Traversing Elephant Country

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A herd of elephants crossing the Hulang Kapolla

Across the sparse landscapes, or hidden in the thick forests, we expected to see elephants. This was the Udawalawe National Park after all – elephant country. Nevermind the prolonged dry season.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara **Photographs** Indika De Silva and Damith Wickramasinghe

Driving into the park premises, the sunny morning unveiled a clear blue sky and gusts of balmy breeze rustled the grass plains. Typical of the terrain of these parts, Udawalawe evolved from shrub jungle, vast grasslands to deep forest. Officially opened as a national park in 1982 the park has an expanse of 30,800 ha – a haven for its primary occupant, elephants.

Located in the South East of the Island the park occupies both Monaragala and Ratnapura Districts and as a result benefits from the scenic beauty of mountainous horizons that include the Adam's Peak and Pitugala *Kanda* (mountain). Along several stretches midway our journey when forests gave way to flat land, we could spot the characteristic round tip of the Pitugala *Kanda.* Incidentally the park derives its name from the region dominated by the Udawalawe Reservoir, a result of damming the Walawe river that originates from the central highlands of the Island.

Hulang Kapolla, a popular reservoir bed where the elephants are spotted in great numbers

Along the winding dust roads, the bordering encroachments gave way to strips of bare land; fireguards to prevent the spread of bush fires. In the deeply forested areas we caught sight of spotted deer, grazing quietly while glancing furtively at the merest disturbance. It was here that we first had our elephant sighting, though well hidden amidst the deep folds of the forest. We didn't linger long as our guide urged us on to far better sightings farther along.

Bird sightings were another that we could indulge in along the way with marshes offering a refuge for common waders such as the Red Wattled Lapwing and the Yellow Wattled Lapwing. However it was an elusive Malabar Pied Hornbill that proved a challenge appearing in the distant reaches of tall trees, and shying away from every photo opportunity. Another highlight of bird watching that we encountered was the Changeable Hawk Eagle that emerged from a well hidden groove of a tree.

We were yet to see the great numbers of elephants that Udawalawe was famous for. Our guide directed us to one of the hot spots, *Hulang Kapolla*, a popular reservoir bed where the elephants are spotted in great numbers.

Only the mugger crocodiles emerged out of the waters to bask on the banks of a lake that we passed by…

And, as promised we were not to be disappointed. Entering at the fringes of the flat plains we chanced upon one or two elephants grazing undisturbed. Differentiating the males with their sloping backs from the females identified by relatively flat backs proved to be tricky for our untrained eyes. The drive through the outer boundaries led to a vantage point from where we glimpsed small herds of elephants scattered across the vast plains. Here a clear horizon afforded a generous view of the mountain ranges, including a low range Kuragala mountain, that is situated closest to the park. We drove across the hardened bed, that the dry season had left behind and to reach one particular groove amidst the plains where the elephant numbers appeared the most dense.

It was a waterlogged pit where the herd had descended to in their search for water, we soon discovered. Females, young males and three baby elephants comprised this small herd that crowded the pit. We stopped at an advantageous viewing distance to watch them communicate with one another or draw out water from what seemed an invisible source in the ground. We soon discovered the elephant technique. Kicking a hefty foreleg into the bed unearthed small holes that filled out with water, from the water logged bed. The elephants then extended their long trunks into them to draw out enough water to drink, and even a few splashes to relieve from the hot sun. The baby elephants too tested the dexterity of their trunks with a few attempts to draw water but were soon distracted by a more interesting past time of nudging and teasing each other.

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While this herd peacefully went about their tasks, an older male cautiously made its approach. Over ten feet tall, the guide put its age at around 35-40 years. Another male who had already found his place in the herd soon grew restless of the approaching newcomer and ventured out towards him. We watched and waited quietly as the two elephants gradually walked towards each other. It wasn’t a day for high drama however as they came face to face and simply extended trunks warily as though to size each other up. Detecting no great threat the two elephants lingered with their trunks extended in a light ‘hand-shake’. Gradually the rest of the herd followed suit climbing their way out of the pit abandoning their watering hole. It was closing high noon, and maybe the herd would wander off to a cooler refuge

out of the open plains.

It appeared that the sweltering heat overcame the wilderness. Aside from a few lone elephants foraging in the thicket, all others seemed to have found refuge out of our sights. Only the mugger crocodiles emerged out of the waters to bask on the banks of a lake that we passed by as we headed on our way back from the sunbaked expanse of Udawalawe National Park.

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