

Elephant Territory



A happytroop enjoying the soothing waters

The day was exceptionally beautiful with the cloudless luminescent skies setting the scene for an unforgettable Safari adventure, the perfect day for exploring the wild, and an audience with the well-known giants of Wasgamuwa National Park; and as mid-afternoon closed in, and the light winds that blew over the still green waters of the Dunuwila Lake swept past, we climbed into the safari jeep, all in fervent anticipation of experiencing the best of the elephant territory.

Words Kamalika Jayathilaka Photographs Prabhath Chathuranga

We soon found ourselves before the red brown gravel tracks that wound through the vast expanse of natural wilderness, the only National Park in the central province of Sri Lanka. Picking up our tracker at the gates we ventured into the wild, rocking back and forth in the slow moving vehicle, eyes out for anything that moved behind the bushes. On either side of the track was the sunburnt dry grassland dotted with patches of bush and forest. We also passed numerous little water holes dotted with herons. Their neighbours the wild buffaloes, rock-like and large, were basking in the hot sun, their heads held high enjoying the combination of mud and water on their sun cracked skins. And as they mooed or splashed in the water every now and again, they disrupted the deep meditation of the white birds that suddenly took to the skies flapping their wings in a flurry of movement.

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The jeep bounced on, slowing down to watch an occasional peacock or eagle; or observe a class of deer sprint across the road in front of us; but the highlight of the evening was to follow shortly. The sun continued to radiate a moderate heat, and the wind hissed as it swept through the thick brown grass.

Half an hour into our excursion we were suddenly taken by surprise as a large grey-black figure almost shadow-like suddenly moved just ahead. The jeep jerked to a halt and silence befell us. Hearts beating, five pairs of eyes began scanning the thicket. Within seconds the giant shadow suddenly emerged from within the trees and stood just a few feet away, its tiny eyes examining the large green contraption with humans in it. As if having realised there was no danger involved the wild elephant continued on its path, taking slow strides, rhythmically swaying from side to side crushing bushes and dry leaves as it moved along. As it disappeared behind the thick green wall of trees a few happy explorers suddenly broke out in excited conversation as the vehicle retraced its path, sharing their thoughts on their first wild elephant encounter on that very special afternoon.

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Minutes later, we left behind the trees coming out onto the open again, with golden brown grass on either side. We all saw the spectacle instantly. There right in front of us were more wild elephants, this time even more than we could count. Amazed, we stopped in our tracks taking in what was right before our eyes.

Closest to us on the left, were about five elephants of all sizes briskly plucking out grass with their trunks and throwing it in their mouths while they swung this way and that. They had such rhythm and speed that it resembled a factory line of people trying to keep up with the working machines. A few metres away, near a water hole stood another troop busy bathing themselves in mud and water, happily trumpeting as the water splashed on them. A few baby elephants stood at close range swinging their tails and trunks in mischievous curiosity.

We sat still in our seats, savouring the panorama that lay before us and lingered on trying to take in the exciting goings-on of the wild elephant habitat. Before long, some of the giant creatures began moving slowly towards us, swaying their trunks and throwing us strange suspicious looks. Within seconds we were surrounded by wild elephants both young and old, peacefully going about their daily routines. A hefty couple of females crossed the track behind us, a little one in their midst for protection. On the other side three more stood in line dining on the abundant grass. Far and scattered across the plains more wild elephant troops were visible like dark moving specks. It was a busy day in elephant-land, all its occupants out enjoying the evening.

This was far more elephants than one would normally spot at once in Wasgamuwa, and through our whole journey back along the winding trails they were looming at every bend, obstructing our path and at times even following the vehicle in swift pace.

Suddenly, our tracker pointed northwards shouting “tusker!!” and we followed his gaze into the far distance. Sure enough an elephant with large tusks stood dark against the brownish green backdrop. Suddenly, another followed, the tusker turned around and went straight at it with its head and trunk, and before long we were watching two huge elephants pushing each other with their heads, trunks wound together, chasing and running around a bush in pursuit of each other. As we watched in awe, the tracker explained that this was mere playful behaviour and a rather rare scene.

We moved ahead through the groups of elephants and the tracker, also surprised, stated that this was far more elephants than one would normally spot at once in Wasgamuwa, and through our whole journey back along the winding trails there they were looming at every bend, obstructing us by standing on the road and at times even following the vehicle in swift pace.

As the skies gradually turned orange and daylight gave way to dusk, the musical bird song was replaced by the dull drone of crickets and the eerie calls of wild nocturnal creatures. We retreated from the wild elephant territory a satisfied crew relishing our luck at spotting close to a hundred wild elephants at close range in one single beautiful afternoon.

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