

Kumana: Where Wings Once Ruled and Leopards Now Reign

Posted on

Photography: Nipun Perera.



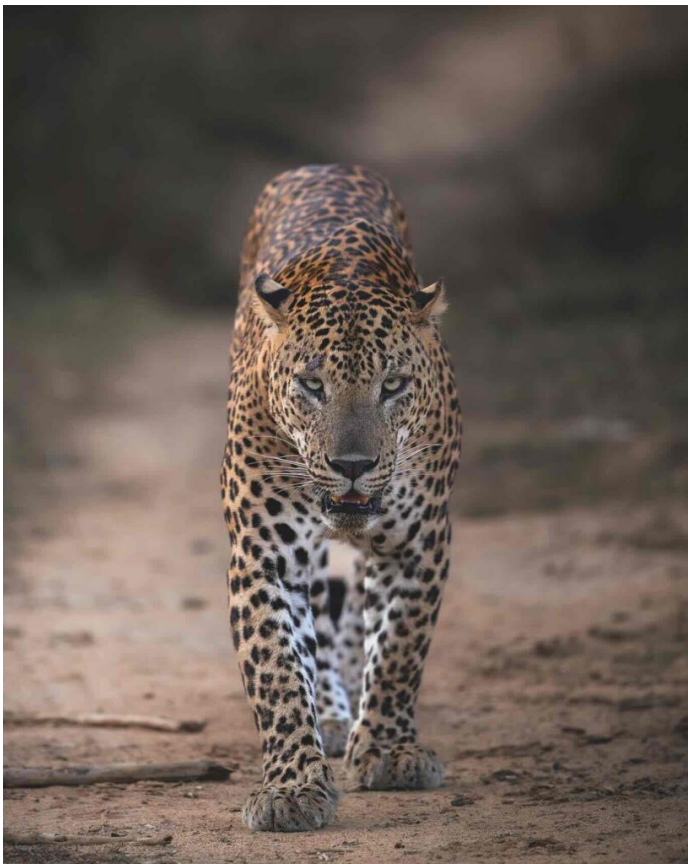
Ritta rests atop the Kumana Village signboard, a rare and iconic portrait where the memory of a human settlement meets the untamed wilderness of Kumana.

For generations, Kumana was known first as a kingdom of birds. Its lagoons, villus, marshes, and forest pools drew migratory species across immense distances, turning this remote corner of Sri Lanka into one of the island's most celebrated bird sanctuaries.

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Birdwatchers came in search of seasonal visitors, nesting colonies, and rare waterbirds. The quiet wetlands, rather than the movement of large mammals, shaped Kumana's identity. That identity is now expanding. Kumana is rapidly becoming recognized as one of Sri Lanka's most rewarding places to observe leopards. The birds remain an essential part of its wilderness, yet the great spotted cats are beginning to command equal attention. Leopards emerge from the forest, rest upon rocks, move through abandoned buildings, and walk along tracks that may remain empty of vehicles for long periods. The relative solitude is part of Kumana's appeal. Reaching this landscape takes time.

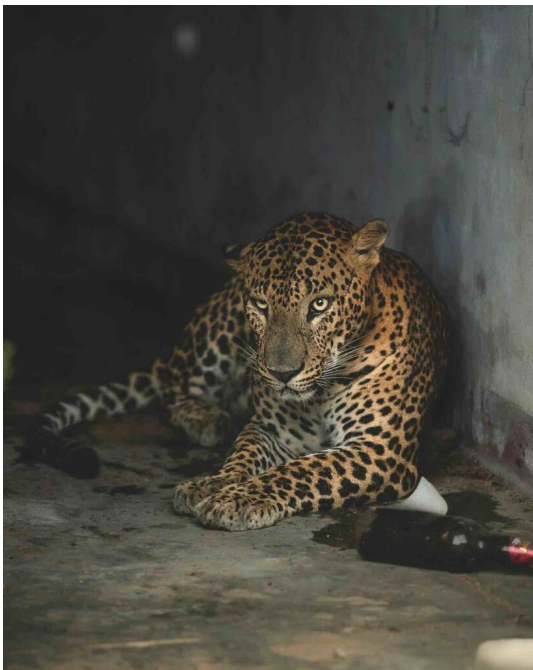
A leopard can remain on a rock or beside a road while only a few people watch from a respectful distance. The experience is often shaped by silence, patience, and the knowledge of local guides who understand the movement of individual animals.



Ritta approaches with an unwavering

gaze.

A journey here can be demanding and more expensive than a safari in a more accessible park. For that reason, Kumana is still not crowded with long lines of jeeps and large groups of visitors. The distance discourages hurried tourism. Those who make the journey usually arrive prepared to stay, wait, and observe.



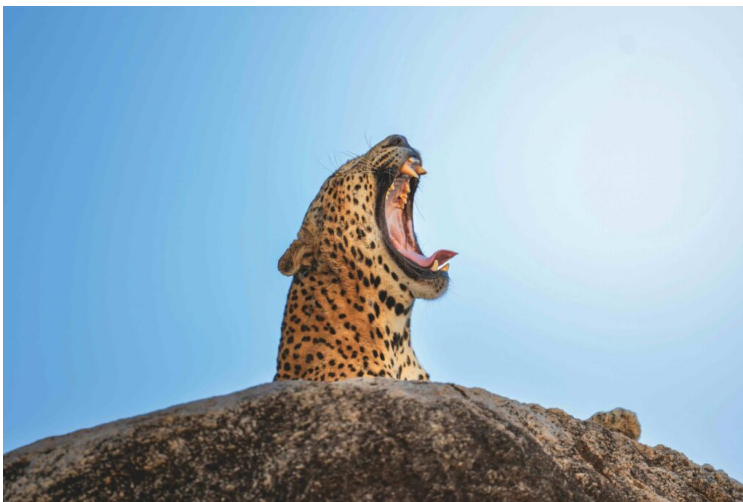
Ritta rests in an abandoned classroom, a discarded bottle reminding us to respect the wild.

Wildlife encounters unfold differently in this quieter environment. There is less pressure to move quickly and less competition for position. A leopard can remain on a rock or beside a road while only a few people watch from a respectful distance. The experience is often shaped by silence, patience, and the knowledge of local guides who understand the movement of individual animals. Among Kumana's best-known leopards is Ritta.

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Ritta pauses atop the wall of Kumana Village's abandoned school.



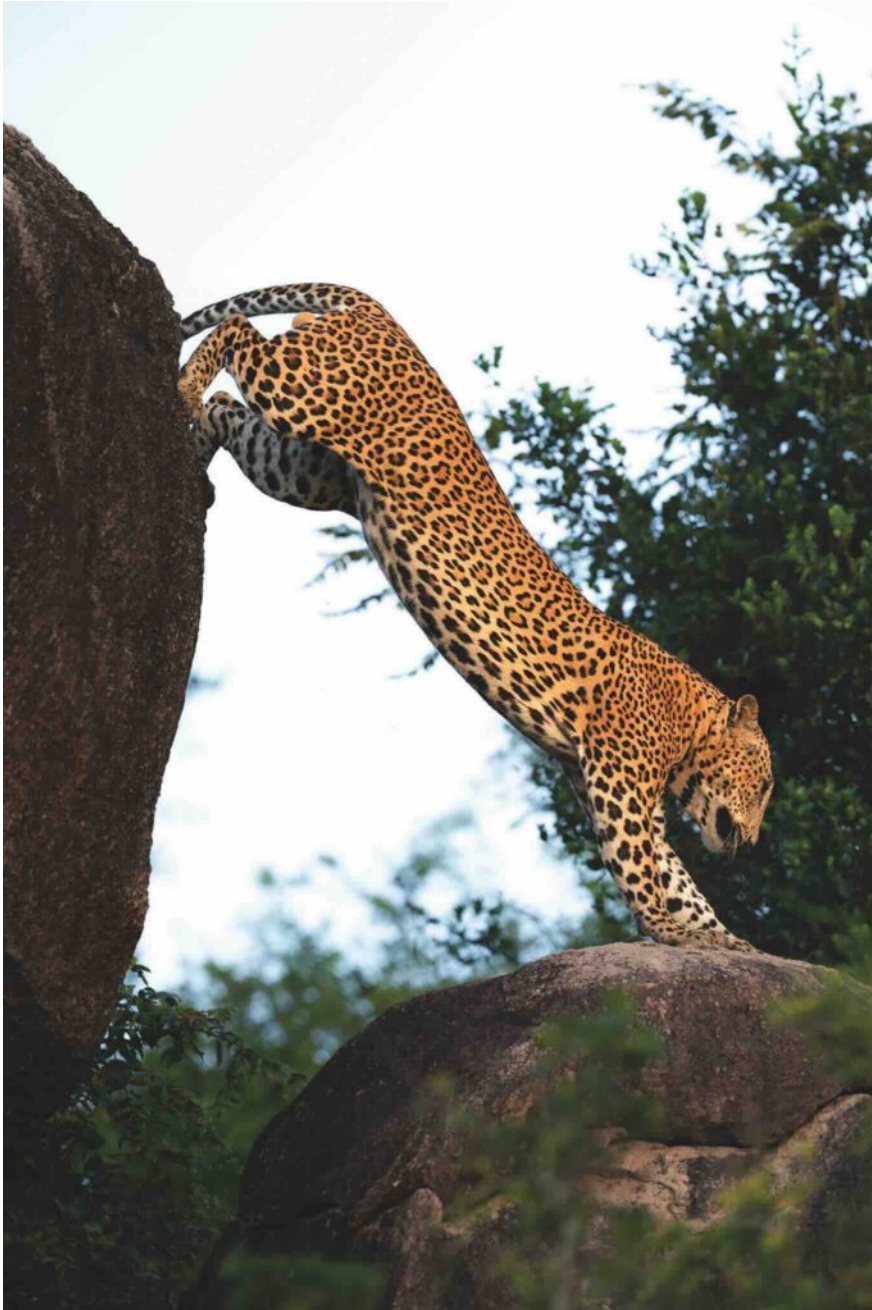
A mighty yawn from Andha atop Andharagala captures the quiet confidence of Kumana's wilderness.

For wildlife photographer Nipun Perera, one cherished ambition was to photograph Ritta on the Kumana Village signboard. It was a scene that depended entirely on chance. The leopard had to approach the sign, climb onto it, and remain there long

enough for the moment to be recorded. News arrived that Ritta was resting in a tree. When Perera reached the area, the leopard remained above the ground.



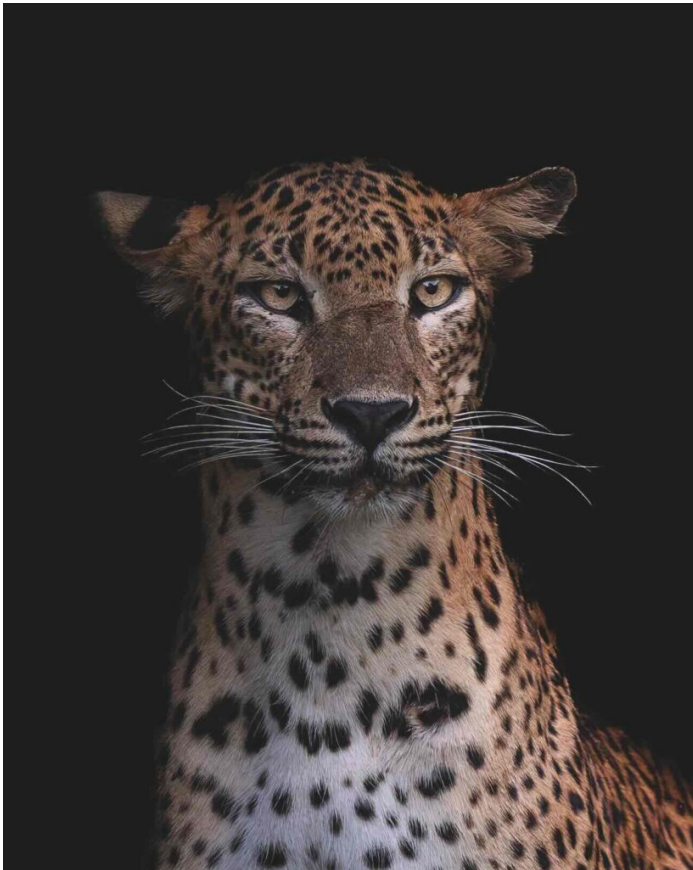
Perched high above the forest, Sena enjoys the solitude of Kumana's rugged landscape.



In a moment of perfect balance, Andha leaps gracefully between the boulders of Andharagala.

After a short while, Ritta climbed down and began to walk. The vehicle was positioned carefully as he moved towards the village signboard. On the way, he paused to scent mark his territory. Then he climbed onto the structure. Ritta stretched across the top of the sign as though it had been built for him. His paws

hung over the stonework, and his tail dropped behind him. Beneath his body, the words “Kumana Village” appeared in Sinhala, Tamil, and English.



A striking portrait of Suparnika in Kumana's Bhagura area.

One photograph placed the leopard at eye level, a rare opportunity that gave the portrait an unusual intimacy. Another showed him approaching directly, his gaze fixed forward and his powerful forelegs moving steadily through the dust.

The sequence reveals several sides of the same animal. In the wide photograph, Ritta appears as part of the landscape, small against the forest and the sign. In the closer images, his face and posture dominate. He looks relaxed while resting above the village marker, yet formidable as he walks towards the camera. Together, the photographs turn a single sighting into a complete story of movement, confidence, and possession.

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Ritta's connection with Kumana Village was revealed again inside its abandoned school. This was Perera's first encounter with the leopard. Heavy rain had fallen during a two-night stay at the Kirigalbe Bungalow, and Ritta remained around the old school for much of the time. In one image, he stands on the wall of the roofed but open building, his long tail hanging against a surface marked by years of writing and neglect. In another, he rests inside a dark classroom, pressed against a faded wall. The abandoned building creates a haunting setting. A place once filled with children and human voices now shelters a leopard.

The scene also carried an uncomfortable reminder of human carelessness. A discarded beer bottle lay near Ritta inside the classroom. Against the animal's dignity, the litter appeared especially intrusive. It showed that even within a protected landscape, irresponsible behavior can leave an ugly, lasting mark. The photograph, therefore, became more than an unusual wildlife portrait. It became a quiet argument for greater respect inside national parks.

Kumana's leopard story is built around individuals. Each cat has its own territory, appearance, and temperament. Guides and photographers learn to recognize them, not only by their spots but also by their habits. Andha is among the most difficult leopards to find and one of the largest males in the area. Perera was fortunate to see him twice within two days.

During one encounter, Andha rested on a high rock. Experienced safari driver and guide Dushan Senarathna studied the leopard and predicted that he would descend by jumping onto a lower boulder. The photographers prepared and waited. Andha moved as expected. He leaned down the rock face and extended his body towards the stone below. The image captured the middle of the descent, when the leopard's long body seemed to flow between two rocks. Another photograph showed him above, mouth open and head raised against a clear sky. The two frames reveal his strength in very different ways. One is almost sculptural, with the cat poised on the summit. The other is filled with motion, balance and absolute control. The rock associated with Andha carries its own history. Known as Andharagala, it is used by several well-known leopards. Saheli has rested there, as have her sons, Sena and

Saliya, now adult males. Andha has also claimed the same elevated position.

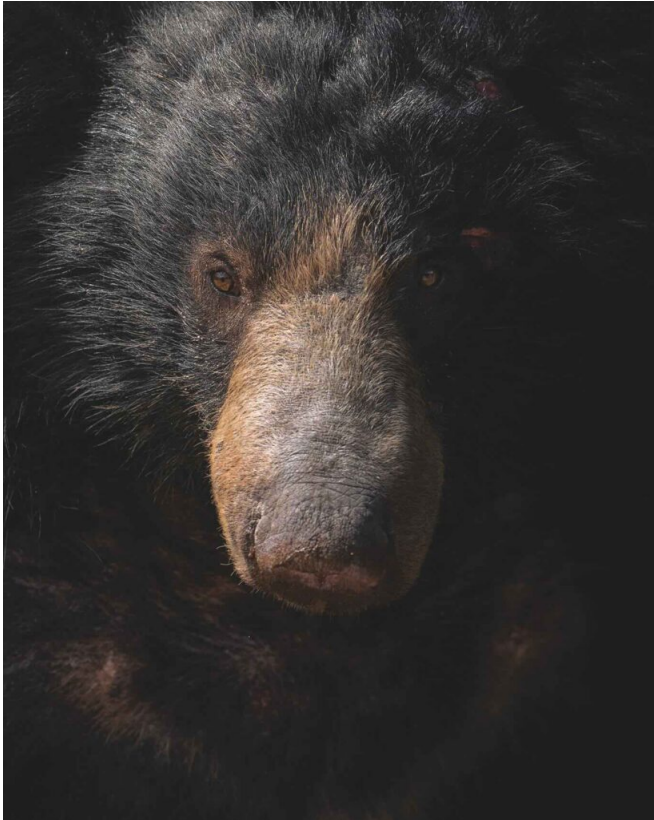
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One photograph shows a leopard appearing almost small at the top of the great rock, surrounded by open sky. The scale of the landscape is immediately clear. The repeated use of the same resting place by several leopards also points to the remarkable leopard presence within Kumana. Different individuals occupy the same broader habitat and return to familiar features within it. Suparnika offered a quieter encounter in the Bhagura area. She was drinking when she heard a safari jeep. She stopped, raised her head, and looked directly towards the vehicle. After judging that there was no danger, she calmly returned to the water. Her portrait is striking because of its simplicity. The background falls into darkness while her face remains clearly defined. Her eyes, whiskers, and spotted chest emerge from the black surroundings, creating an image that feels almost like a formal studio portrait, despite being taken in the wild.



Anuvi sits quietly beneath Kumana's forest canopy, where distance and patience define every memorable encounter.

Anuvi is known for a different temperament. She is one of the cubs of the famous leopard Blacknose, who has since died. Anuvi is shy and uncomfortable around safari vehicles. When she appeared on the road near Kirigalbe Bungalow, the photographers kept their distance. The photograph reflects that decision. Anuvi stands far down a forest track, framed by tall trees and deep shade. The image does not force the viewer close to the animal. Instead, it allows the leopard to remain part of the landscape, alert and independent. It is also a reminder that a successful wildlife photograph is not always the closest one. Distance can preserve dignity and reveal the place's atmosphere more honestly.



A sloth bear pauses along Kirigalbe Bungalow Road, its watchful gaze emerging from the forest shadows.

Kumana's forest is also home to sloth bears. One exceptionally large male appeared along the Kirigalbe Bungalow Road and remained visible for almost twenty minutes. At one point, he rubbed his back against the Kirigalbe Sea Turtle signboard. The photographer did not have a second camera ready to capture the bear's full body during that action. Even so, the surviving photographs preserve two memorable views.

In one, the bear is seen resting or moving among the branches and tangled shapes of the forest. In the other, a close portrait fills the frame, with coarse fur, a long, pale muzzle, and watchful eyes emerging from the darkness.

The portrait carries the rough, almost ancient appearance of the species. Unlike the polished elegance of a leopard, the sloth bear seems built from the forest itself, heavy, powerful, and unpredictable. Some of Kumana's most extraordinary leopard photographs came during the mating period of Bhathiya and Rio.



Bhathiya lounges on a massive tree near Girikula, perfectly at home above the forest below.

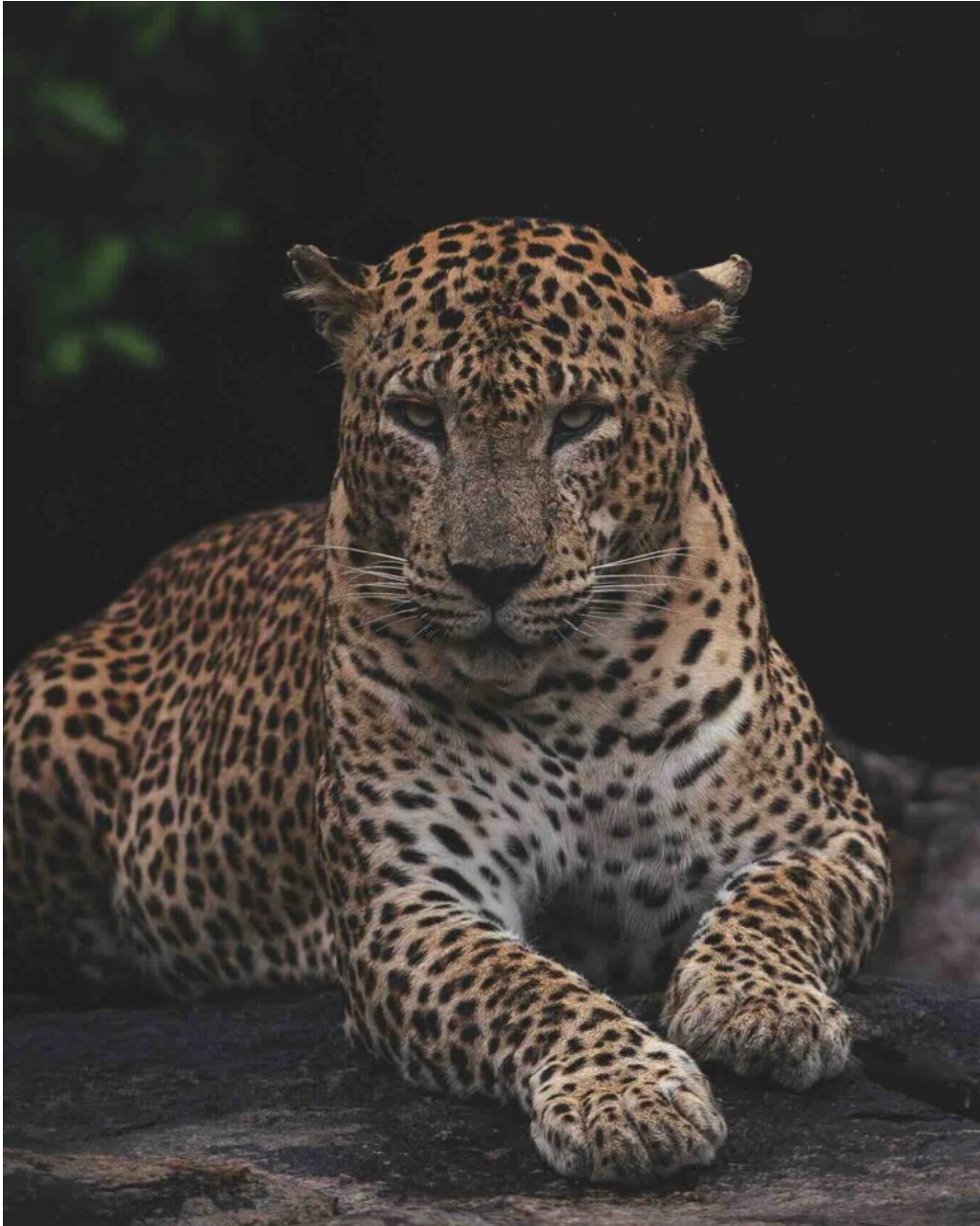
For Perera, this was one of the most valuable encounters of his wildlife photography journey. It occurred soon after he had purchased a new lens. More importantly, it was the first time he had witnessed leopards mating in the wild. A light rain had begun, and the pair chose a flat rock. Buffaloes stood nearby and had already warned Bhathiya by charging towards him on several occasions. He remained attentive to their presence and looked towards them repeatedly, yet continued to stay with Rio. The surrounding forest formed a nearly black background. Against it, the leopards' coats appeared rich and luminous. Fine rain added depth to the scene.



Bhathiya and Rio during their mating period, a rare glimpse into the intimate lives of Kumana's leopards.

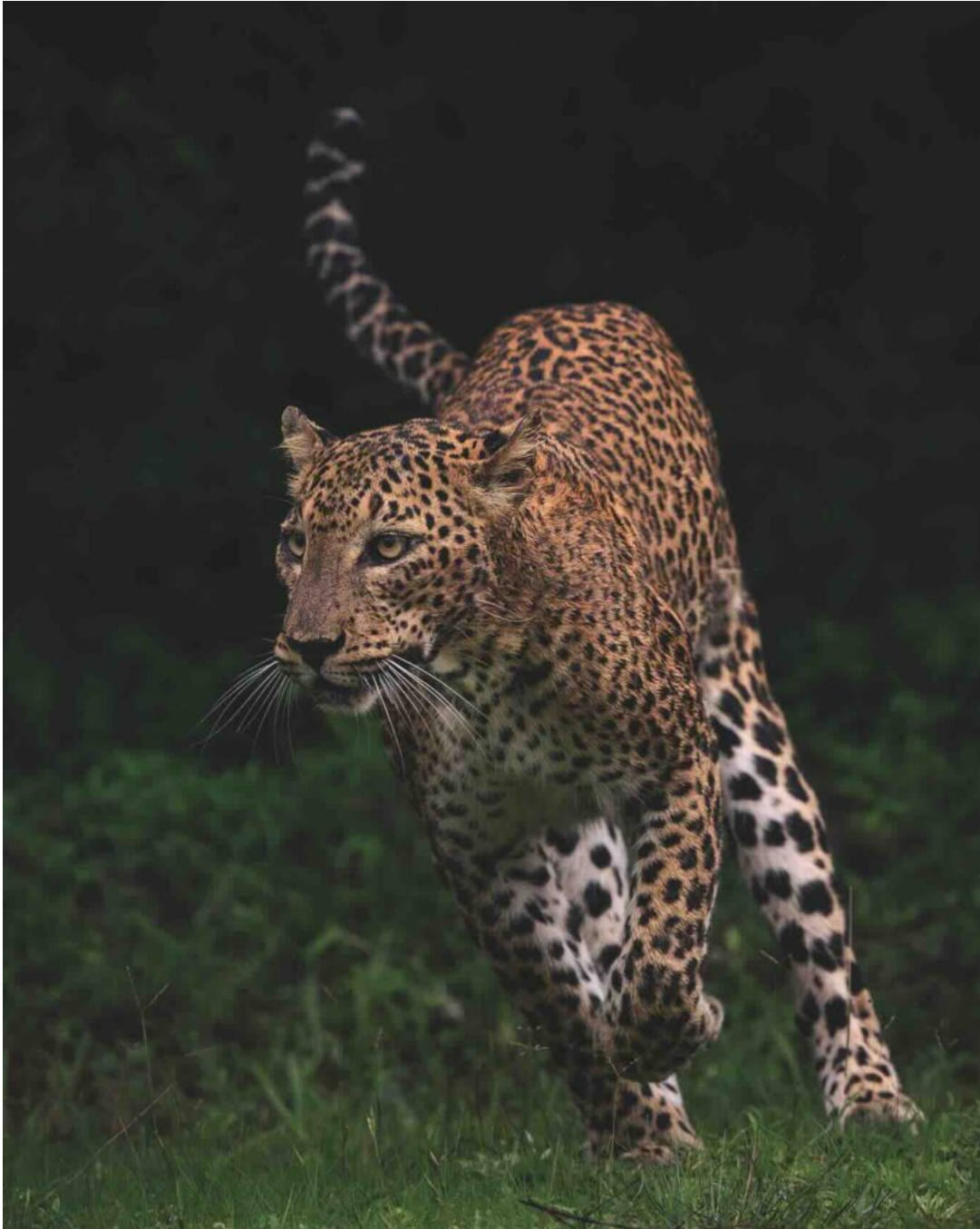


The sequence of photographs records much more than mating behavior. One image shows the pair together on the rock, their bodies forming a tight circle of spotted movement. Another presents a powerful male seated frontally, broad paws resting before him. A third captures a leopard walking with its tail raised, muscles tense, and eyes alert. Other frames show the pair together and one animal resting alone beneath the dark canopy.



A steady gaze and powerful presence embody the untamed beauty of Kumana.

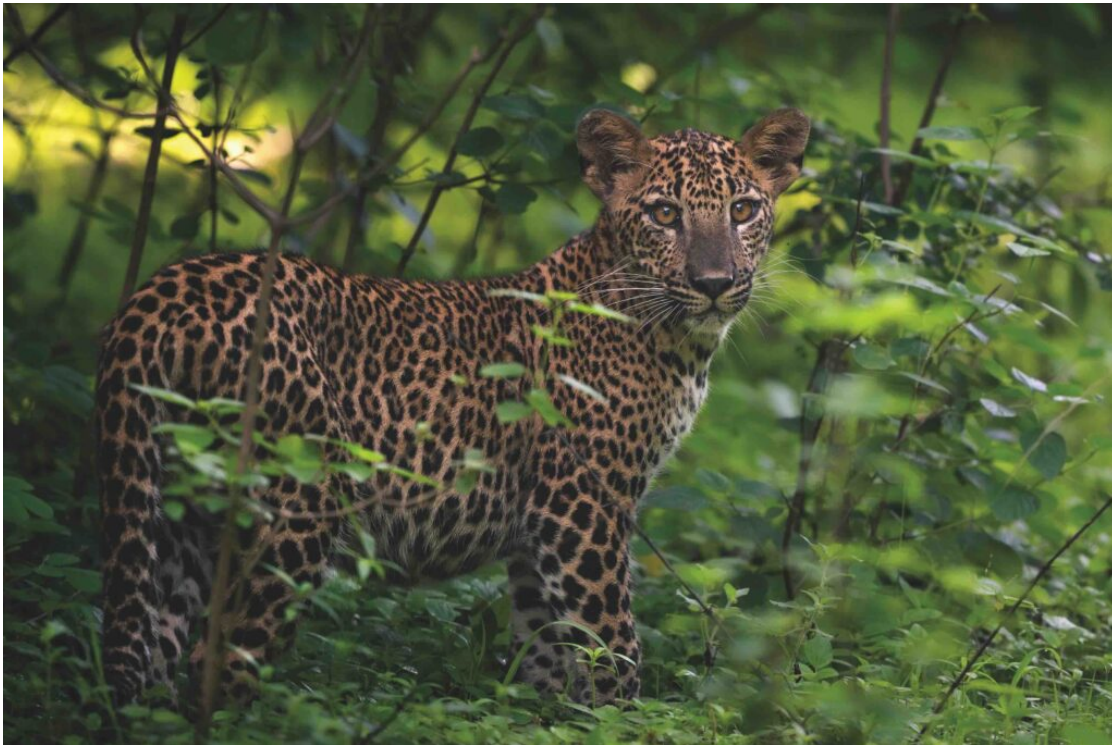
Seen as a group, the photographs reveal desire, vigilance, physical strength, and the uncertainty of the surrounding wild. The buffaloes remain outside the frame, but their presence is felt in Bhathiya's posture and repeated attention. Although leopards are bringing Kumana new fame, the park's older identity remains alive in its birds.



With silent precision, the leopard advances through the forest.

The female, Black-necked Stork is among its rarest and most impressive residents. In Sri Lanka, this bird is associated mainly with Yala and Kumana. It is the tallest bird found in the country and one of the most difficult to see. The female has yellow eyes, while the male has brown eyes. The photographed female stands tall beside a

track, her long red legs supporting a black-and-white body. Her neck and head shine with dark iridescence. The yellow eye is clearly visible, giving the bird a bright, almost jewel-like expression.



Hidden among the foliage, a young leopard blends effortlessly into Kumana's vibrant forest.

The image is a reminder that Kumana's wetlands remain as important as its forests, and that its original reputation as a great bird sanctuary has not diminished. The story of Bimba and her six-month-old male cub reveals a gentler side of leopard life. They were seen near the Kumana Villuwa area, where the mother and cub spent almost thirty minutes interacting. The series begins with the young leopard partly concealed by vegetation.



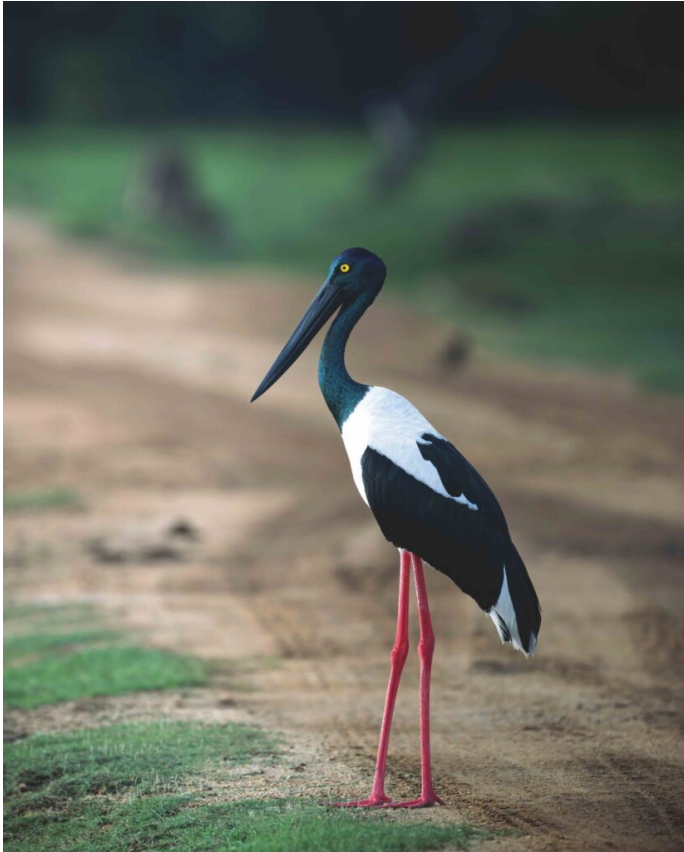
Bimba and her male cub share a playful moment.

Another image shows Bimba and the cub walking together across an open track. The most dramatic frame captures the mother rising on her hind legs and placing her forepaws around the cub as the young animal twists away in play. Without the sequence, the final photograph might appear aggressive.



Bimba stands protectively beside her young male cub.

Seen together, it is clearly part of an affectionate exchange between mother and offspring. The cub learns through movement, pursuit and physical contact. Bimba teaches without ceremony, using play to develop the reflexes and confidence that the young leopard will need when it becomes independent. The photographs are valuable because they show behavior, not simply appearance. They reveal the bond between mother and cub in the open, during a period of life that passes quickly.



A female Black-necked Stork stands gracefully.

A jackal mother provided another rare display of parental care. At first, the observers believed she was carrying prey. As they watched more closely, they realized that the object in her jaws was her own cub. She was moving the young animal to a safer place. The photograph shows the mother at a distance, standing in grass and low vegetation. In the closer image, the cub hangs gently from her mouth, its legs and tail visible while she grips it carefully by the skin. The scene is both practical and tender. The mother must move quickly, yet her hold remains controlled enough not to injure the cub.



A jackal mother gently carries her pup to safety.

Together, the photographs present Kumana as a landscape of many lives. There are leopards on village signboards and in abandoned classrooms. There are great males descending from rocks and shy females remaining far down forest roads. There are mating pairs, playful cubs, solitary bears, rare storks, and jackal mothers carrying their young. The old village structures add another layer to the park. Human history has not disappeared from Kumana. It remains in walls, roofs, signboards, and empty rooms. Yet nature has moved back into these spaces. A leopard rests in a classroom. Another lies above a village marker. The boundary between the human past and the wild present has become beautifully uncertain. This is why Kumana feels different. Its remoteness requires commitment. Travel is time-consuming and costly, which naturally limits the number of visitors.

The park is not usually overwhelmed by jeeps or crowds. Encounters can still unfold with room around them. Animals are given the freedom to choose whether to remain, approach, or disappear. That freedom is essential to the quality of the experience. Kumana should not attempt to imitate busier wildlife destinations. Its strength lies in the opposite direction. It offers stillness, distance, and the possibility of watching without controlling. Its growing fame as a leopard destination should therefore be welcomed with care.



Wildlife photographer Nipun Perera.

The birds made Kumana famous long before its leopards became widely known. They still return to the wetlands and fill the skies according to ancient seasonal rhythms. Now the leopards are adding a new chapter, one written across rocks, forest roads, abandoned buildings and village signboards. The image of Ritta resting above the words “Kumana Village” captures the transformation perfectly. Below him is the memory of a human settlement. Around him is the forest. Above both rests the leopard, calm, watchful and entirely at home.

By: Ama-Sena.