



Indian Darters basking in the sun

Scrub jungle, wetlands, lagoons, salt pans, sand dunes and beach! Bundala terrain has an ever-changing face. And within its yielding landscapes is its fauna, overflowing with vigor and vitality.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara □ Photographs Indika De Silva

At the southern end of the Island, Bundala National Park spreads along the coast to the east of Hambantota, encompassing an area of 3,700 ha. □It was the first to be declared □a RAMSAR site in the island for its rich wetland ecosystem. Coursing slowly along its tracks scanning □its terrain for signs of life we were not to be disappointed. The best time to visit is the early hours of the morning when all of its feathered inhabitants come out to bask in □the morning light. Bundala, among its many attributes, is famously □a bird sanctuary and it was easy to see why.

Not only were the familiar plumes ever present in healthy numbers, the wintering birds swelled the population at Bundala with greater varieties. It is believed that there are up to 200 species of birds at Bundala and they vary with the many habitats. The road wound through shrub jungle that often gave sight to the smaller birds laced among the brambles. The green Bee-eater was a common sight, □as was the Indian migrant, the Blue-tailed Bee-eater. A swiftly moving troupe of Barn Swallows, their heads buried in preening, a lone

Black-headed Munia, or a glimpse of a velvety Purple Sunbird were some of the initial sightings.

As we approached the taller gnarled trees, silhouetted against a clear blazing sky was the sombre cloaked presence of a Serpent Eagle, and further along another majestic sighting of the Crested Hawk Eagle gazing austerely. Though it did not do to have eyes cast upwards as the earthen red path carried fleeting glimpses of other animals. As we skirted the bordering jungle, a startled Black-necked Hare scampered haphazardly and was out of sight within seconds, and a more brazen gathering of Black-faced Langur lazily lounged about while a few others strutted with their tails high in the air. In the shade of the thicket was a pair of curious birds who appeared equally perplexed by our presence; the Greater Thick-knee, as identified by our guide, was a one-of-a-kind sighting and its round yellow eye stared back at us quizzically.

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It is when we approached the water logged swamps that greater densities of birds made their appearance. In this migratory season, the swamps, lagoons and salt pans were dotted with waders, herons, shore birds and ducks. We tried to spot as many birds as we could while our guide confounded us with a deluge of both familiar and unfamiliar names. Two Purple Coots ducked their heads comically into the swamp while their chicks huddled safely near the tall grass. A little away from this scene a young crocodile emerged just above the surface, its knuckled snout barely visible. As Bundala is endowed with a diverse habitat including brackish lagoons, and marshlands it is home to both types of crocodiles, the Mugger crocodile and the Estuarine crocodile and we were eager to spot a stealthy reptile more clearly.

As our path led towards the coast, it passed an evolving landscape and with it many more bird sightings - too many to account for. A Snakebird or Indian Darter poised gracefully upon a bare branch, an Asian Open Bill scouring the waters, or the striking Painted Stork dipping its large yellow beak for bites were common sights at Bundala. A Wood Sandpiper pecking the shore delicately and a flock of Whistling Ducks were among other notable glimpses on the banks of the lagoon waters. Bundala indeed was a birdwatcher's paradise with possibly every bird known to inhabit the Island sighted here. However it was the Salt Pans that served the highlights of the day: a large crocodile lumbering lazily towards the water. Its back arched as it leapt heavily into the water where its companion surfaced as if in a greeting. We watched them stream away surreptitiously and descend beneath the placid waters. None would be the wiser of their presence here.

This was not to be the end as Bundala had more secrets in its folds. Our path led us unawares towards the coast. The surroundings became sparse and desertlike, with wild buffalo grazing the thinly laid grass. In the distance a high rise of land appeared against the horizon and soon we were upon an undulating sand dune. Blanketed with thorny vegetation it was indeed an unusual spectacle with vast plains of sand disappearing into the distance. □A phenomenon said to have resulted over millions of years (600 million according to our guide!) from winds amassing the sand, the dune today serves a vital role to the Bundala ecosystem. Its presence conserves the watersheds within as it captures the water from rainfall.

Oblivious to the view that lay a little farther up, we strayed awhile on the sandy path our feet deliciously sinking into the warm powdery surface. Passing the dune we happened upon a precipitous cliff. □Approaching its threshold a vast aquamarine sea erupted directly below, its boisterous waves foaming along an arching beach. Incidentally, the quiet stretch of beach is also a nesting site for five varieties of turtles that find refuge here. □Our birds-eye view allowed a sight to behold and so we did. Sitting among the warm rocks, in the incessant blowing of wind, the waves crashed against the rocks on the lonely strip of arching beach. In the quiet lapse of our pensive gazing a pair of turtles came into view and we watched as they floated whimsically in the lapping waves.

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