



A large herd of startled deer caught unawares at the grasslands

Rustles, squeals and perturbed trumpeting, but all we could glimpse were a few disoriented movements in the thicket... Not often frequented by visitors, we find the wilderness here is secretive and mysterious and its inhabitants all the more intriguing for it.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara Photographs Menaka Aravinda and Damith Wickramasinghe

The elephants are wilder, the sloth bears are elusive as ever, and there's only a rumour of leopards; with slim prospects we enter the Lunugamvehera National Park. □An expanse of 23,498 hectares that sustains surrounding reservoirs that include the Lunugamvehera and Weheragala Reservoirs, the park falls within Monaragala and Hambantota Districts. Entering the park from the west we were to take an approximately 30km journey across the park to reach the Weheragala Reservoir at its North East end.

Typical of the dry zone our track was aligned with scrub jungle ,however a succession of grasslands, forests, and an abundance of small tanks and pockets of water-logged

marshland hinted at a rich and diverse habitat. Rivulets and streamlets stemming from the Menik River added to the enchantment in the denser parts of the forests. With the changing face of the wilderness were a variety of the feathered occupants from the tiny little bushlarks, to the sombre Fish Eagle or the shy Pied Hornbill in the shelter of a thick tree and an abundance of water birds. Painted Storks and Cormorants reigned the bare trees that stood starkly across the breadth of the tank's waters.

Gnarled branches of leafless trees rose eerily above the water's surface and a distinct lull hung in the atmosphere

What we had not anticipated however, were an abundance of deer. Darting across the narrow pathways or cautiously grazing the grasslands in large herds, the Spotted Deer seemed to have found a sanctuary at Lunugamvehera. It may be the lack of predators here as the length of our journey was often met with healthy herds of the shy animals. □We soon discovered that the Grey Langur was a sign of deer nearby. From atop a tree the langur served as a useful sentinel for the deer and even a source of food as the scraps of branches and shoots dropped □from the tallest trees were servings for the foraging deer. We soon got accustomed to seeing a langur first cross our path, followed by a handsomely antlered stag dashing across, tailed by a whole herd of scampering Spotted Deer.

The other animals of the park remained hidden for hours along the path. Elephants in particular were believed to be highly territorial and unaccustomed to vehicles and human presence. Our guide made sure to include ali wedi or elephant crackers, in his possession as a precautionary measure. Having begun our journey mid-day, the first hint of dusk was already upon us. We were at the last lap of our journey when the thick wall of scrub jungle rustled with fretful movement. Twigs snapped and crackled and amidst the hefty movements arose perplexed squeals of a baby elephant. After several minutes of waiting and watching, it became apparent that the protective mother was not about to expose its young calf. Instead they remained hidden and a loud trumpeting seemed intended to sound us off.

Thereafter on two occasions elephants did enter our sights, although fleetingly. The cooler evening summoned the large foragers out of their hidden refuges of the forest. They seemed to emerge though just barely, only to retreat promptly into the jungle upon sensing our presence. We were an unwelcome audience. Feeling very much like trespassers, we headed directly to the end of our track, the Weheragala Reservoir. Completed in 2006 to harvest the waters of the Menik River, it was an immense expanse of water. Gnarled branches of leafless trees rose eerily above the water's surface and a distinct lull hung in the atmosphere. In the opposing view from the bund, the Menik River meandered on to nourish the pristine jungle. It was hard to fathom that its waters could fill such a vast expanse of

Weheragala.

Our journey back was a race against time with a veil of dusk descending gradually upon us. Tailing an alternate path, we neither anticipated nor dared hope for what we next encountered just around the bend. In a moment that only seemed to hold a second we caught sight of a leopard snuggled lazily upon the crook of a roadside tree. In the blink of an eye it had descended with lightning agility, its tail slithering out of sight. It left us staring at an empty space wondering if we had all dreamed it. Our photographer despondently aimed the camera at where the elusive one had only just been. Its choice of resting spot so close to our path it is no wonder it had gone in a beat. □We pointlessly circled the area and rehashed the details of what each saw and didn't see.

It was time to head back out of the park, herds of deer still came out to graze alongside our path. Now and then, excitable groups of wild boar crossed our path or dashed amidst the thicket for better cover. We passed a cordoned land of approximately 5,600 acres; an elephant rehabilitation park where elephants who run into human occupied territories in other regions of the Island are released for their safety. When introducing a foreign elephant here, the park's borders had to be guarded day and night until the elephant settled down to its new home, explained our guide. On our return journey our path fell alongside a manmade stream that flowed from Weheragala to the Rathmal Tank. It was on this path that we finally spotted a lone elephant feeding on clumps of grass on the banks of the stream. Unlike the others we had spotted, this pachyderm seemed unconcerned by our presence and continued its methodical feeding beside the banks of the stream.

[The cooler evening summoned the large foragers out of their hidden refuges of the forest](#)

This was not an end to our sightings. Farther along the stream's banks hosted another of the park's inhabitants. A muddy brown crocodile, its tough exterior moistened from the stream's waters, lay still as though frozen. Maybe displeased at being detected, it quietly slid into the water in the seconds that followed and camouflaged in the opaque waters of the stream. As we closed the end of our journey at the edge of dusk, Lunugamvehera grew eerie with sounds of the wilderness. Secretive and unyielding it had unwittingly revealed a few of its amazing treasures.

[nggallery id=309]