbet***, **Sri Lanka Hanging-Parrot***, **White-bellied Drongo**, a **Spot-winged Thrush** in the shadows, a gorgeous **Malabar Trogon**, and the tiny endemic **White-throated Flowerpecker***.



After a boxed breakfast with tea and jaggery from the little tea shop, we headed back into the forest. Although it wasn't particularly productive, we did see **Sri Lanka Blue-Magpie***, another skulky **Spot-winged Thrush**, the usual heard **Pale-billed Flowerpeckers**, **Large-billed Leaf Warblers**, and **Green Warblers**, and a couple of **Flycatchers** – **Brown-breasted** and **Tickell's Blue**. There were also some really great herps including a Lowland Hump-nosed Viper, coiled up on the path in strike-pose, while a Green Vine Snake tried to hide in the shrubs pretending to be a vine, and a fully grown Oriental Rat Snake bathing in the sunshine. There were also some tiny, highly camouflaged Forest Day Geckos and Sri Lanka Kangaroo Lizards – all great reptiles.

We took lunch at the nearby small lodge which had a few feeders that attracted plenty of **Yellow-browed** and **Square-tailed Bulbuls** for our viewing pleasure. After our repast we returned to the Forest Reserve, this time taking the trail leading past the wetland and into a more open area. Dulan was working really hard to find us a Scaly (Sri Lanka) Thrush but no dice this afternoon. It was a relatively slow afternoon, but we were provided with good views of some previously seen species and a few new ones, including another two **Serendib Scops-Owls***, more **Sri Lanka Blue-Magpies***, **White-throated Flowerpecker***, and the endemic **Sri Lanka Myna***. Once again, we had another fantastic ride home in the jeeps and a delicious dinner.

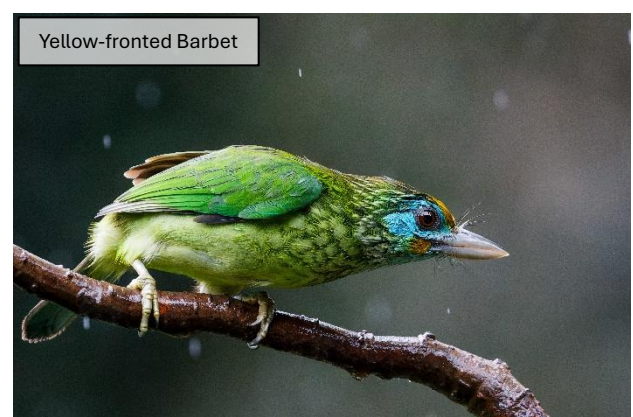
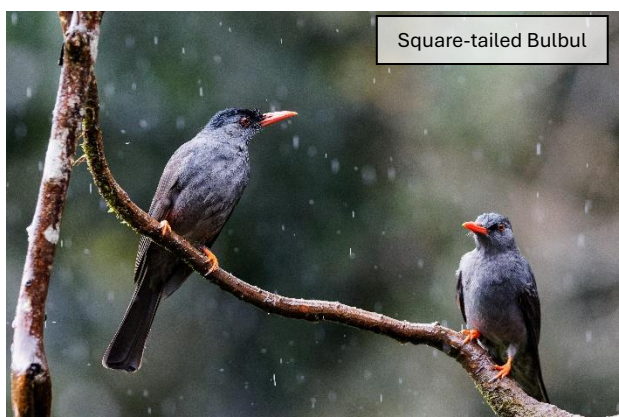
DAY 13 - Monday 17, November

Dulan was determined to find a Scaly Thrush and because this species can be quite skittish, we needed to be the first people in the park, so we were up early and out. As we walked the trails, some of the unusual sightings included a small flock of **Red-faced Malkoha*** a Sri Lanka endemic and first for the trip, and another roosting **Sri Lanka Frogmouth***, a heard **Chestnut-backed Owlet***, great views of **Malabar Trogon**, a couple of **Lesser Yellownapes** with their cool crest, and better views of **Layard's Parakeets*** as they flew overhead.

Naturally, we stopped for a cuppa at around 10am where we were entertained by a very gregarious **Blue-Magpie*** and **Sri Lanka Gray Hornbill***, as well as some sneaky Layard's Squirrels. A magnificent snake was also discovered – Sri Lanka Green Pit-Viper. We continued birding, taking the path past the wetland area we visited the day before. We spotted a **Besra** perched way off in the distance, checked-in on the **Serendib Scops-Owl** again which was in the same place, and encountered some of the usual birds – **White-throated*** and **Pale-billed Flowerpeckers**, a **Brown-breasted Flycatcher**, another couple of **Spot-winged Thrush**, and **Orange Minivet**. The leeches were particularly bad today, and we were constantly checking ourselves and each other for the stealthy suckers.



And then the rain started. We took lunch at the same place as the day before, and the feeders were very active. We had great views of **Yellow-fronted Barbet***, **Sri Lanka Gray Hornbill***, **Orange Minivet**, **Square-tailed** and **Yellow-**

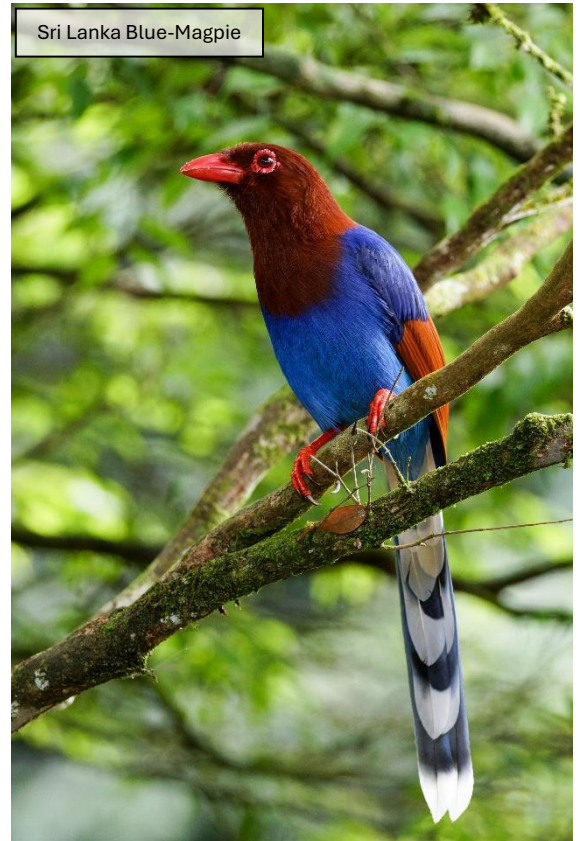


browed Bulbul, and **Golden-fronted Leafbird**. While waiting out the rain we devised a “fun” game for renaming birds – citrus-pygmy-animal-doctor = Orange Minivet! etc. The afternoon brought more rain, few birds, but lots of leeches, and although we only got poor looks, the only new bird was the endemic **Ashy-headed Laughingthrush***.

As the light began to fade we headed back to the lodge with our jeeps, but not before stopping at the local art shop where Iresha Sandamali produces amazing bird and wildlife artwork including hand-painted t-shirts, canvases, bags, and other items. Nearly everyone purchased something – a great way to take a memory home from Sri Lanka and inject a little money into the local economy.

DAY 14 - Tuesday 18, November

Today we needed to head to our next destination, but Dulan was determined to find a **Sri Lanka** (Scaly) **Thrush*** before we left as this would be the last place we could find this species. We headed early to the park, this time walking up from the main gate. Dulan only had one bird on his mind and was ultra focused. That meant we were somewhat on our own with other bird identification. But with two weeks of birding in Sri Lanka under our belt, we did pretty well. The morning was split into two sessions, with tea in between, naturally. The first session brought us a couple of **Sri Lanka Spurfowl***, brief views of **Red-faced Malkoha***, **Lesser Yellownape**, **Dark-fronted** and **Orange-billed Babblers***, and **Sri Lanka White-eye***. While we walked behind, Dulan stopped suddenly and hurried us to see a bird on the trail in the distance. We were poised ready to see our Thrush, but it ended up being of the **Spot-winged** variety. We also came across another Lowland Hump-nosed Viper, but this individual had a gorgeous rufous head.



We then started along the main, well-traveled path through the park and just as we were starting to lose hope, up ahead along the path, Dulan saw a thrush-like bird. Was it another Spot-winged Thrush? No, it was our bird – **Sri Lanka** (Scaly) **Thrush*** – sitting right on the edge of the path in the sunlight. With a huge grin on his face, Dulan’s relief was evident. We all had great looks through the scope and got a few photos. Phew! The pressure was now off. It was time to head back to the bus and be on our way.

However, as we made our way along the path lagging behind Dulan we had an amazing mixed flock pass by right overhead

– **Red-faced Malkoha***, **Malabar Trogon**, **Red-backed Flameback***, **Lesser Yellownape**, **citrus-dwarf-animal-doctor**, **Indian Paradise-Flycatcher**, **Velvet-fronted Nuthatch**, **Tickell’s Blue Flycatcher**, and no doubt many more. It was a manic few minutes! It was time to move on. We walked down to the park entrance where the jeeps were waiting for us.

Our next destination was the Cinnamon Rainforest Restoration Project; an initiative focused on reforesting a 50acre degraded area nearby. The project, a collaboration between Cinnamon Hotels & Resorts, the Tree Society of Sri Lanka, and the Sri Lankan Forest Dept., involves planting native trees to restore habitat for wildlife, improve

biodiversity, and carbon sequestration. We learnt about the goals of the project and each of us were given the opportunity to plant one of the native trees grown in the nursery. Although a drop in the ocean, it's great to think "our trees" will someday sequester some of the carbon emissions we expended on the trip.

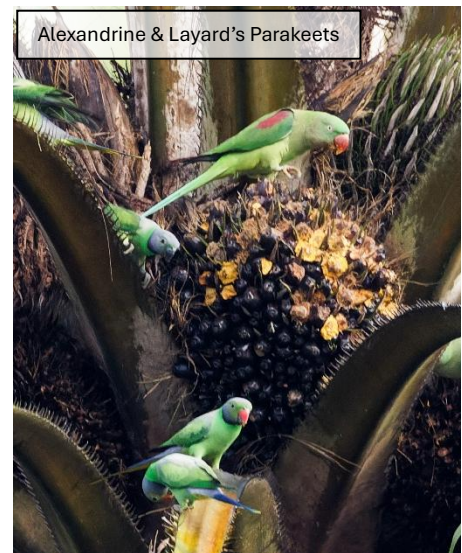
It was time to return to the lodge, pick off the leeches, and pack. A few of us headed to the nearby school to present them with books for their library – something that will hopefully benefit many children in the school for years to come. These types of activities typify why birding trips with Alight Tours are so different. We are guided by a local expert guide, stay in locally owned accommodation, and are driven by local drivers who own their own vehicles. We see incredible endemic birds, learn about reforestation, and plant trees in an effort to restore habitat for birds and wildlife. We visit local artists and other small business owners and spend money at their establishments, buying art and drinking tea, and we distribute education materials to rural schools with few resources. In a single morning, we saw unique birds, we contributed to the local economy by supporting small businesses, and we helped rebuild habitat so the place we leave behind is better than when we found it. Few other bird-focused travel companies weave these aspects into their itineraries. Thank you for traveling with Alight Tours!



It was then time for lunch and to hit the road. A brief stop at a local jaggery seller and we continued on our way to Kitulgala. It was already pretty late in the afternoon which meant we didn't arrive at our hotel until after dark, but we were in time for dinner – we couldn't possibly miss a meal!

DAY 15 - Wednesday 19, November

It was our last full day of the tour and we wanted to make the most of it. We met at 6am in the rest house garden and were struck by the beauty of the location on the banks of the Kelani Ganga River with mist shrouded forest on the hillside across the water. Breathtaking! The birds were active this morning too and we had our first really great views of both **Alexandrine** and **Layard's Parakeets*** as the fed in an Oil Palm, as well as a **Stork-billed Kingfisher** perched on a wire over the river, a **Sri Lanka Hanging-Parrot*** sitting atop a branch in the open for a change, we also had fabulous views of **Golden-fronted Leafbird**.



Another delicious breakfast was followed by a nearby birding excursion to find a species that most hadn't seen yet and few had only glimpsed – the very poorly named (in my opinion) **Black-backed Dwarf-Kingfisher**. When we arrived, a small group was just leaving and they kindly pointed out the bird, making the visit very easy. Perched motionless under some leaves, the Kingfisher didn't seem to notice our peering presence. After enjoying the Kingfisher, we continued our walk, finding more **Sri Lanka Hanging-Parrots***, **Orange Minivets**, a lovely **Orange-headed Thrush**, and an incessantly calling **Common Tailorbird**. Taking the bouncy rope bridge across the river we walked the small roads of the community on the other side. Moving down one of the paths Dulan glimpsed a **Slaty-legged Rail** disappear into the undergrowth. He motioned for us to stop while he ran ahead and strategically placed his speaker. Playing the call, we waited silently focusing on the spot up the path where the Rail had disappeared. Then completely out of the blue, the Rail popped out within a few feet of us and ran straight down the road toward the speaker. It totally took us by surprise and most of us only got photos of the back of its head as it ran away! We also saw an **Oriental Honey-buzzard** soaring overhead, a far-off **Shikra**, both **Orange*** and **Yellow-billed Babblers**, and a **White-rumped Munia**.

Continuing along the road we came to a house whose owner Dulan knew well. Ashoka was a local craftsman who made spoons and other household objects out of wood. Whenever possible, Ashoka tries to use salvaged wood instead of cutting down living trees and most of the wood he uses is either Teak, Coconut Palm or Fishtail Palm. Dulan explained that the spoons made from Fishtail Palm wood are extremely durable and could last decades (100 years?!). Everything Ashoka made was beautifully carved and most of the group walked away with something. We were shown around his workshop where he and his colleague demonstrated how the spoons are made. He also worked hard to find us a couple of interesting herp species. He couldn't find a Caecilian, but he did find a Buton's Nessia or Three-toed Snake Skink.

Walking further along the road, Dulan heard a bird we hadn't encountered before on the trip – **Banded Bay Cuckoo**. Dulan knew that it would respond well to playback and shifting the speaker from one side of the road to the other, we all finally got good looks and some photos. A **Crested Serpent-Eagle** was also heard while we were finding the Cuckoo. We eventually found ourselves next to the water where a man was ferrying people across the river in a raft powered with a single paddle. It took two trips to get us all across, delivering us safely on the other side, directly next to the guest house. Perfect!



Returning to the hotel, we received a delicious and fragrant cooking demonstration from two of the hotel's chefs. Throughout the tour we had enjoyed incredible Sri Lankan food and so it was fantastic to see it being prepared by local chefs right in front of us. They cooked an ochre curry, a green bean curry, brinjal, and sambal. This amazing food was then served to us for lunch – Yum!

After lunch, the afternoon was spent birding a few locations not too far from the hotel. With highlights including a few **Black Eagles**, a very dapper **Chestnut-headed Bee-eater**, **White-bellied Drongo**, **Sri Lanka Swallows*** and **Southern Hill Myna**. We made our way to the river and the site of the bridge featured in the 1957 movie *The Bridge on the River Kwai* starring William Holden and Alec Guinness, which although set in Burma, was actually filmed at this location in Sri Lanka. Unfortunately, the bridge used in the movie is no longer, but we could see the location and bird from the current bridge where we had some typical water birds – **White-breasted Waterhen**, **Common**, **Stork-billed**, and **White-throated Kingfishers**, as well as **Little Cormorants**.

DAY 16 – Thursday 20, November

It was time to head back to Colombo and start saying goodbye to our friends.

Incredibly, Dulan had already checked off all the Sri Lankan endemic bird species, and he admitted that it would be difficult to find new birds for our Sri Lanka list. The original itinerary had us birding around Kitulgala, but Dulan suggested we begin heading back to Colombo and to visit a lake he knew that might have a couple of species we hadn't seen yet.

We began the day birding around the hotel grounds where we had some great views of **Red-backed Flameback***, a preening **Sri Lanka Gray Hornbill***, both **Layard's*** and **Alexandrine Parakeets**, and a dark morph **Oriental Honey-buzzard**. We then enjoyed our last breakfast, checked-out, and hit the road.

After a few hours of driving in ever increasing traffic, we arrived at Thalangama Lake on the outskirts of Colombo. It was very hot, but we found shade as we walked around the lake which was almost completely covered in waterlilies and other water plants. On an island there was a breeding colony of **Asian Openbills** with very grown chicks, already

displaying their wonky bills. We had great views of the very attractive **Crimson-fronted Barbet***, **Gray-headed Swamphen**, **Pheasant-tailed Jacana**, finally views of the vociferous but rarely seen (by us) **Common Tailorbird**, and fleeting glimpses of our last new bird of the trip – **Blythe’s Reed Warbler**. And that was it, the last of our birding sessions! Dulan took us to a very swanky lunch place with some of the best Sri Lankan food of the trip. And then it was to the Olinia Hotel where some of us were staying for one more night. Folks got a chance to freshen up before heading to the airport for their flights home (and Malta) and it was time to say goodbye to Dulan, Prabath, and Pubudu.

What an incredible trip! Dulan was such an amazing guide – his knowledge of not only birds, but all wildlife was immense. He also knew everybody we met and was personally involved with all of the conservation projects we encountered. Prabath drove us expertly and safely across the entire country – battling winding roads, crazy drivers, a Leopard, and even a Cobra! And Pubudu was always by our side, carrying our bags, the telescope, picking up the items we dropped along the way, supplying us with bananas, always with a smile. We felt thoroughly taken care of.

It was clear that Sri Lanka had more to give than the 2 weeks we spent travelling the island. From the few opportunities we got to briefly meet Sri Lankan people it was clear that they are warm, kind, welcoming, and so generous with their time. With layers of diverse ethnic traditions, religions, and colonial influences, the places we visited had an atmosphere of peace and love of nature. Not to forget the culinary journey we took, with favorites including flavor-packed rice and curry for every meal, curd and treacle, hoppers, and daily fresh fruit (Nelli anyone?).

It was an absolute pleasure traveling with you all with memories that will last a lifetime. Hopefully we’ll get to do it again sometime.



Dulan Vidanapathirana



Pubudu



Prabath



Dulan, Paula, DJ, Carl, Michael, Nancy, Don, Liz, Peter, Elizabeth, Peter, Toby

Endemic Birds of Sri Lanka (*)

(taxonomic order and day first observed)

Sri Lanka Spurfowl – Day 12
Sri Lanka Junglefowl – Day 1
Green-billed Coucal – Day 11
Red-faced Malkoha – Day 13
Sri Lanka Wood-Pigeon – Day 6
Sri Lanka Green-Pigeon – Day 1
Chestnut-backed Owlet – Day 12
Serendib Scops-Owl – Day 11
Sri Lanka Gray Hornbill – Day 1
Yellow-fronted Barbet – Day 5
Crimson-fronted Barbet – Day 4
Red-backed Flameback – Day 1
Crimson-backed Flameback – Day 6
Layard's Parakeet – Day 12
Sri Lanka Hanging-Parrot – Day 5
Sri Lanka Woodshrike – Day 3
Sri Lanka Drongo – Day 11
Sri Lanka Blue-Magpie – Day 11
Black-capped Bulbul – Day 4
Yellow-eared Bulbul – Day 7
Sri Lanka Swallow – Day 2
Sri Lanka Bush Warbler – Day 7
Sri Lanka White-eye – Day 7
Sri Lanka Scimitar-Babbler – Day 5
Brown-capped Babbler – Day 1
Ashy-headed Laughingthrush – Day 13
Orange-billed Babbler – Day 11
Sri Lanka Myna – Day 12
White-faced Starling – Day 11
Sri Lanka (Scaly) Thrush – Day 12
Spot-winged Thrush – Day 12
Sri Lanka Shama – Day 2
Dull-blue Flycatcher – Day 7
Sri Lanka Whistling-Thrush – Day 6
Legge's Flowerpecker – Day 12

eBird Trip Report:

<https://ebird.org/tripreport/437925>

Donations

The CO₂ emissions from our 1,985km of bus and jeep safari travel, as well as Toby's round-trip flights, will be offset through Sustainable Travel International. In addition, 3% of all profits have been donated to the Red Cross: Sri Lanka to aid in recovery after Cyclone Ditwha.

