

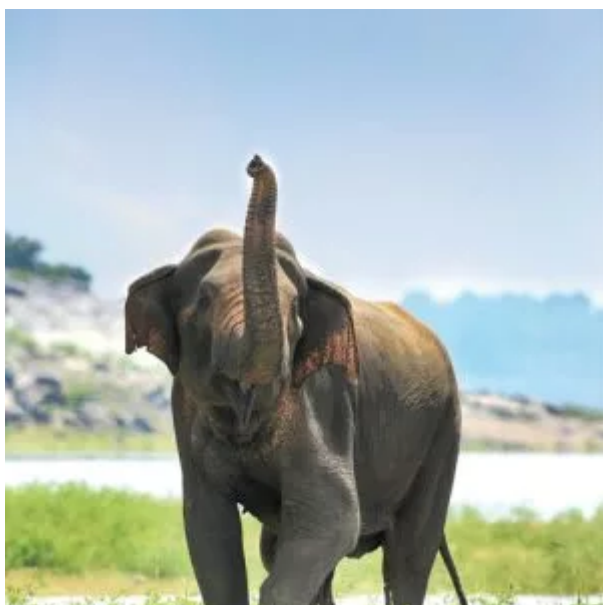
In Elephant Country



Elephants crossing!

Madhuru Oya, the lush green landscape that is centred around the massive reservoir is undoubtedly home to herds of elephants that roam the land freely. These giants can be witnessed any time of the day but come morning and evening you will truly feel that you have entered elephant country.

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“Watch it... this is my territory”

We drove along the banks of the Madhuru Oya reservoir and up the slope on to the massive bund. The view was simply breathtaking. It was late afternoon and we were eager to see the 'gentle giants'. What is interesting about Madhuru Oya is that while the wildlife sanctuary itself is there, you will find wild elephants emerging out of the jungle into the vast open plains outside the national park. At times single elephants, generally males can be seen either near the waters of the reservoir crunching succulent greens, or at the sides of the road just visible beyond tall grass or trees, which is always a pleasant surprise as you go in search of them.

However, the best is being able to observe large herds without being disturbed by anyone else along the Aralaganwila - Maha Oya road that runs through Madhuru Oya. In the evenings, herds gradually emerge into the open. Little ones are protected by their elders and everyone relaxes in the cooling light. And, as the sun recedes the breeze becomes a bit chilly but you just don't want to move as watching elephants is almost hypnotic. At Madhuru Oya, while you watch a herd on one side of the road you will suddenly be startled by the crunching sound, twigs snapping on the other side of the road; yes, there is an elephant just beyond! A group of 4 elephants returned to the lush jungle with the little one boldly going in front. But the elders were on his side, protective as always.

The herd kept moving at a leisurely pace and we decided to drive further, elephants were speckled here and there like little granite gems in a sea of green. As we approached Henanigala we were amazed to see an elephant on the sloping side of the rock and just beyond a large elephant crossing the road with giant strides.

It was the memories of the elephant herds that lingered in our minds and truly reflected to us that Madhuru Oya is indeed elephant country...

Dusk had fallen with the sun receding into the darkening sky. Madhuru Oya reservoir is a haven for birds as well. Flocks of various types of birds, at times in large numbers, flew up and away, while others almost to a rhythm moved to the currents of the wind.

We returned to the Aralaganwila - Maha oya road at dawn the next day after spending the night inside the park. 2 herds of elephant had already arrived to the sides of the road. 1, had just finished their forage in the open plains and was

returning to the jungles surrounding the bund of the reservoir, while the other was still having their meal and was nearing the road to cross. The herd that was moving away into the jungle was doing so in a very disciplined manner, which was amazing...all in a line. The 2 little ones were clearly visible and seemed reflective as they followed.



At misty dawn the elephants gather for a morning feed

We watched the other herd for a long time. Gradually they came forward, the grown-ups nudged the little ones into place and always made sure that these calves were not exposed to curious visitors. The matriarch and 2 supporting elephants kept checking the terrain, they were very much aware of our presence. A passing vehicle had the entire herd on alert but they soon relaxed back into their morning routine.

Closer and closer they came, sensing our location they altered their path. The matriarch lifted her trunk to survey the surroundings. She did so a few times. As the matriarch came forward, the herd almost on cue came into formation. The little ones were in the centre accompanied by the grown-ups, the matriarch and her supporting elephants were in front and another 3 elephants were at the back guarding the entire herd. And then in a moment the herd moved and started crossing the road, only short sounds of trumpeting and a shuffle of feet could be heard. As the entire herd made it over to the other side, the 3 guarding elephants at the back reacted instantaneously to any sound or movement they felt. The matriarch marched ahead, indicating the others to follow. White egrets were their travelling companions.

A drive within the national park proved to be another experience as we journeyed on tracks that had not been used in ages and had been reclaimed by the jungle. While other wildlife caught our attention and the simmering reservoir beckoned us, it was the memories of the elephant herds that lingered in our minds and truly reflected to us that Madhuru Oya is indeed elephant country...

