A day at Yala

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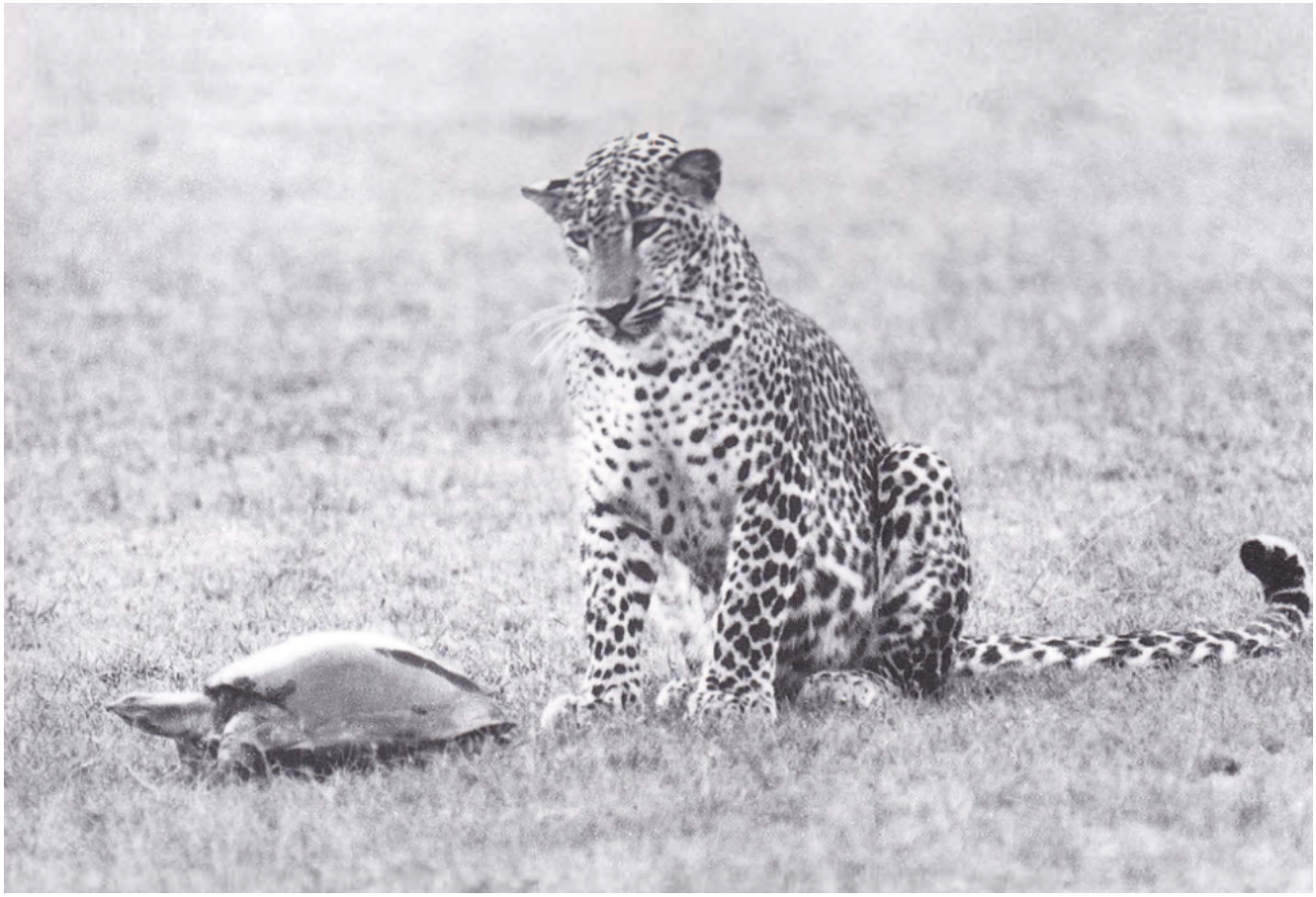


A leopard at Yala is curious about a tortoise crossing his path.

A holy man once told the ruler of this country: “Oh. great king, the birds of the air and the beasts have as equal a right to live and move about in any part of this land as thou. The land belongs to the people and all other beings. Thou art only the guardian of it.”

That was in the third century BC when the co-existence of man and beast presented few problems, compared to the situation today. Now an expanding food front, and

declining forest base, present the dilemma of development ver us environment. and farm ver u forest. evertheless, we try to preserve our wild life as best we can.

The elephant is the most spectacular as well as the most famous of our animals. But its enormous appetite – 250kg of succulent green stuff every day – has put it in direct conflict with the farmer.

Out of an estimated 30,000 elephants in Sri Lanka a century ago, there are no more than 2,000 today. The majority are concentrated in the national parks: Ruhuna (commonly known as Yala), Wilpattu, Walawe, Galoya, Somawathie and Wasgamuwa. Yala is the oldest national park, covering 650 sq km. It is in three blocks. Block One, with about 193 sq km, is open to the public. It is to this park that visitors come to see wild elephant, and it provides an animated shop window for this jungle beast.

By staying at Tissamaharama you could devote a whole day to the park. Its gates open at 05.30 hours when you can collect your guide or tracker. Do not expect to find a “Hollywood” jungle of densely matted vegetation with pythons hanging from the trees and leopards peering around every bush. The Yalajungle is only scrub and open parkland dotted with little lakes and waterfalls.

The main road running through the park separates the landscape. Dense forests and upheavals of rock are on the higher ground on the left, with the picturesque plains and sea coast on the right. Elephants favour the plains because there is food and water. There is plenty of grass, which they scallop with their feet. The plains also provide easy access to the sand dunes which they frequent. As the drought sets in from June to ‘September, the elephants start moving towards the river and two large water holes to the north of the plains. Heenwewa and Meynertwewa, the two water holes, normally retain sufficient water for use through the dry period. They are usually swarming with elephants, hotly pursued by visitors with cameras.

Elephant and buffalo are the two largest animals in this park. But while the elephant has either declined or stayed static in number, the buffalo population has rapidly multiplied. This is causing some concern because the buffalo are beginning to wallow, muddying the water in all the water holes. They are also competing for grass with the elephant and deer.

A wallowing buffalo muddies the water, upsetting fastidious elephants.

Knowledgeable people, among them the Smithsonian Elephant Survey Team that was here recently, feel that if this continues much longer, the elephant will leave the park. Elephants are extremely fastidious about their drinking water, and require plenty of grass to supplement the rapidly diminishing resources of tree fodder.

There is a magnificent black rock in the park which looks like a massive bull elephant side on. (Ask your tracker to point it out to you.) This likeness is a natural monument to the great beast that has made Yala famous. God forbid that it should become a gravestone marking the extinction of the elephant from the park.

Around 10.00 hours, as the sun hots up, the park’s animals gradually retire to the shade of the forest. The open plains are left to monkeys busily attending to their toilet and discussing jungle politics in their shrill voices. You will also see scavenging wild pigs, grubbing for food to satisfy their voracious appetites. They eat anything from fallen fruit and roots to worms and carrion.

You could be fortunate in witnessing the mating dance of the peacock. It is a scintillating display of avian ballet. The gorgeous bird with his blue and green tail opened like a fan over his back, gives off electric shocks of colour as he stamps out a slow dance, revolving to shine his glory m all directions.

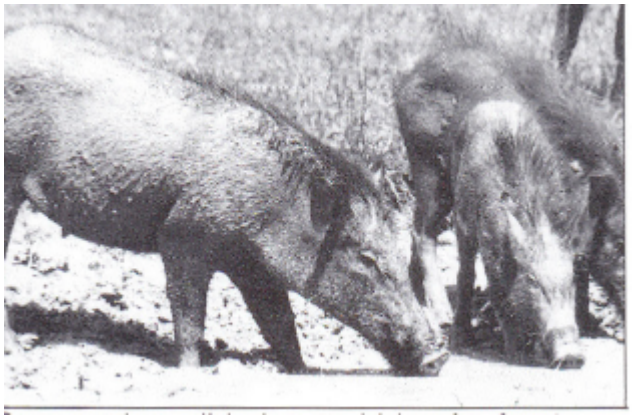
When the jungle animals take their siesta, it is time for you to relax, to get down from your vehicle and stretch your legs. A good place to do this is on the banks of the river that flows through the park by the Y ala bungalow. But only leave the vehicle at authorized halts.
As there are no catering services in the park, you should carry your own picnic. You could enjoy your meal alfresco style in the shade of the huge kumbuk trees (Terminalia Arjuna) which border the river.

As evening approaches, the animals return to the plains to feed before nightfall. Bears are sometimes seen at this time. They are shy customers during the day, except in the mating season when they make a big noise and quarrel furiously. One visiting party got a shock when it interrupted such a quarrel. The losing bear, in his attempt to get away from his rival, somersaulted over the bonnet of the group’s jeep.

The elephant is the most spectacular of the animals at Yala.

A leopard, stalking its prey, is one of the finest sights in the jungle, but also one of the rarest if you are only spending a day there. Instead, look for the magnificent leopard that gives a matinee performance on a large rock by one of the established

jeep trails. He exercises on its flat top or relaxes in a niche, gazing out over the plain. Occasionally he will turn his head to look down at you, Catch that implacable gaze in your binoculars and you will be surprised at the burning intensity of his green eyes. When the leopard finally stirs, he stretches languidly like a housecat and melts out of sight. It is the grand finale to a spectacular day.



Scavenging wild pigs grubbing their food.