Untamed Udawalawe

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Three baby elephants playing in the protection of an adult at Udawalawe (Photograph by Milinda Wattegedara)

Udawalawe takes you through a journey of anticipation and excitement where you become an inevitable participant of the wild.

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After a five hour journey from Colombo we reached the Udawalawe National Park just before dawn, to catch the first rays of the sun dribbling its way through the distant escarpments, covered under a golden hue. Of the many undulating terrains that were visible right around the park, the Kaltota escarpment was perhaps the most prominent towards the far north. Here one could vividly see a cross section of the island, with all three geographical peneplains.

This area was declared a national park in the early 1970's to house the many displaced wild creatures due to the construction of the Udawalawe reservoir. Additionally it acted as a catchment area to the reservoir. Wild elephants were the most affected. Eventually Udawalawe National Park became a wild jumbo heaven for enthusiasts of these majestic animals. Recalling from a few years back, I remember the close encounter we had with the 'Walawe Raja' the iconic tusker, of the national park. It was dusk and after field work while returning to our abode, our path was momentarily obstructed by two bull elephants entangled in a tug of war. In order to avoid any conflict we diverted our path, and what we saw was not a clear road ahead, but instead a gigantic tusker, approaching us head on. We had no option but to stop and wait still. It came charging towards us as if to warn, and just as soon as it approached us it disappeared into the jungle. The tusker had not recently been spotted within the park but to catch a glimpse of this majestic giant will indeed be an unforgettable experience.

Coming back to the present, as if awoken by us, an endless repartee of birds greeted us at the entrance. The surroundings of the park are of a typical dry forest where much of the vegetation consists of *Manilkara hexandra* (*Palu*– tree) and a terrain of vast open lands, which are unified by riverain forests. There was a sudden commotion near the entrance and the news of three elephants close by, hidden

amongst the dry scrubland, doing their daily feeding was indeed a promising beginning to the journey that had just begun. Every single shrub on either side of the road was occupied by birds feeding on fruits or seeds, in unison; especially the rose-ringed parakeets in their large flocks not taking a moments rest, hopping from one bush to the other. Despite their fairly large body sizes these birds were quite well camouflaged amidst the thickets thanks to their green plumes. And the much smaller Munias flew faster in swarms from place to place. Even the slightest disturbance in the surroundings just set the entire flock to flight creating ripples as they landed a few metres away.

The vast open plains provide an ideal opportunity for predatory birds to be on the lookout. Para-gliding to sky diving raptors such as Sea Eagles, Brahminy Kites, Black-shoulder Kites, and Crested Hawk Eagles are a common site. For their watchful eyes the slightest disturbance on the ground below indicates a probable hunt down. This is just when the forest comes alive with loud alarm calls from all corners to alert every forest creature that danger is around. At a distance a large sized bird landed by the side of the road, it was a Black-wing Kite and as we slowed down from a fare distance and patiently watched what we saw next was unbelievable. A large rodent was strolling amidst the thickets totally unaware of the Eagle’s presence. It didn’t take too long; the bird snatched the prey with its sharp talons and flew further away into the forest covers.

The gushing waters of the river Walawe was more than rewarding, as we stopped to refresh ourselves closer to the Weheramangkada wildlife beat office. Many visitors can’t resist taking a dip at the shallower parts of the river, which is filled with fresh water fish. It had been several weeks since the last rains had soaked the forest floors as it was midway through the dry season. Since the water bodies had not completely dried out, small pools of water were a heaven and provided ideal hunting grounds for water birds. A large congregation of Painted Storks, of around 500 wading birds, was just what we saw next. Not one of them at ease but all their necks painstakingly drooped into the water and their beaks patiently manoeuvring hither and tither awaiting the much anticipated catch of fish. As the interaction amongst the birds were getting rugged some birds even took the liberty to snatch hold of what the other bird had in its possession. Apart from the storks, Black-headed Ibises, Woolly-necked Stork and a Lesser Adjutant were also amongst the visitors fishing in the shallow waters. The park is also home to vagrants such as the Daurian Starling, European Roller, and Bay-back Shrike, which were first time reports from Sri Lanka and also rare migratory birds such as the White Wagtail, and

the Citrine Wagtail.

Sun basking crocodiles, with their mouths wide open, lined along the banks of the reservoir and small water holes. Dead trees standing amidst the reservoir speak of the extent of the natural forest cover that existed before the construction of the reservoir. These tall trees have now become versatile breeding grounds for many aquatic birds. We approached closer towards the centre of the now dried out reservoir where two nests atop closely standing trees were occupied by Grey Herons.

Although villagers claim to have sightings of the sloth bear from Pokunuthenna, these elusive creatures have never been recorded from the Park. We waited patiently by the reservoir for the gentle giants to approach the waters. They started coming out from the thickets one after the other eventually flocking in their large numbers. Foggy appearance of the atmosphere from the dry earth under the golden light had created a pleasant atmosphere despite the day’s tiring events. During the months of February, Udawalawe National Park is perhaps one of the best places for a wildlife photographer to capture the large herds of elephants approaching the reservoir silhouetted against the setting sun, creating an aura of unspeakable beauty.

