

The Wilds of Sri Lanka: Sanctuary for beast and bird

Posted on

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For a little island only 140 by 270 miles, Sri Lanka has a fascinating variety of wild terrain. These 'jungles' cover about one tenth of the total area of her ancient face and they vary from the primeval, confined to the 21,000-acre Sinharaja Forest, and the deep secondary forests down to the rolling thornbrush plains and the mangrove swamps of the low country dry zone. Then from the flood plains of the Mahaveli basin, where roams the great marsh elephant, to the Hana knotted, steaming jungles of the wet zone and up to the lichen covered, stark beauty of the mist-draped montane forest. Found in this diverse landscape, from the treetops to the leaf-covered forest floor, is a rich array of wildlife, both feathered and furred, nocturnal and diurnal, arboreal and terrestrial.

The big game, like the elephant, leopard, bear and buffalo-also known as the big four-is mostly confined to the low country dry zone and the foothills of the wet. The leopard, however, is also met with even in the hills, where in fact it thrives.

Elephant Country Some time ago, wild elephants were widely distributed in the island and were encountered even at high elevations. But owing to excessive shooting, especially during the colonial era, these magnificent creatures are now confined to the flat, open, bushy terrain and the lightly forested areas known in the jargon of the wildlife man as 'elephant country'.

Limited to the Mahaveli flood plains are the giant marsh elephants. It is still inconclusive as to whether they are a separate sub-species or whether their stature is due to their environment. Today elephants can quite easily be seen in the Yala National Park, where the average herd consists of about ten animals. In the Mahaveli marshes, however, and in Lahugala in the southeast, very large herds of over one hundred have been seen. One of the animals that suffered the most during the days of hunting and as a result has today become the rarest and the most

sought after animal in the jungle is the majestic tusker. No accurate count of this creature has been possible, but it is believed that no more than about 150 of them are left in the wilds. Encouragingly, during the last couple of years, the Yala National Park has been the venue of a number of tusker sightings, ranging from the little two foot calf to the mature nine-foot giant. Yet, despite the many attempts made by the State to preserve the wild elephant, one could never be sure of the future status of this magnificent creature.

Big Cats Still Prowl

The leopard undoubtedly is one of the finest of the big cats and most travellers and wildlife pros are of the opinion that this island is one of the finest and easiest places in the world to encounter them in the wild. Wilapattu National Park along the west coast is world famous for its leopards, while the Yala National Park, too, during recent years has had a fair increase in its leopard population. Unfortunately, though strictly protected a large number of them have been killed off, shot and recently poisoned for their beautiful pelts. The cat is usually found in the low country, both in the forested areas and the bush, but favours the rocky outcrops and the sandy patches.

The Horton Plains at an elevation of 7200 feet, a saddle on the central hills of the island, is another place where one could see them. Though tending to be nocturnal in the hills, they could be seen in the daylight hours in the low country national parks, especially during the mornings and evenings. Their favourite prey are the spotted deer and the sambur with the speciality being the monkey and the village dog.

Two man-eating leopards have been officially recorded on the island. The more famous was known as the Punani man-eater, after a little hamlet off the east coast where it operated. A contemporary of the world famous man-eating leopard of Rudraprayag of India, it was shot in 1923 with 20 recorded human kills. Its mounted carcass can be viewed at the Colombo Museum. The other was the Pottana leopard which appeared along the ancient Pottuvil-Kataragama pilgrim route, in the southeast of the island, in the 1950's. Its history, however, is obscure.

The Big Games Beasts

The sloth bear is the only bear species on the island. Its body is covered with long, thick, coarse, jet-black hair and has a long boney snout with which it can suck up

termites from an ant-hill, like a vacuum cleaner. Here is a creature most dreaded by the jungle folk, but in fact it is a very gentle animal by nature. Provoked, however, or defending its young, it is the devil incarnate-the perfected mauling machine. One of the most charming sights in the Sri Lankan jungles is the mother bear taking two or three cubs on a piggyback ride. The bear is a vegetarian but will readily consume carrion if easily come by.

The best time to see bear in the parks would be from middle May to early June when their favourite fruit, the Palu (Manilkara hexandra) is ripe. They would also be quite readily seen when the rains are in and they could forage around the anthills and the beehives which are the specials in their menu.

The wild buffalo is widely distributed in the jungles of the dry zone and is often seen mingling with the domestic herds in the villages. The species found on the island is the water buffalo and it is much smaller than its African cousin, the cape buffalo, but it is nevertheless a very powerful beast. It has an evil reputation for attacking without provocation but experts seem to think that this dishonour is without ground. Some large specimens could be seen in the national parks.

Myriad Creatures Abound

Treading the forest floor, among many other smaller animals, are a single species of wild boar, a formidable beast, and four species of deer, the commonest of which is the 'spotted' found in large numbers in all the national parks.

Also vaulting among the branches with a numerous variety of creatures such as the slender lorises are five sub-species of monkeys two of which are confined to the hills, two sub-species of giant squirrel and a flying squirrel.

Crawling with belly to ground are three large lizards. The Bengali monitor, the water monitor which is confined to the riverine areas and the crocodiles. The latter are usually shy but the estuarine type found in the lagoons-and as their name implies near the mouth of rivers-could be aggressive and man-eaters have been known. Out of an exciting collection of birds, in excess of 425 different kinds, 251 are residents while about 180 are winter visitors. Among the residents are 21 species and a further 81 sub-species that are endemic.



A buffalo makes friends with a stork while lazing in a pool of muddy water.



Elephants leading their young along a river. (Lal Anthonis)

Sri Lanka's Sanctuaries and Dedication to Conservation

Of the eleven national parks in the island, two are world famous. They are Yala and Wilpattu. The former for elephant and the latter for leopard and bear. The best time to visit Yala would be between November and May, while Wilpattu would be between February and November.

Uda Walawe, situated south of the central hills, is a young park, but fast growing. It is steadily building a reputation for its large herds of elephants with some really big animals among them. The park is also a bird-watchers' paradise and the scenic beauty along the Walawe River is hard to beat.

The concept of nature conservation has been a very old principle in this island. Words scattered through the pages of that ancient chronicle, the Mahawamsa, stand testimony to this. Many stone inscriptions in the ruined cities also echo the same theme. The most famous of these is the 11th century edict of King Issankamalla of Polonnaruwa on his royal visit to Anuradhapura. Inscribed on an upright stone slab, it now stands in the shadow of that great stupa, Ruwanveli.

Following the noble tradition of the ancient Buddhist kings, the Government has launched a series of tough and costly ventures to preserve our jungles and their denizens from extinction by wanton destruction and in the wake of development. A few aspects of this enormous plan for conservation are a contiguous system of national parks, jungle corridors where possible, an updated Ordinance with severe penalties and the translocation of 'pocketed elephant herds' to areas of better sustenance.

The enthusiasm shown by the younger generation recently, especially among the rural schools, towards conservation is very encouraging. Many private bird clubs and conservation organisations have sprung up and they have all contributed in no small way towards this cause. In keeping with the good work done by the ancient monarchs it is also fitting that the island should have the oldest conservation society in the world the Wild Life and Nature Protection Society of Sri Lanka which is in its 94th year.



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A leopard relaxes in the forest of a National Park. (Lal Anthonis)



A stag pauses on his way through the thicket.