


Amidst the Tranquillity of Kaudulla

 The lone male elephant having his morning feed

The cooling breeze of early morning and the comfortable warmth of the rising sun embraced us as we entered the quiet environs of the Kaudulla National Park...

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The Kaudulla National Park is bordered by a small mountain range in the western side, Kaudulla Reservoir and the scrub jungle on the east and the Yoda Ela (or canal) where the water flows from the Minneriya Reservoir to Kantale from the southern to the northern boundary. The central feature of this park is the Kaudulla Reservoir, which has been essential for the sustenance of the diverse wildlife. Although considered to be a wetland, Kaudulla also comprises of grasslands, riverine forests and dry mixed evergreen forests. Due to the several water bodies within the park, it is also a well-known watershed.

Crossing the bridge over the sluice gates, we journeyed farther into the park. Our eyes intently scanned the jungle for any movement. The richness of the greenery suggested that a source of water was hydrating the land. As the gravel road stretched in front of us, by chance we looked back to see a lone male elephant crossing the road. We reversed the vehicle to get a better look. This large elephant sensing our presence hurried to the other end and splashed in the small canal below to get across. He was quite quick as he proceeded into the jungle where we could not follow.

The morning sun was rising creating a picturesque setting. Known for its rich diversity in birds, the park is home to both indigenous and migrant species. Our morning was filled with sightings of eagles such as the serpent eagle and grey headed fish eagle, blue tailed bee-eaters, little cormorants, grey herons, painted storks, the Asian open-bill, woolly necked storks and many more.

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As it was the dry season, the water level of the reservoir had reduced significantly. The dried up trees within the tank had the markings of when the water level was high, which reflected the mammoth volume that this reservoir held. We were actually driving on the river bed and the view of the Kaudulla Reservoir in the morning was breathtaking. Placid waters and aquatic birds were having their day's feed. A fishing boat could be seen in the distance. Suddenly the flock of birds would rise into the sky and organise themselves into a creative formation as they dipped and rose to the current of the wind.

It seemed to be the mating season for peacocks. On two separate occasions the males had their plumage displayed to impress the peahens, from what we could gather it did not seem to be working! As we journeyed farther we came across a herd of deer, that scattered as they heard us approaching.

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A lone male elephant enjoying a morning meal of grass caught our attention. We slowly edged towards him. His movements were almost rhythmic as he encircled the grass with his trunk and expertly pulled it off the ground. He shook off the earth from the grass and put it into his mouth with a single motion. We watched him almost in a trance, enraptured by his simple movements. Once he felt that his stomach was satisfied, he made his way into the jungle to begin the day.

The Kaudulla Reservoir has an interesting history and is linked to royalty. It is said that the tank was built by Princess Biso Bandara who was a sister of the Great King Mahasen, who built the massive Minneriya Reservoir. As the King had not given her permission to build a tank, the Princess had sought the help of Krishna, a minister in the Royal Court. As this was a forbidden project, it is said that the Princess and the Minister mobilised the 'Yakshayas' and the massive reservoir was built overnight. The Grackle (Kauda) who was the King's pet bird that could talk informed the King of the Princess's secret. It is believed that the reservoir was named after the bird—Kauda.

The sun was rapidly rising in the sky and it was getting warmer, the animals were leaving the open areas to go into the shade. We too left the environs of Kaudulla, promising to visit again.

