

Reminiscences of Lahugala

Posted on

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Adult, adolescents and a baby elephant at Lahugala.

My two buddies, Mervyn, Chandima and I had left Colombo at 4 a.m. and long before we reached our destination, the bungalow at Lahugala, we spotted our first elephants from the 191st milepost on the Moneragala-Pottuvil Road; a group of four, out in the tank. When we reached the bungalow, they were there just in front to welcome us. Downing a quick cup of tea, I joined Sonny the keeper to take a few photographs of the herd from closer up. These were the days before Lahugala was declared a National Park, and one was permitted to walk along the bund of the tank. But we decided to drive up by jeep.

A quarter mile from the bungalow where the edge of the jungle takes a curve we saw a fantastic sight: two herds intermingling at the edge of the water, but the moment they got wind of our presence they made off in a swirling cloud of dust. Sonny was sure they would come back, so driving to a fallen tree almost at the water's edge we switched off the engine and waited. And sure enough, they came.

The first herd I counted was twenty-five strong. The second was much larger-there were forty in it, and then we found there were more, yet another herd further away. It was almost 87 strong, more or less. It was on the second afternoon at Lahugala that I had what I think was my most exciting experience in the jungles until that time. It was a warm breezy afternoon, and having freshened up at the nearby well, we were just about to sit to a cool beer when I spotted an elephant on the bund. By the time I got my camera, five more had appeared, and the wind being in our favour, we set out on foot -Sonny and I.

We rounded the point where the bund takes a sharp bend and were rewarded with something more than we had anticipated. There were about sixty of them on both sides of the bund - a wildlife photographer's dream come true in the noontday bright. It has been an old habit I had cultivated while making my pictures in the wilds, to look backwards every now and again. On this afternoon I was so fascinated by the sight before me that I believe, I had overlooked it. But then I heard the sound that instinctively made me look back - the unmistakable sound made by an elephant flapping its ears. I looked and saw nothing. I could see the bungalow far away, and Mervyn and Chandima looking in our direction. I turned around and was just beginning to savour the scene ahead of us, when I heard the warning cry loud and clear "La!" I whipped around. There, barely 25 yards away he stood. A magnificent bull, the ears and trunk covered with the pink pigmentation some elephants have. He was looking with trunk upraised in our direction, ears out. Time seemed to stand still. I could hear a deep throbbing in my chest, and my knees seemed to be suddenly weak. I whispered to Sonny with all the nonchalance I could affect, that there was an elephant behind us. Sonny took in the situation and in a moment made a gesture asking me to follow him. Where? Straight toward the waiting elephant. The big bull stood still, his ears still out, his trunk down but with the tip turned slightly outwards. He gave forth a throaty growl accompanied by a fearfully loud stomach rumble which seemed to shake the very bund we were walking on. Sonny did not falter but kept walking toward the bull; then, with an ear splitting squeal, the elephant gave way. He turned around with an air of dignity somehow natural to his kind and slowly walked down the bund ahead of us.

The magnificent beast stopped and again gave forth yet another trumpet call. I hurried away imagining he was after us that time, but it was Sonny. Then, there was yet another incident during those memorable four days-one that has greatly increased my love for and interest in these beasts. There had been a shower of rain which came out of nowhere and disappeared as suddenly as it had started, leaving

everything bright, sunny and cheerful. Two young bulls came into the bund and started pushing one another, entwining their trunks and banging their foreheads in a light hearted wrestling bout.

This went on for some time until they got down from the bund, and for a time we could hear them crashing about in the jungle. They then broke cover just below the anicut, one chasing the other at speed. The first bull, not noticing the big pool of water just before him, went in headlong. We saw forelegs slowly buckle and, as if in slow motion, the big fellow landed head over heels in the water. He was up in a flash, but stood watching his playmate in an utterly bewildered fashion. Their game of course ended there. Looking back in time, I still remember another day, when as a little boy of seven I spotted my first elephant at this very spot, standing with a pair of oversized binoculars in my hands, my parents flanking me. That tingling sense of excitement, fear and elation experienced on that great day is never to be forgotten. But will the elephants' fate bring a happy ending? The mechanical clatter of civilisation seems to be overtaking the wilds. The jungles are opened out, and animals like the elephant, leopard, and bear would soon walk the same path as the quagga and the great auk. Perhaps they will if we don't bestir ourselves and take the necessary steps. Editor's Note: Mr. Lal Anthonis, is one of Sri Lanka's leading writers on wildlife, as well as being among the best known photographers on the subject. His concern for the future of the elephants at Lahugala, has been shared by other enthusiasts of the wild too, and their efforts, together with the policies of the governments of the country, helped in declaring Lahugala a National Park, where the elephant population is protected. It is the best place in Sri Lanka to view elephants in large herds. Inquire from the Wild Life and Nature Protection Society, Chaitya Road, Colombo 1.