

# Co-existing with Elephants



As we approached, a jumbo was in the middle of the Buttala Road

**Elephants are inherently linked to the people of Sri Lanka. From ancient times elephants and people have co-existed peacefully. Even today as you travel through elephant country, you are bound to meet these giants of the wild on the road crunching on fruits that have been given by passersby or just strolling relaxing with a branch firmly held in their trunks. The age old precept of 'give respect to earn respect', rings true as elephants will not harm without reason.**

**Words** Udeshi Amarasinghe

**Photographs** Menaka Aravinda, Geeth Viduranga, Anuradha Perera and Thanuja Thilakaratne

Driving along Lunugamvehera – Sella Kataragama road that stretched into the horizon like a great silver ribbon, we passed makeshift stalls selling fresh and succulent vegetables and fruits. These were mainly for motorists to purchase to gift to jumbos along the road. Bright colours caught our eyes as we headed on our way. In Sella Kataragama we turned towards Buttala, this is when our adventure began.

The dry zone jungle was on either side of the road. Soon there was a bit of excitement, vehicles started to indicate to us with their head-lights that something was up ahead. And, yes indeed a massive elephant was in the middle of the road munching on fruits and also stripping the bark off the branches. At one point, there were queues on both sides of the road, as people waited for the elephant to move. We stopped a short distance away to observe, while other vehicles overtook us and passed the elephant. Three wheelers, motorcycles, cars and lorries safely passed by with care. It was not disturbed by human presence and continued with its task, not moving from the side of the road. There were bananas on the road, undoubtedly given by motorists on their way. Indeed, treating these gentle giants with fruit has almost become a custom. And when they receive these fruity gifts, they salute the passer-by with their trunks. We slowly edged forward and as we passed it, the elephant gave us a kindly look and returned to stripping the branch of its bark and leaves.



Indeed a rare sight!

We continued on our way and then suddenly there was a shout ‘Aliya!’ (elephant!). We stretched our necks and looked out of the window, far away



leaning on a tree was an elephant. The front half of the body was on the road and the back was comfortably resting on the tree. With a branch in his trunk, the jumbo swished it to the side and at one moment brushed the body with the branch. This elephant too had been given fruits and there was a spread on the ground.

Motorcycles and other vehicles continued on their travel without any disturbance from the elephant who was minding its own business. It was indeed pleasant to see the co-existence between man and this majestic jumbo. We were happy with our close encounter with the elephants and were chattering excitedly when we came across a mom and baby elephant standing together on the side of the road. The duo carefully gathered fruits in their trunks, it almost seemed as if the baby elephant was in training. The little one had small tusks and was curious about those passing by. Yet, the duo never left each other's side. Mom and son, patiently waited unafraid and people too kept a respectable distance while giving them fruits. Another slowly emerged from the jungle to get a few fruits as well.

### **On the road from Lahugala to Pottuvil**



A majestic moment

Later in the day, as evening approached, we were driving around in Lahugala, closer to Pottuvil when a movement caught our attention. An elephant after clearly enjoying a splash of mud or water checked the vehicular traffic on the road and decided to cross to the other side. With great strides it went, the steps gently placed on the ground. After crossing, the jumbo turned around and looked

straight at us.

*The little one had small tusks and was curious about those passing by. Yet, the duo never left each other's side.*

A short distance away, another elephant was playing with dust. It took a 'trunkful' of dust and splashed it on itself. With its trunk held high it looked straight at us and thereafter trumpeted and turned its back heading towards the jungle.

We continued on our drive, reaching closer to the villages and then met another elephant crunching on grass. It lifted its trunk to sense the air, noting that presence was no harm and it resumed consuming its evening snack. After a few moments it came closer to the road and it was its time to observe us! It too crossed the road and followed us slowly for a short while. It was almost like saying 'see you later!' And as we proceeded on our way, it stood in the middle of the road, claiming it as its own. Soon paddy fields came into view, and yes, there was another elephant crunching on the wet grass. It would first roll the blades of grass in its trunk and in one movement swish it into its mouth.

## **Whisky Point**



In the middle of the road in Lahugala - a leisurely stroll

At night they roam near the Urani lagoon and village, their presence at times cannot be felt. They silently walk along the paths that they have known and used for generations. Sometimes through home-gardens, roads connecting the village and also the beach. They stand in silence on the side of the road, under tree or near the lagoon completely camouflaged in the darkness. You may here a trumpet or two, but that is more of a way of communication between the herd.

Elephants are a majestic presence that make this country unique. The fact that they can be seen on the road and near villages, indicate the relationship that elephants and humans have had for millennia. If we do not cause any harm to them, the wisest mammal on earth – the elephant, will not harm you.

