



Yala East National Park is commonly known as Kumana, after its famous mangroves which provide an important habitat to both endemic and migratory birds. However this National Park is also home to a plethora of other animals including elephants, sambur, crocodiles, monkeys and the ever elusive leopard. We set out during the Poson Poya long weekend to try our luck and see the inhabitants of Kumana.

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Kumana is situated in the eastern district of Ampara and is 12km south of Arugam Bay. There is a turn off just before the town of Panama, which leads to the National Park. The best time to visit Kumana is in the late afternoon, around four o'clock.

As we drove towards the entrance of the Park, passing the village and the lush paddy fields, I had a good feeling that we were going to see animals today and as if to confirm my intuition we met an elephant leisurely drinking water from a pond even before entering. At the Okanda Murugan Temple, which is a few metres from the entrance of Kumana we were surprised to see a large female sambur relaxing under a tree. We were told that she was semi wild and was being looked after by the Security Forces (STF) nearby. She was an absolute beauty and even at the slightest sound her ears would expand, stretch and rotate in the direction of the sound. To see a sambur at such proximity was indeed a treat.

Once we had completed formalities at the Park office, together with our trusted trekker Sashika we entered the reserve. The vegetation is semi arid thorn scrub with intermittent areas of dense forest, and being in close proximity to the coast, the soil and terrain has a white sandy texture and the flat plains are broken by the occasional rock outcrops.

We drove along the main route and then turned into an alternative path where only a few drive through. Shrubs and branches scraped the side of the vehicle as we drove on the uneven path. We bounced up and down as we dipped in and out of pot holes and large trenches. The drive itself was an adventure.

Suddenly, there was a movement and we stopped the vehicle in its tracks. Just a short distance away was a lone male elephant enjoying himself at a waterhole. He was covered in mud and he would occasionally throw water on himself. He stopped what he was doing as he

became aware of our presence, after a few minutes he dipped his trunk into the water, lifted it and put the water into his mouth. The elephant continued with this ritual for a few minutes all the while aware that we were watching him. After a little while he stopped, he looked at us as if to say 'stop looking at me', turned his back to us and went into the jungle.

We saw many birds flying around, the most common being the green bee-eater. We came across a crested hawk eagle on the ground, near a pond looking at the water. The bird was indeed majestic. After a few moments seemingly not being able to find what it was looking for, the eagle flew to a tree branch above. As we drove along we saw an open-bill stork, a woolly-necked stork, pelicans and many more birds. There was a large crocodile basking in the evening sun with its mouth open. One of the more common sights was the presence of wild buffaloes, usually in herds, but on one instance we met a lone bull whose face showed character. As we prepared to take a photograph the bull looked straight at us defiantly, not at all disturbed by our presence.

There are many watering spots in Kumana and many birds and animals can be seen in these areas. In a tank adorned with water lilies was a sambar stag cooling himself in the water. The evening was definitely the time that the animals came out. I was thrilled that we had been lucky enough to see so many.

We drove through inner routes hoping to see more, suddenly someone shouted leopard and yes indeed a leopard was trying to cross the road, he looked at us startled before returning back into the thicket the way he had come. Our trekker explained to us that since the leopard wanted to cross we should switch the engine off and wait very quietly and that it will come back. We waited very quietly...patiently...the minutes ticked on and then with no warning the leopard cautiously came out. He looked at us once and started crossing the sandy path; the movements were fluid and elegant. It was a young leopard and his coat was a darker shade than the leopards seen in any other part of the country. This young prowler was indeed the prince of the jungle; royalty was evident in every step it took. As he made it across, the leopard gave us one last look before heading into the thicket. We heard the cries of the deer as it warned its brethren of the leopard in the vicinity. For a moment I could not believe that I had actually seen the elusive Kumana leopard but indeed there was proof...he had left his foot prints on the sandy trail...