Trekking Through The Wilderness Of Runakanda…

Posted on
Maguruganga, slow moving and crystal clear for a swim

For an adventure freak here is an ideal escape. Gushing cold waters, breathtaking scenery, and amazing wildlife, packed with adventure in the unperturbed hands of Nature.

Words Nethu Wickramasinghe **Photographs** L J Mendis Wickramasinghe and Udaya Chanaka

Heading from Colombo, a few kilometres to the South and turning inland towards Mathugama off Kalutara district, away from the bustling environment, is an experience of feeling pure tranquillity. Fragmented from the main Sinharaja Rainforests, due to de-forestation for timber in the early 1970s, Runakanda Forest has become a secondary forest with unbelievable biodiversity.

Passing the main towns of Agalawatta, Lathpandura, Baduraliya and finally Hadigalla, one can easily reach the Runakanda Proposed Forest Reserve. But, for an off road experience, the forest can also be reached through an untainted village called Mannawatta, an altogether isolated location from rest of the world, which has preserved every good thing possible over the years. For a wildlife photographer it’s the ideal location to gear up all the equipment to capture the mystical landscapes and gushing pristine waters, bursting with aquatic life in the lowland tropical forests of Sri Lanka.

Rising 477m above sea level, Runakanda is among several closely knit small ridges in the lowland wet zone. A large number of fresh water springs give life to small streams that begin there and seep through rocks and boulders through the thickets of the jungle and finally join in with Maguruganga. It is the main branch of the Kuda Ganga, which borders the Runakanda Forest from the western end. Because of this very reason the thick forest covers of Runakanda are an important catchment area for Maguruganga, which tosses and twirls and does not hesitate in cascading from several locations.

Aquatic life here is unbelievably rich and some of the sites are verysensitive because they are the only remaining habitats of some of Sri Lanka's rare varieties of fish found nowhere else. The well camouflaged Redneck Goby and beautiful Lipstick Gobies, as their name suggests, have hot red bulging lips. The rare largest of all endemics, the Giant Snake Head, swims in these waters as it's still safe and the waters are pristine. And it's true that all life could meander in the streams of the Maguruganga, as long as these waters are free from pollution and safe. You will definitely find a stream on any path you take that leads to the jungle and it is equally tempting to swim in the purest of waters and feel the overwhelming serenity amidst the wildlife that survives there.

Pahanthuda Ella is named for its water cascading from above through a narrow point that then expands to form a sort of '*Pahana*' (lamp in Sinhala). This is one of the beautiful falls that gushes through these mystical jungles, and the first to be encountered after a 3km hike through the jungle. While Madeyiyawa Ella is the next fall about 6km deep in the forest, Mannawatta Ella, a distance of 8km and Mohini Ella, 12km away, can only be reached by foot.

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It's all about adventure trekking through the wilderness, moving in jungles along the streams, with once in a while an unwelcome visitor such as a leech or two accompanying your way. And one must also be cautious of the snakes like the mildly venomous Hump Nosed Vipers common among dry leaf litter, and Green Pit Vipers amongst green foliage. Harmless snakes like the Brown Vine Snakes are abundant and avoiding their paths if encountered would be the best cautionary measure to take.

Not much sunlight reaches the ground level because of the thick canopy set high above, and the vegetation is perfectly striated beneath. From dusk to dawn, endless melodious songs—a perfect blend of sopranos, altos, tenors and basses—singing in harmony. The high pitched Hill mynahs to Drongos, and the many endemic birds found in the lowland tropical forests, are abundant too.

The sounds of birds like the Blue Magpies to the Red faced Malkohas, to the Crested Drongos, and the never ending continual conversations and chatters of the flocks of

the endemic Orange-billed Babblers will accompany your way through the jungle, reminding you that you're not alone. Even common birds like the white breasted kingfishers, yellow billed babbler, and black robins yield ample opportunity to be captured on camera, for the back drops and lighting conditions are perfect.

Every inch of the way is decorated with lichens and moss, every leaf that's fallen on the ground is a unique habitat for tiny creatures to thrive, especially insects unbelievably camouflaged. Giant creepers and vines entwine on gigantic trees that push their way through to the canopy for a fresh ray of sunlight. It is a fairly common sight for one to encounter giant squirrels, langurs and macaques that hurdle their way through the canopy.

Mammals like the wild cats, fishing cats, wild boars, barking deer, and even the leopard have been sighted here. Nocturnal life is filled with the endless croaks of the amphibians of which many endemics survive in this ideal tropical jungle. The calls of the Red Slender Loris, an endemic and rare species, can be heard and to watch one of these slow moving primates needs much patience. Also the awkward looking, slow moving armoured pangolins come out in the darkness to feast on ants and termites.

Visitors wishing to enter the proposed reserve must obtain permission from the Agalawatta Forest Range Office prior to their visit. The Runakanda Conservation Centre, which is situated just at the boundary of the proposed forest reserve, is the only visitor 'help centre' providing lodging facilities and guidance within the forest. It is advised to obtain their assistance in order to have a safe journey within the jungle, and is the safest way to trek through different trails and experience the unsurpassed wilderness to the fullest.