Spotting The Wilpattu Leopard

Posted on



The prince of the jungle – the elusive Wilpattu Leopard

It was February 17, 2011… a date that will be etched in my mind. Why? I saw the elusive Wilpattu LEOPARD! Yipee…

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We enter Wilpattu National Park

Eight of us including our vastly experienced driver and the Wildlife Department trekker rumbled along the gravel roads of Wilpattu in a green safari jeep. No wildlife excursion can be truly experienced unless you go in a safari jeep, open to the elements with the speeding wind cooling you in the evening sun. Branches of the trees on the side of the road caress you (more like hit you) as the vehicle passes by,

but that’s the fun of it!

In search of the leopard

A barking deer crossed the road in one leap surprising us from our vigil, our eyes were scanning the surroundings for the famous Wilpattu Leopard. Our driver and trekker pointed out to us the vibrant peacocks that stood out against the green back drop. A little bit farther, a flapshell turtle basking in the evening light and a star tortoise enjoying an evening stroll… this would not quench our thirst to see the spotted prince of the wild.

The jungle fowl, more commonly known as the wali kukula (which literally means fighting cock) was seen in abundance and at times there would be more than four together. The male bird, which is more colourful and striking, was more prominent, but we were fortunate to see three of the more shy female birds as well. But… where was the leopard?

Suddenly an Asian Paradise Flycatcher fluttered from branch to branch and our eyes synchronised with the movement… back and forth, until it rested on a branch with its white tail clearly visible. Herds of spotted deer, cautious and vigilant stood still as we stopped to admire their majestic beauty. There was one herd with only stags; their antlers give them a sense of character and strength. On the banks of one of the villus, with its mouth wide open was a crocodile basking in the sun. I could not help but think ‘what a big mouth you have… what large teeth you have!’ Not the best time to think of little red riding hood!

> Herds Of Spotted Deer, Cautious And Vigilant Stood Still As We Stopped To Admire Their Majestic Beauty.

It is indeed true that the animal kingdom lives in peaceful co-existence; in an open area was a curious sight. A Monitor Lizard on one side, a Jungle Fowl on the other, a Pea Hen and a Red-wattled Lapwing were all nibbling on a snack completely at ease with each other. A little farther, our driver excitedly pointed at a tree; perched in its full glory was a crested hawk eagle. Definitely Wilpattu has much to offer…the diversity is such that you were bound to see a plethora of birds and animals. Yet… the Leopard…

Spotting the leopard

We rambled along, bouncing up and down scanning the area to locate any other animals. We made a turn and drove along a villu where the water had come on to the road when suddenly, someone shouted… DIVIYA! (LEOPARD). The commotion within the jeep was hilarious, with all of us scrambling to see the leopard. It was having an evening drink, slurping the water as it drank. As we approached the leopard ran into the jungle.

We switched off the engine and waited… slowly but surely the leopard came out again. Cau-tiously… it looked at us… it was then that I saw that the leopard was blind in one eye. As soon as the leopard came out again, the drama within the jeep was priceless. We jumped from one side to the other, over each other's heads…the one with the camera was sent through the side of the jeep to take photographs from the top of the roof. There was only one with the camera but seven people to give instructions on how best to take the photograph. It was indeed surprising that the camera did not land on one of our heads!

> We Waited Patiently, Hoping That The Leopard Will Once Again Come Out From Hiding. Minutes Passed… And Yes…We Saw The Leopard Slowly Taking A Step Forward…

While we silently observed the leopard, another vehicle came from the opposite side disturbing the prowler who ran back into the jungle. As we silently inched forward the leopard came out again, looked at both vehicles but decided to come towards us and sat in the middle of the sandy road. The other vehicle impatient to see the leopard, drove forward…once again startled the leopard ran back into the safety of the jungle. It should be noted that visitors to the park should not behave in a selfish manner and should respect both the wildlife and other visitors so that all will have the opportunity to observe these beautiful animals.

We waited patiently, hoping that the leopard will once again come out from hiding. Minutes passed… and yes…we saw the leopard slowly taking a step forward, it came on to the road and started walking away from us. The elegant lines of this majestic animal swayed as it strolled making it clear to everyone that he was the prince of the jungle. The leopard once again entered the jungle as we inched forward to see what he was doing. He lay down on the ground and stretched himself before falling asleep. Our trekker and driver speculated that the leopard was not leaving the environs because there might be something that is important to him,

such as prey.

We watched for a while longer as this stately animal relaxed… its characteristic spots and golden yellow blending perfectly with the surroundings. It was late evening when we left the Wilpattu Leopard to enjoy its nap.

One thing I know for sure is that it was definitely an honour to be in the company of royalty of the animal kingdom. The elusive Wilpattu Leopard had graced us with his presence.

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