

# Exploring Wilpattu in a day



**We left Colombo at midnight and reached Wilpattu early in the morning. It was my first visit to Wilpattu, and I was thrilled that we had been able to see so much wildlife that makes this national park their home. We returned on the same day, reaching Colombo close to midnight.**

**Narration and photographs** Alex Fleming.

Wilpattu National Park is open from six in the morning to six in the evening. In order to make the most of a day safari, it is essential to arrive early in the morning and also to have an experienced driver. Prasanna Ambigaibagan Nature and Wildlife Photography organized our tour from Colombo to Wilpattu and back. It was well planned so that we were able to experience the maximum time within the park, which provided many photographic moments.

Wilpattu National Park was established in 1938 and is one of the oldest parks in the country. It is a vast jungle area with salt grass and low scrub; monsoon scrub and forest areas. As its name denotes, Wilpattu is a land of villus (small natural lakes). This diverse natural habitat has a variety of wildlife such as herds of elephants, spotted leopards, sloth bears, deer, crocodiles, jackals, monkeys, and a plethora of birds.

We had been driving on the tracks for a couple of hours when at around 8.30 in the morning, we encountered the majestic prince of the jungle, the spotted Leopard. It was relaxed and seemed to be after a meal. For about 20-minutes, we were able to observe the leopard grooming itself and then it played around, rolling on the ground with its legs in the air, which was a rare moment. We greatly enjoyed the experience.

As the leopard retreated into the jungle, we continued on our journey. We saw many birds, one being the Gray-headed fish eagle, alert as it perched on a branch. We also saw a Peahen with her three chicks, which was another rare sighting. We had our breakfast on the banks of the Kumbuk villu (lake). The cooling breeze and rippling waters were mesmerizing.

Around 11 am, as we were continuing on the safari, through the jungle in a small clearing, we saw a Sloth Bear, enjoying the morning sun. He was relaxing on the ground and then made its way to a small water hole. He looked straight at us and then continued on his morning routine.

As the day progressed, we saw many birds. A Kingfisher, a Woolly-necked Stork taking flight, Whistling Ducks gathered along the banks of a villu and a Brahminy kite flying into the distance, amongst many others. After a break for lunch, we were back on the tracks. A Green Bee-eater with a dragonfly in its beak caught our attention. Its bright green color was striking as it perched on a dry branch.

A sudden movement near some trees, around three in the afternoon made us gasp in surprise. It was a massive Crocodile of about 12ft long, walking into the shade far away from any water body. Such a sighting was indeed unusual because we rarely see crocodiles on all fours walking on land.

As evening approached, we were fortunate to see another Sloth Bear as it made its way along the path, sniffing the ground looking for insects to eat. Our safari was almost drawing to a close and we decided to make our back to the entrance. On our way, at around five in the evening, we came across an owl surveying the area. Darkness soon fell as we exited the Wilpattu National Park around six in the evening and we were back on the road to reach Colombo by midnight.

We had explored Wilpattu in a day, and it had been the most memorable experience. Protecting the wildness is vital for posterity because we all live in the same ecosystem where the circle of life connects everyone.

