Cruising the Wintering Grounds of Kalametiya

Posted on



Two Whistling Ducks take flight

We were back along the southern extremities of the Island, this time to unearth a little known bird sanctuary of the parts – Kalametiya. Against the clear blue sky of a sunny day we discovered mangrove-rich landscapes resounding with the chirruping of feathered visitors.

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While Bundala National Park is the renowned wintering grounds in the deep south, we were eager to discover the unknown. Beyond Tangalle town, in the Hambantota District lies Kalametiya. Our journey led us down an alternate route instead of the designated turn off to Kalametiya from the main road. This gravel road fell across

open landscapes and we soon found ourselves traversing the peripheries of the Kalametiya reserve.

A Bee-eater poised on a fragile branch and a Pond Heron in the grassy wetland came within our sights. The road fell by a lagoon waterway visible through the thickly bordering mangrove roots and we caught sight of a Whistling Duck nestled on the banks. It was an inkling of what was to come on our journey ahead.

The road however ended and we found our way to the regular route to Kalametiya farther up from the main road. It was down the winded routes that we happened upon a lake by the road. At the bank across the waters an invasion of what appeared to be brown clusters drew our attention. It was a large host of Whistling Ducks busily going about their daily ablutions. We watched these flocks who had come in search of breeding and feeding grounds that the mangroves and the waterlogged marshes provided. The flock seemed all too settled to move away from their favoured spot and we hadn’t yet reached our destination. We wondered where an entrance to the reserve would finally appear. However this was not to be. At another dead end that only allowed us a view of the grounds with no access way, we began to wonder if Kalametiya was simply unexplored terrain. Luck came our way however in the form of a cyclist who promptly revealed that the only mode of traversing Kalametiya sanctuary was across the waterways by raft! A few quick calls to arrange for the boatman and we were soon on our way to the banks of Kalametiya lagoon.

Painted a vivid sky blue, the rafts were parked on the banks of the lagoon. Judging by its spacious seating, the humble raft could easily accommodate up to six people while two rowers sit in the parallel catamaran hulls and navigate the waters. Our resourceful boatman, Gayan, provided bird watching gear that included a guide book, binoculars and bottles of water on a detachable round table at the rafts centre. Before us stretched the vast body of the lagoon, its placid surface interrupted here and there with clusters of mangrove islands. We set off without much effort perched comfortably upon the raft ‘benches’ with unimpeded views of our surroundings.

An elegant Grey Heron in the refuge of a tree, a Brahminy Kite surveying the waters from the skies above, the comical Purple Swamphens rising out of the greenery in ungainly flight and a Jacana striding across the marshlands were among many notable sightings that the lagoon environs yielded. Traversing the waters proved a hefty task to the rowers as the muddy sand bed rose up in the shallow waters from

time to time. About a kilometre stretch into the lagoon we soon spotted the winter migrants in large flocks. Their great numbers meant that even from a distance away we could hear them before we could see them. The incessant squawking and quacking punctured the air while we, the silent onlookers, sailed past the feathery commotion. There appeared to be mixed flocks and first within our sights came Terns of various types – a cloudy layer of white and grey. Farther along was a mixed flock of Godwits and Black Winged Stilts masking the lagoon waters with a patchwork of hues. These winter migrants had arrived in large numbers seeking wintering grounds in the warmer climes. The season for these visitors lasts only through December and January and we felt fortunate to have made a timely visit. We watched for many minutes enthralled by the great numbers of migrants, however our boatmen urged us on as the more populated sightings promised to appear ahead.

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Although careening across the lagoon on a manpowered raft was a slow business, it was without a doubt ideal to get lost in the balmy atmosphere and soak up the lagoon’s enchantment. The lagoon itself was an unfathomable expanse of 650ha. The mangroves primarily consist of Kirala, a mangrove plant known for its fruit from which locales obtain a delicious and healthful drink.

Every which way there were in abundance, the mangrove forests and their distinctive roots emerged upright from the water’s surface. It painted a pretty picture of little fenced-in islands scattered across the glassy surface.

We had coursed the waterway for a good two hours and had ventured nearly 2.5 km when we came to our next point of interest. While more winter migrants flocked a ‘hot spot’ at the water’s edge of an ‘island’, the high branches of nearby mangrove trees were home to much larger feathered members. We watched transfixed as the branches heaved with a congregation of Asian Openbill and their nests. The larger adults stood sentinel, while parents fed their young and together they made quite a ruckus, partly we guessed in their anxiety to ward off crows hovering nearby.

The raft floated aimlessly while we drank in our surroundings, we had not been offered an opportunity such as this to observe flocks in such numbers elsewhere. We were the only human trespassers here and the isolation was part of the charm it held. While our tireless boatsmen finally rested their oars, we were more than

happy to linger along the lagoon waters – a single bright blue raft cast amidst the lush mangroves, serene waters, and endless hours of bird watching while the sun began to descend into the horizon.

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