

# Two Wildlife Parks In a Day!



A picturesque sight - Lunugamvehera reservoir during the day

**The drive along the Kataragama-Buttala road is a wild one where nature's inhabitants reign. It was indeed an adventure to visit two wildlife parks, Yala and Lunugamvehera, within a span of a day.**

**Words** Udeshi Amarasinghe

**Photographs** Menaka Aravinda and Anuradha Perera

The main road bisects the wilderness, thus Yala Block III is on the side of the Park office and on the other side of the road Yala Block IV and V, which thereafter becomes Lunugamvehera National Park.

We decided to first venture into Yala Block IV and V, where the entrance was denoted with boards indicating, Yala National Park, Lunugamvehera as well as Weheragala reservoir. As we entered through the gate, we were nervous with anticipation hoping that we would be able to see the many creatures of the wild. Quiet except for the occasional sounds, we drove along the gravel paths bouncing as the vehicle went over rocks and roots. Herds of deer were in abundance as they fed on the wet grass. Wherever we turned, deer were surely there. Young stags with antlers stood majestic amidst herds of does and frolicking fawns.



The Lunugamvehera reservoir glistens in the evening

A large crocodile quickly splashed into the water as we approached. It was clear that the animals were not used to human presence. The roads were overgrown with foliage and jungle indicating that not many visitors came through. Black-naped hares were nibbling on greens and darted in a hurry.

The waters of the Weheragala reservoir provided the ideal aquatic environment. The reservoir itself was beautiful with dried up trees emerging from its depths. Weheragala was completed in 2009 by building a dam across the Menik Ganga. The Weheragala stupa, too can be seen atop a rock outcrop by venturing along an alternative path.



## The entrance to Yala and Lunugamvehera

Passing the waterway of the Menik Ganga and by crossing the dam, we entered the Lunugamvehera National Park. The forest becomes thicker and the rain wet soil had a sense of richness.

Bird life was in plenty, especially eagles within both national parks (Yala and Lunugamvehera); we were able to see serpent eagles, grey headed fish eagle, crested hawk eagle, fish eagle and the brahmyn kite. Each in their natural habitat, observing the surrounding for prey. At times swooping down and then flying into the distance. One was actually holding on to its meal with its talons but due to shadows of the trees we could not determine what it was.



A herd of elephants emerge from the wilderness

Wild buffaloes with mynas perched on their back was indeed a curious sight. Pairs of Ceylon grey hornbill, various types of kingfishers including the pied kingfisher, white throat kingfisher and the stork bill kingfisher were some of the highlights of the visit. Painted storks, herons, cormorants and lesser adjutants also dotted the landscape.

Later in the day we ventured into Yala Block III, which was on the opposite side of the main road. The Kebiliththa Devalaya, jungle abode of Lord Murugan can be reached via Yala Block III as well. We drove through the roads overgrown with jungle. It was very quiet except for the sounds of the wilderness. Ancient stone columns believed to be from a bygone era can be seen indicating that this area

would reveal a rich history, if further explored. Travelling inland in the jeep, branches scraped our sides at times dislodging us from our seats as we scaled rocks where clear paths could not be seen. Our heads kept turning all on alert but nothing was to be seen. Suddenly a large noise almost like a growl/bark stunned us and a shadow fell onto the ground. We stopped in our tracks and reversed the vehicle, we heard the angry growl again but we could not see anything. We heard twigs snapping as if the animal was moving, then again there was silence. We waited for a while but the sloth bear did not reveal itself. Disappointed we headed back towards the entrance to cross the main road to revisit Yala Block IV and V.

*Our heads kept turning all on alert but nothing was to be seen. Suddenly a large noise almost like a growl/bark stunned us and a shadow fell onto the ground.*

As evening approached we were able to see more birds, buffaloes, toque macaques, a Bengal monitor (thalagoya) lazing on a tree branch as well as a crocodile basking in the evening light. A mongoose too decided to relax in the middle of the sandy road. The waters of the Weheragala reservoir looked resplendent in the evening light. As day became evening it was time for us to exit the national parks. A beautiful herd of deer was calmly relaxing undisturbed by our presence on the slopping walls of the dam. The wildness of these two national parks were intriguing and provided a different experience from the rest. As many do not visit, there is much to discover. With stories of leopards seen on numerous occasions were narrated to us, we promised to return.



Herds of young stags with antlers feeding on grass

As we headed on our way along the Kataragama-Buttala Road towards our next destination there were elephants on the side of the road. A small herd was approaching, two adult elephants with two youngsters on tow, another elephant was just emerging from the foliage. This was indeed the best farewell as we continued on our way.

