

Wild Beauty of Wilpattu Villus



The rugged terrain by the villu

I had been forewarned of Wilpattu's idiosyncratic nature and the waywardness of her elephants. They are a shy lot, I had been told. "You will be lucky if you even manage to get a fleeting glimpse," my Wilpattu-beaten pilgrim pals had shaken their heads and said, when I had naively expressed my desire to see jumbos in the wilds of Wilpattu.

Words and Photographs Manu Gunasena

They had a valid point, I realised. Though this was my first visit, I knew that Wilpattu was not all that hot on elephants. With only about 200 roaming an area of 1,317 square km in extent and with the rainy season on, the chances of stumbling into an elephant were remote. But I was not to be deterred and as I arrived at Sri Lanka's largest wild life sanctuary, I promised myself, elephants or no elephants, I would savour the experience. Going wild in Wilpattu's arms became a quest in itself.

There are 60 villus or lakes, found at certain strategic spots nature has chosen in her wisdom to quench the thirst of her creatures. These are natural sand rimmed water basins of depressions that fill with rainwater; and it is from the villus that Wilpattu gets her name.

There are 31 species of mammals who have made Wilpattu their home. Among them are elephants, leopards, sloth bears, water buffaloes, sambhurs, the spotted deer, barking deer and mongoose. Among the birds are the Sri Lanka jungle fowl, painted stork, the open bill, little cormorant, many species of owls, terns, gulls, eagles, kites and buzzards. Reptiles like rat snakes, Indian python, common cobra, mugger crocodile, the pond turtle and the soft shelled turtle, add to the main Wilpattu family.

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First stop is an artificial tank, the Percy Bandhe vila, named after a senior game ranger of 30 years service who built the tank. Then we come to the picturesque Kumbuk Vila, a villu that has large trees swooping down to its water. This is a designated spot for a break and alighting from the vehicle is permitted.

The Maha Pathassa villu is next on the itinerary. It is a large lake surrounded by thick jungle. Two red lettered lapwing birds had also flown there to fish in the lake and to indulge in a spot of courtship at this scenic villu. Leaving them to their jungle romance we made our way towards the Kuda Patthassa villu. This shares the same features as the Maha Pathassa villu.

As we travelled on the gravel road, perched high on a tree we saw Sri Lanka's largest bird of prey, the Fish Eagle. It peered at the ground for prey and, possibly finding one, took wing to embark on another flying hunt. Two white necked storks flew in and landed on a grassy clearing by the road side and after browsing for a few minutes flew away. We came next to the Kurutupandi villu. There a small herd of deer had gathered to drink from the lake. Due to the large open space, they showed no fear of leopards.

We were on the way to the next villu when suddenly, without warning, we saw a leopard on the left side of the road only a few yards away. Without even a nod of its head in our direction it slipped into the dense jungle. For a brief moment we saw its back between the trees and the foliage as it went further into the interior, then it was gone. We waited for a few minutes hoping it would re-appear. But it didn't. On the right side of the road, the driver discovered its pug marks, freshly imprinted on the gravel. It showed that it had been crossing the road to get to the other side. While the driver and tracker bemoaned the lost opportunity a few minutes earlier would have provided, I notched a record sighting of Wilpattu's signature mammal: the elusive leopard.

No one really knows how many leopards exist in the Wilpattu jungles but estimates based on sightings, put the figure at approximately 50. On their menu are deer, elk, monkey, jungle fowl, mongoose and other small rodents.

We passed Kumbutu Villu, which has greened with the recent rains as has the Kanpuram Villu. Then we were greeted with the breathtaking beauty of Kalli Villu, for me the most beautiful villu I saw in Wilpattu. Egrets and cormorants flock there to fish and use small half submerged trees as their launch pads. The

presence of fish in its relative deep waters also attracts crocodiles to take up permanent residence on its banks.

A few yards into the jungle from this villu, are the ruins of what is claimed to be the palace of Kuveni, a figure central to the story of the origins of the Sinhala race. A few stone pillars stand, while a few others lie scattered on the ground.

Passing Mara Villu, we traversed a short stretch of the Puttalam-Mannar road. Here the White Bellied Fish Eagle made an appearance and quickly flew away again. We turned left to see the Maila Villu, the Park's largest lake. It is a vast lake, extending as far as the eye can see. With the onset of the rains it had turned into a sea of grass and I watched it in wonder.

And then, suddenly, on the far side of the lake, I noticed movements in the otherwise still scene which, peering through my camera lens, made me freeze in delight. And lo and behold what did I see? Elephants. Not a lone wild elephant, turned rogue perhaps, but a whole whopping herd of elephants, right before my very eyes, come to feast at the Maila Gras.

I could see three elephants, two adults and a calf, which had entered the villu a sizable distance from the banks, happily foraging grass. Another four could be seen in the villu near the bank doing the same. A few more could be seen hazily moving on the banks. I had found my elephants.

Now the call of history beckoned. It was time to go in search of the place where the legendary king who founded the Sinhala race landed in Sri Lanka. It was time to visit Kudriamalie, the Horse's Point.

The area is called Thambapani. It gets its name from the colour of the soil found here. It is copper red in colour and the texture is like that of mud, chunky and sticky. This is the only area in Wilpattu that this soil is found. On this hill, known as Ashwa Kanda, Horse's Hill, is found a kind of rock also extant only in this small area and no other. It is akin to molten rock and its mysterious presence strongly suggests that the area may have been subject to volcanic activity thousands of years ago.

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A small rugged foot path led down to the sea and I stepped onto the beach where, according to Sri Lanka's Bible of history, the Mahawamsa, an exiled Indian prince named Vijaya landed 2,557 years ago, met and married Kuveni and founded the Sinhala race. To me this beach, set in the bay of Kudriamalie, maybe one of the loneliest spots in Sri Lanka but it was the most beautiful unspoilt beach I had ever set foot on. Its isolation was its splendour; the whiteness of its sand was its sparkle. The sea rolled in smoothly, its clear waters were shallow, its waves were but a ripple that lapped gently on the sun kissed shore. It's also a beach where turtles come to lay their eggs.

Returning back to base, we passed Kokkari Villu, which is one of two lakes - the other being Lunu Villu - having a salt content in its waters. Near this lake is a small area that also has a different kind of soil not found in the vicinity: white sand. The place is called Weli Kanda, sand hill. It is a favourite haunt of leopards, known to love a soothing snooze in the sand.

Not even 500 yards from this place we briefly saw another leopard by the road slinking into the dense forest cover. And as for the sloth bear, it only makes brief appearances when the Palu tree is in season and bears sweet fruits. Otherwise it remains a recluse and is hardly seen

And so with the sun going down and the light beginning to fade, we reached the office gates in time to meet the park's 6pm curfew. I took with me the happy experience of having embraced Wilpattu's wild and winsome ways. And also with a small herd of elephants lodged in my memory vault.

