Sri Lanka: The Land of the Leopard

Posted on

Join us, for a moment, on a journey of imagination, into a forest in Sri Lanka, not any forest, but a rainforest. It is night. Imagine its sounds – cicadas, crickets, frogs, the warble of a nightjar, and the occasional soft whoop of an owl – enchanting, exhilarating, even soothing. Suddenly, their song is stilled. A deep, guttural, repeated, echoing rasp cuts through the night. You are now alert, hairs on your neck raised not in fear but in excitement. For that is the sawing of Sri Lanka's apex predator, a leopard.

Words Rohan Wijesinha.

Spot the majestic leopards at Yala. ©S Manuelpillai

Why an apex predator?

This island has no lions, tigers, or hyenas, so leopards have nothing to fear…except one animal, us. Panthera pardus kotiya has nine leopard sub- species in the world;

this one is Sri Lanka’s very own.

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Leopards are champions of survival, able to adapt to almost any habitat. In Sri Lanka, they have learned to live in the high mountains of Horton Plains and the Peak Wilderness, the rainfor- ests of the Wet Zone, and the scrub forests of the Dry Zone. Even on the outskirts of human habitation, any- where where they have some forest cover and prey animals to feed on. The lack of large predator competition may be why Sri Lanka is one of the few places where leopards are seen regu- larly during the day. In most other countries, they are crepuscular or noc- turnal; they hunt and move at dusk or after dark, as they need to hide from lions or tigers. However, in Sri Lanka, especially in the National Parks of Yala and Wilpattu, they can be seen anytime and are rarely afraid. Powerful and agile, their light fur covered in striking black rosettes are a wonder to behold as they pad silently on sun-dappled jungle tracks or drape their lithe bodies over the branch of a tree. This is why thousands have come, from all over the world, to see them.

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A very special one

Let us return, once more, to that special forest, the Sinharaja rainforest, and imagine its sounds and the sawing of a leopard. It might be extraordinary if you hear a leopard in this World Heritage Site. Previously, just a record in the history of Sri Lanka conservation, even a supposed myth, within the past 10 years, three of their kind have been found. This is the elusive Black Leopard, precisely the same species as the country’s other leopards; it is just that they have a recessive gene that turns their fur black due to an excess of melanin. Their beautiful rosettes can still be seen under the shimmering black of their coats. This gene can be carried across generations to suddenly appear in a litter of cubs, just one black cub in a

regular litter of two or three. This is why they are so rare and precious and must be protected. Sadly, we only know of these unique individuals from their dead or dying bodies, cruelly killed by poachers.

To save the black leopard, we must protect all leopards. To save the leopard, we must save their habitat, the forests in which they live, with plenty of prey animals to keep them from roaming into human habitation in search of food. As an initial step in promoting these principles to the broader public, the Wildlife & Nature Protection Society (WNPS), Sri Lanka's oldest (and the world's third oldest) nature protection society, successfully canvassed for the declaration that falls on August 1st and celebrated annually as "Sri Lanka Leopard Day". This recognized the date on which a thesis by Dr. Sriyanie Miththapala was published confirming Panthera pardus kotiya as an endemic subspecies.

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The Land of the Leopard

Sri Lanka is a global biodiversity hotspot filled with creatures great and small – a myriad of insects, beautiful gossamer-winged butterflies, over 450 species of birds, reptiles, mammals, and the mightiest of all; the elephant on land and the blue whale in the ocean. Forests, from rainforests to coastal scrub jungles and those in between, from the highest mountain peaks down to the sea, are all watered by monsoonal rains, over 100 rivers, and thousands of bodies of water of varying shapes and sizes. By the coast are precious mangrove forests, a trop- ical island, a surrounding ocean of coral reefs, fish, turtles, and mammals – whales, dolphins, and the highly endangered dugong, close to or a little further offshore.

Just one of these magnificent species is the powerful leopard, all in a land where a wildlife lover can lose oneself in wonder: Sri Lanka – the wondrous Land of the Leopard.

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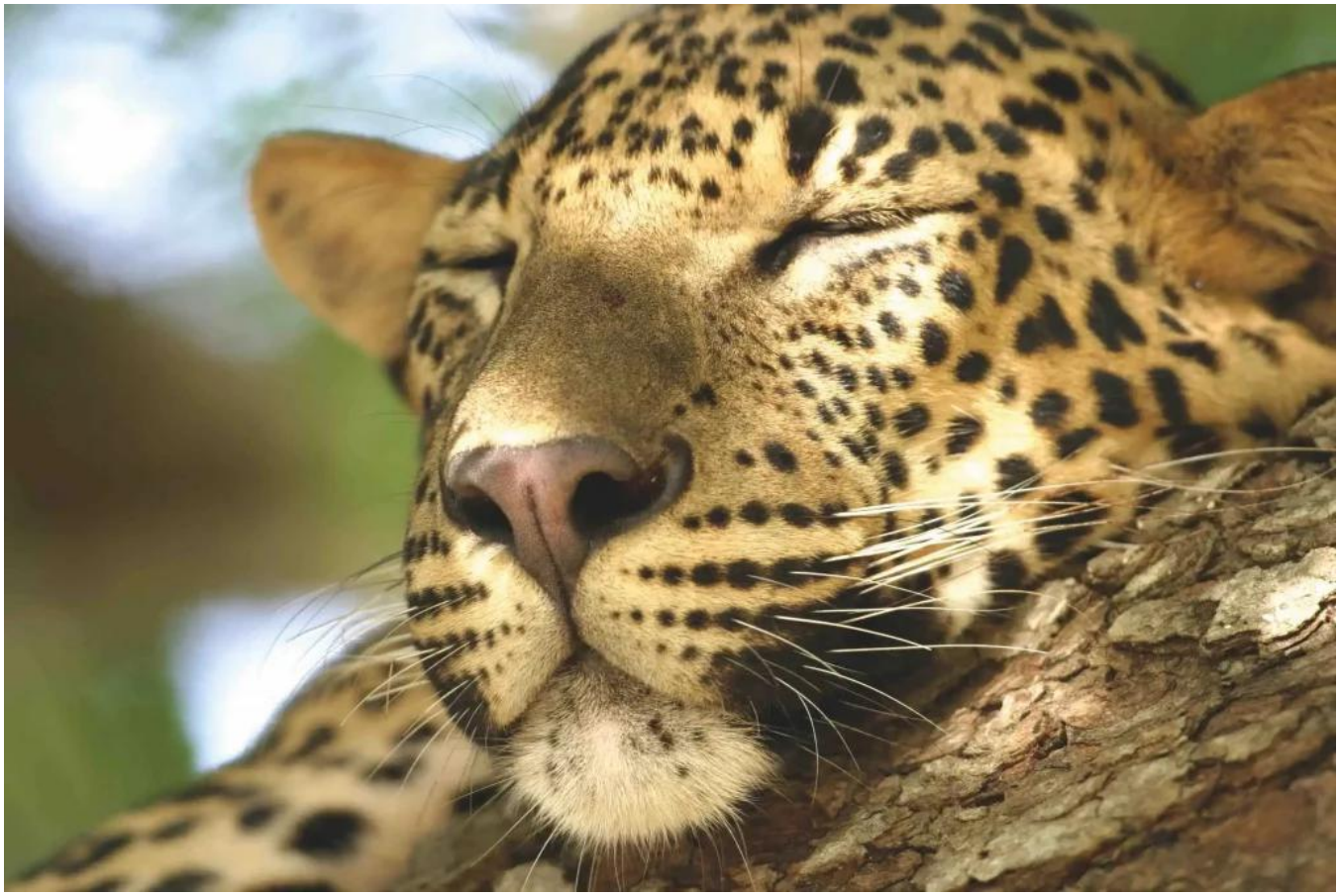
where a wildlife lover can lose oneself in wonder: Sri Lanka – the wondrous Land of the Leopard.

At Yala.©S Manuelpillai

Watching on.©S Manuelpillai

An incredible capture.©Ranjan Josiah



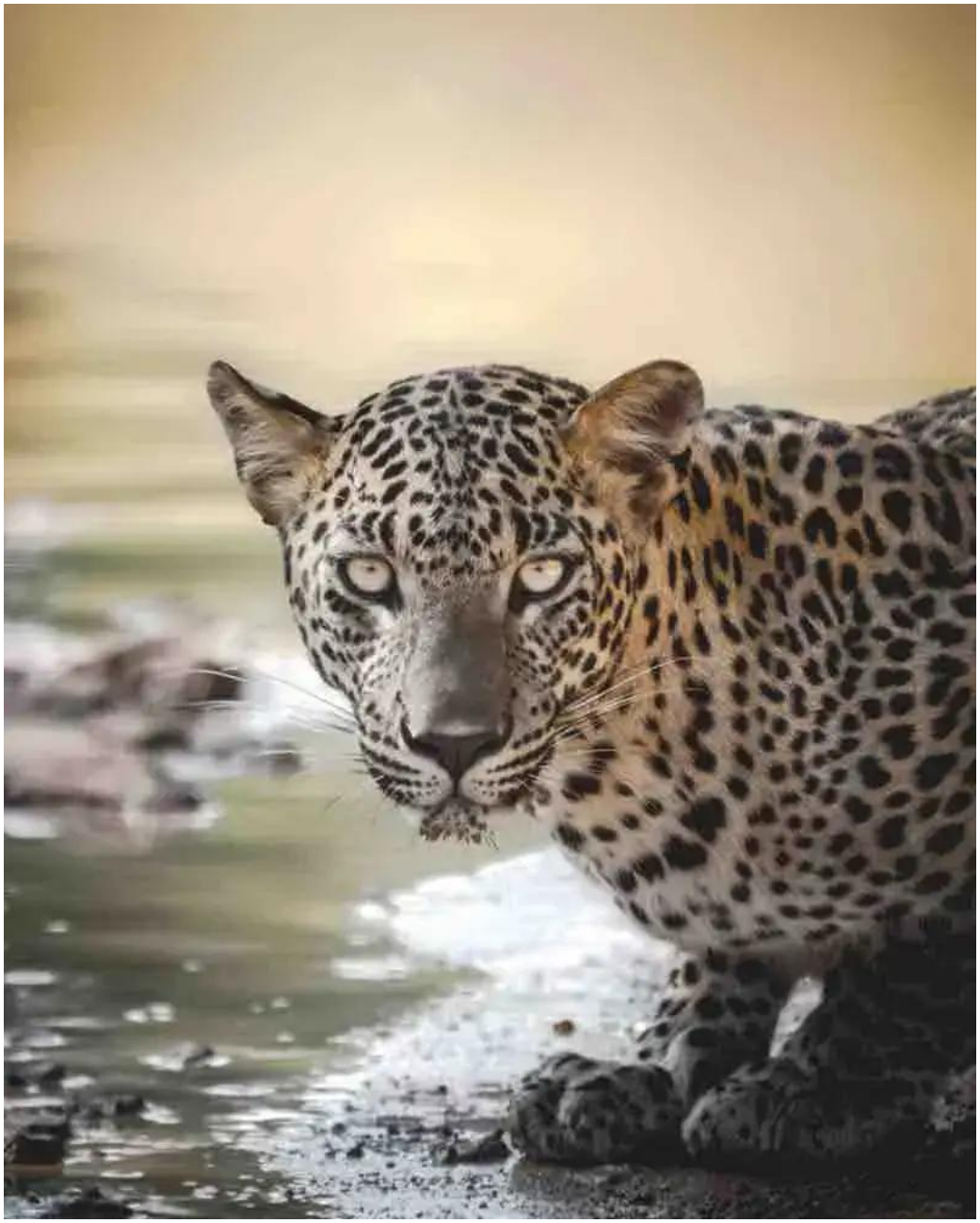
At rest. ©Gehan de Silva Wijeyeratne

At Yala.©Riaz Cader

A watchful gaze while at Yala.©Riaz Cader

At Yala.©Riaz Cader

At Wilpattu.©S Manuelpillai

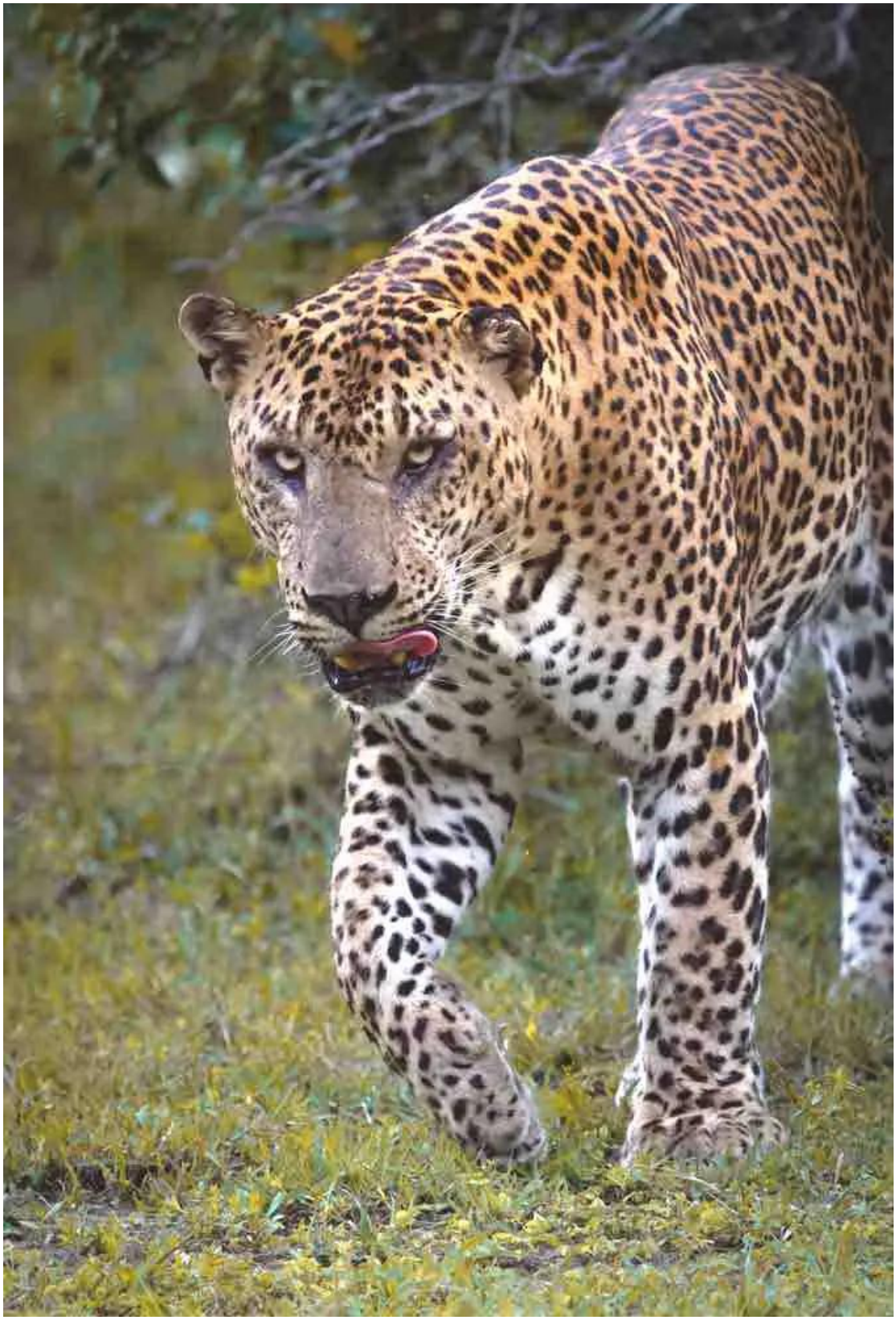


Selena. ©Gautham Kumar

Leopard at Horton Plains.©Sankha Wanniatchi

Hunting in Wilpattu.©Dilshan Hettiaratchi

Trapped.



Harak Hora.©Gautham Kumar

It’s my prey.©Dev Wijewardane

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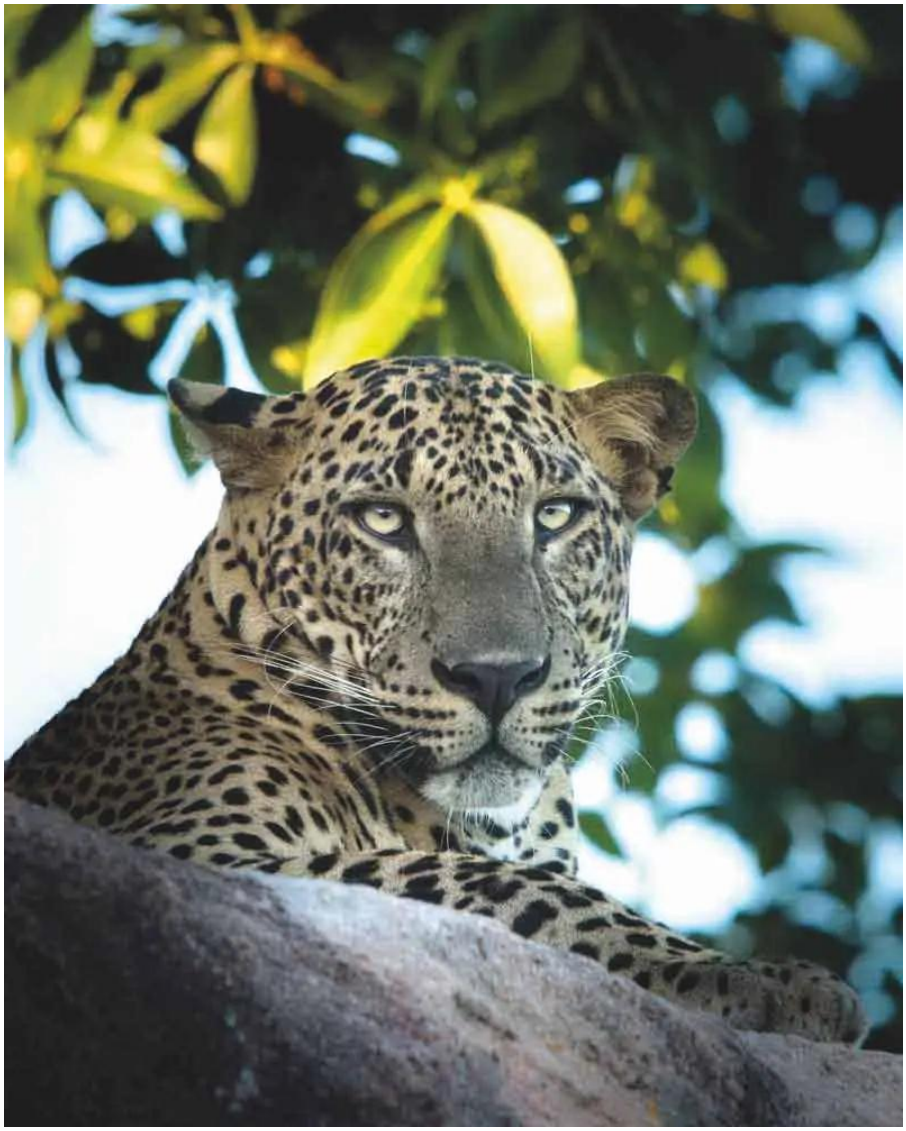
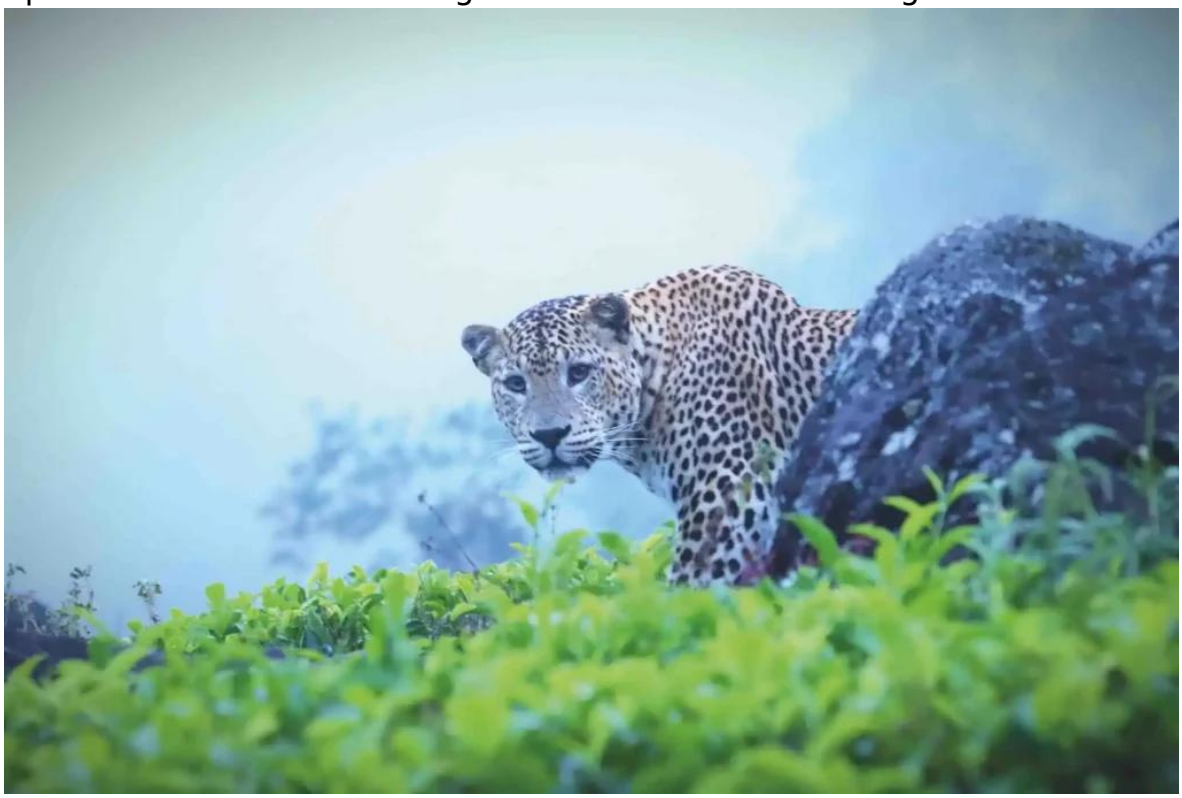


Julius.©Gautham Kumar

Spotted near Buttala Kataragama Road.©Milinda Wattegedera



Spotted in the Tea Garden.©Rohan Gunasekara

In their territory, at Yala.©Dilshan Hettiaratchi

At Nellum Villa.©Dilshan Hettiaratchi

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