

In the Land of Mist and Leopards

Posted on



A leopard moves through the clouded Horton Plains—silent and unseen.

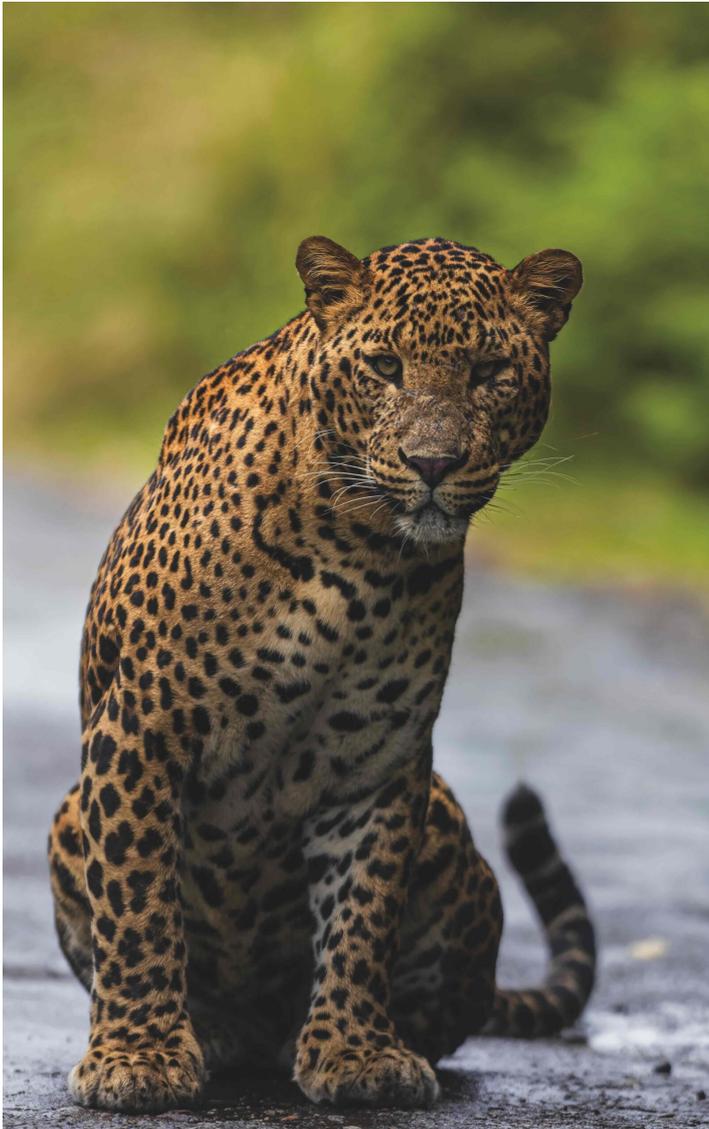
‘Ghost of the Clouded Plains’ reveals Sankha Wanniatchi’s long-term effort to deepen understanding of the elusive leopards of Horton Plains, clearly positioning his work as a significant study of this unique species in their habitat.

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Photography: Sankha Wanniatchi.

Sankha Wanniatchi, researcher, conservation photographer, and author, plainly states his credentials—a non-scientist motivated by passion for wildlife photography. For ten years, he braved wind, mist, fog, and rain, tracking the elusive mountain leopard.

His long pursuit yielded stories of mothers, cubs, powerful males, and unique spot patterns, culminating in his book, “Ghost of the Clouded Plains.”



The undisputed monarch of the highlands—calm, composed, and commanding.

The book’s central message is a deep dive into leopard behavior and adaptations in the montane ecosystem of Horton Plains. This focus, supported by Sankha’s thorough fieldwork, earned recognition from renowned naturalist Sir David Attenborough.

Years of family outings to Horton Plains nurtured Sankha's passion for the wild. He never expected his love of wilderness would bring him back to Horton Plains—not for brief visits, but for over a decade, sometimes daily, to study its leopards. Tracking the elusive leopard was a daunting task requiring patience and long hours, sometimes rewarding, often not. Sightings lingered for moments or vanished quickly, like a specter. Well-camouflaged among tussock grass, the leopards were difficult to see. It is the leopard's rarity and elusive character that have inspired such awe, drawing crowds eager to catch even the briefest glimpse of the animal in any form or action. And it is this very distinction that led to the book's title.



A highland leopard moves through a sea of green—perfectly hidden and free.

Sankha collaborated with international film crews, spending 17 days to capture five minutes of footage for one project, and 70 days for another five-minute segment. These partnerships produced the first recorded footage of Sri Lankan Highland Leopards for international documentaries, showcasing their unique behaviors.



At the edge of shadow and grass, the leopard reveals itself—to those who wait.

Ghost of the Clouded Plains draws on field observations rather than formal scientific training, based on Sankha's years studying leopards in Horton Plains. Carrying cameras and always ready, he operated within park hours, like a regular visitor. His research area covered Ohiya to Pattipola, with a focus on Mahaeliya, where leopards are more visible due to open landscapes.



Eyes that hold the wild—untamed, yet poised.

Interestingly, Sankha became such a frequent visitor to the park that he built a strong rapport with the rangers. Since he does not stay inside the park after the stipulated time of 6pm, unless he reserves to stay in the bungalow inside the Park, the rangers have been the best sources of intelligence about leopard movements after Park hours, revealing about alarm calls, nighttime activities, which are very important in his day-time quest of tracking the animals. Clues are crucial for tracking leopards because the roads in Horton Plains are tarred, hence there are no paw prints or pug marks.



Across the silent road, it moves with stealth.

Upon entering the park in the morning, you almost have zero indications of what happened in the night. Very rarely, one might come across droppings and scratch marks on trees, giving some indication of overnight activity. A typical day involves Sankha bringing food and staying until dusk, focusing on areas of high leopard activity and occasionally driving to look for signs. He notes that, with careful observation, one may spot droppings or scratch marks, though days often pass without a single sighting.



At an unhurried pace—back to the wilderness.

Since 2016, Sankha has used Google pins to record leopard sightings, mapping consistent pathways. These routes, followed by leopards across generations, enable them to cross roads undetected using forest cover. These routes have remained unchanged over the years, allowing for relatively predictable leopard movements and filming opportunities. His trail camera captured the big cat's unguarded behavior, including one instance where a leopard paused for a satisfying scratch against the mounted equipment. Left to their own devices, even the wildest animals can display endearing and amusing moments in the wilderness they call home. Most significantly, ten years of studying and 14 years of photographing leopards allowed Sankha to capture striking images against mesmerizing landscapes. He can now identify many individuals by their spots and recount stories about them.



At ease—where the road belongs to the highland leopards.

An important discovery from his observations is how the leopards of Horton Plains became habituated—gradually growing accustomed to human presence. Over this long period of study, some leopards became his familiar subjects, including a pivotal female, coded HPF- 04 (Horton Plains Female - 04), who served as a catalyst for increased leopard visibility in the park. This 13-plus-year-old female, whom Sankha has known for almost a decade, established her territory on the Mahaeliya side and gradually grew accustomed to human presence. She has successfully raised eight cubs, with seven still alive, shaping leopard dynamics in the park. Her daughter, HPF-07, now has two male cubs. Sightings rise when cubs are present and return to normal when young males leave.



From the quiet folds of grass and fern, the leopard emerges.

A key message from Sankha's research is his identification of four main areas: spot pattern inheritance, the link between light and sightings, hunting techniques, and adaptations to climate—each illustrating the special characteristics of Horton Plains leopards. Interestingly, Sankha discovered that leopards inherit spot patterns from their mothers, citing research papers that support this observation and providing photographic evidence of the distinctive “S” pattern inherited by the cubs of HPF - 04.



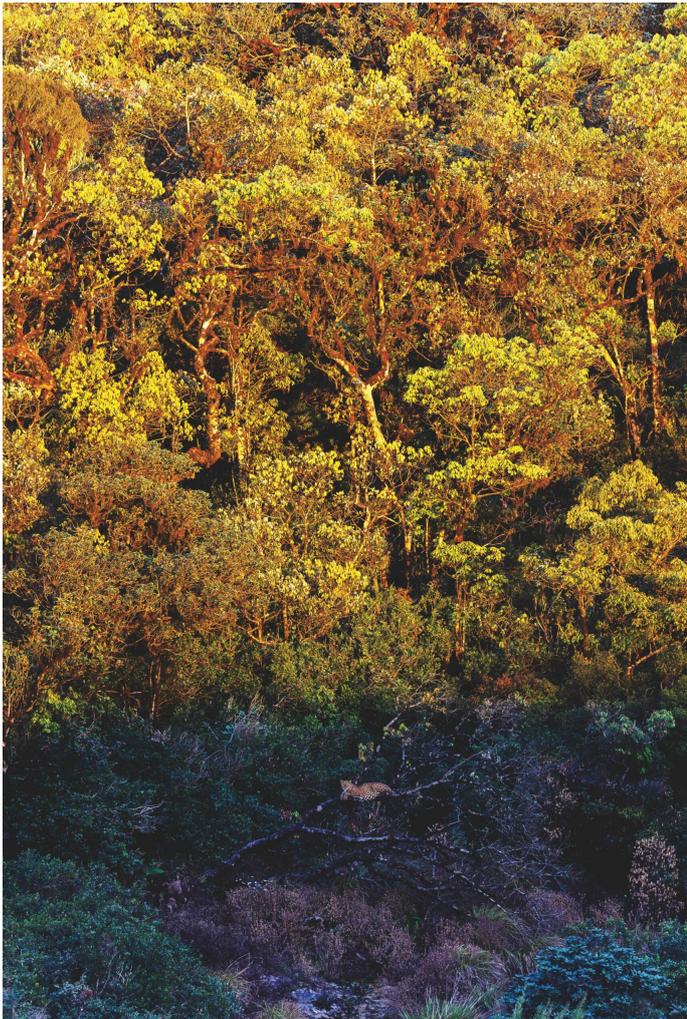
Sankha Wanniatshi, researcher, conservation photographer, and author of 'Ghost of the Clouded Plains' book.



'Ghost of the Clouded Plains' — a journey into the hidden world of Sri Lanka's elusive leopard.

Lighting analysis formed a crucial component of the research. For two and a half years, he carried a lux meter, recording lighting conditions during leopard sightings. He found that 85 percent of leopard photographs were taken at 2000 lux or lower, in gloomy conditions, establishing a clear correlation between low light or misty conditions and increased leopard activity. This led to the discovery that leopards use mist as a hunting advantage, approaching prey undetected in conditions of poor visibility. Climate adaptation was also thoroughly documented, showing how Horton

Plains leopards have developed double coats, which are bulkier and fluffier, for insulation against near-freezing temperatures as well as semi-waterproof protection.



Perched on a branch, bathed in golden light, with the shadow of the Kirigalpoththa Range below.

Leopard conservation concerns Sankha deeply, especially leopards that leave park boundaries and face threats from hunting and human conflict. Having spent many years quietly studying and photographing the elusive Horton Plains leopard, Sankha strongly advocates responsible wildlife photography, emphasizing the importance of maintaining respectful distances, avoiding disturbance to natural behaviors, and refraining from sharing real-time location information. He was critical of the practice

of rushing to leopard sightings and immediately uploading photographs to social media, which increases stress on the animals and leads to overcrowding in sensitive areas. “As a photographer, you must have the skill to take pictures without disturbing the animal. There are leopards who don’t mind your presence, as some of them are quite habituated. But there are others who would not like your presence at all. So it is very important that you keep a relatively decent distance and take pictures.” Sankha’s central plea concludes the narrative: build awareness, educate about leopard behavior, and expand protected land to ensure the species’ continued survival beyond current boundaries.

Horton Plains National Park Horton Plains National Park, located in Sri Lanka’s central highlands at elevations of 2,100–2,300 meters, is a unique montane ecosystem featuring rolling grasslands, cloud forests, and a cool climate. It is home to endemic wildlife such as sambar deer and the Sri Lankan leopard. Key attractions include the dramatic World’s End escarpment and Baker’s Falls. The park is vital for water catchment, feeding major rivers, and is recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.