

Yala: Escape and Sanctuary

By Fred R Malvenna



Leaving Colombo at midnight we were at the Yala National Park by 5 a.m. Having completed the formalities of filling forms and paying Park fees we were ready for a head start long before the morning queue of vehicles formed outside the office bringing a host of tourists and other visitors all eager to visit the Park. Yala Block 1 comprises approximately 50 sq. miles and is the best bet for a visitor in a hurry to see most of the better known species of wild fauna found in Sri Lanka, and this with luck, one can achieve during a day's trip into the Park.

Ignoring the early morning flights of a dozen species of water birds we drove on to "Wepandeniya" our first aim to get a glimpse of a leopard. Wepandeniya is a rock outcrop towering over the green vegetation of Yala and is a favourite haunt of leopards who climb to the top of the rock for an undisturbed sleep early morning. The silence was broken with sudden calls of pea fowl echoing through the jungle as they heralded the day. flying down to the villa from their night perch atop tall trees. A brace of jungle fowl scratching for an early breakfast of insects and worms were not in a hurry to give way to us. We approached the Wepandeniya rock with our cameras ready and all eyes glued to the rock outcrop. Piyadasa, our tracker was looking all round trying to spot the leopard which decided to disappoint us. Perched on a rock at Padikema we see a peacock in its full splendour dancing with it's tail feathers fully fanned out in a glorious display of vivid colours of deep blue purple and magenta, shimmering in the morning sun. It held its head high in pride and turned around, this time with it's back towards

us, and the quills of it's tail feathers white and neatly arranged and spread like a ladies fan.

Past Padikema the track opens invitingly - for in Yala there is over 75 miles of good motorable track which can be traversed by car, as well as miles of jeep tracks suitable for the more adventurous traveller. These tracks twist and turn through an ever changing junglescape itself an attraction even if one does not meet with wild life en-route. We take a turn to the left towards Buttuwa Tank which even during drought has ample water for the many animals that drink there.

Our sudden approach on the tank bund caused little annoyance to the majestic herd of wild elephants who were already in the water just a 100 yards in front of us. The elder of the herd, which we noted was a fully grown bull, lifted it's trunk menacingly twitching the tip all around like a periscope and took a few paces towards us. The elephant was taking our scent and satisfied that we were out of its range and posed no danger rejoined the herd. There were about fifteen elephants in the herd. We especially noted the three calves that would have been less than six months old. The elephants were enjoying the cool of the water, some lying on their side, others throwing water over their backs and some, especially the babies running around and frolicking, playing their own games.

Leaving the elephants to their peaceful sojourn, we were on the trail again -now heading towards the Menik Ganga which forms the border of Yala blok 1, which is the section where most visitors are allowed. Gonalabba Lagoon now lies to our right and we spot several Sambhur already on the open plain ambling towards the lagoon which is their favourite salt lick. A few minutes drive and we approach a water hole "Diganwala" which had only a few inches of muddy water and wallowing in it were a herd of wild Buffalo. They muddied the water so much making it impossible for other animals to quench their thirst. As we drove on, herds of deer crossed our path and a pack of monkeys were going high above our heads, crossing our path with such ease. During the Palu fruit season in September, monkeys come down to the ground to pick the succulent fruit and fall easy prey to lurking leopards that follow their trail. As we approach Yala plains still green with ample water the sand dunes towards the sea shore shine bright in the sun. As we break cover from the jungle and enter the plains, the heat of the dry zone is suddenly on us. Someone suggests an Iced Coke but there is no time for that, for the plains are dotted with much signs of life; grazing herds of deer. peafowls

pecking away at grass seeds, a sound of wild pig grunting and digging in the soft earth, a few painted stork walking lazily. Ahead on our path were two elephants walking away from us yet keeping to the dry track and we lost no time in gaining on them. We wanted to stop but the tracker said 'go on sir, get close' and so it was, 20 yards, 10 and then 5 and it happened so suddenly.

The elephant in the rear turned around in one lightning move that froze us on the tracks and the next moment he was towering over the bonnet of our vehicle with its trunk held high and trumpeting in anger. There was near pandemonium; while Piyadasa shouted some "Mumbo Jumbo" and managed to stop the massive brute on its tracks, our lady friend inside had panicked and with nowhere to run or hide had sprawled on the floorboards shrieking. Surely the elephant heard this too, for the next moment he left the track and moved away from us.

Everyone needed to cool off, especially after this unexpected excitement and there was no better place than the banks of the Menik Ganga which we reached without further adventure. So pleasing to the eye the Menik Ganga runs down flanked by majestic Kumbuk, Mee. Palu, and other giants of the tropical forest, shading its path and cooling the water beneath. A cool beer, a picnic lunch and a siesta on the sandy banks of the Menik ah! It was around 3 p.m. when we started off on our final round. We travelled further into the jungle towards Heen Wewa that lay on the northern boundary of the Park. Everyone was keen and alert once again, for the jungle looked so promising with rock outcrops here and there, nearby water holes each with its complement of Parson stork, egrets, kingfishers, and hawk eagles and brahmini kites that perched on dead trees, all awaiting their share of fish and frogs that would soon be stranded in the fast drying water holes. "Sh!" stop said Piyasena. "Reverse Sir; reverse, reverse, stop". A few seconds and "there he is sir -the spotted one'. We looked to our right and about 20 feet up on the branch of a Palu tree sprawled a leopard with its feet dangling down freely and the tail twitching endlessly, head resting feigned in deep sleep. Maybe the motor drive of my camera disturbed it - for it raised its head and looked at us as if in disgust and soon disappeared into the jungle in a flash of yellow.

Located on the northern boundary of the park, the Heenwewa bungalow overlooks the nearby tank and the lush jungle beyond, giving the visitor a glorious opportunity to observe numerous birds and animals that come to the tank for their daily drink. The tank, half empty during the dry season, is a haven to crocodiles and other marsupials too - for one can count a dozen "crook" and a

couple of terrapins basking on the dry tank bed throughout the day. All this, sitting in a comfortable cane chair on the veranda of the bungalow and chatting to the friendly keeper.

Shadows were lengthening as we drove towards Jamburagala, the rock waterhole on our way back. A couple of crocodiles slithered hurriedly into the water at our sudden approach and a jackal who was sniffing for toads at the waters' edge took a suspicious look at us. Peafowls were loitering on the big rock - some dancing in glorious splendour others just looking on before they took flight to the treetops nearby to roost for the night. With the sun already behind the trees, darkness was drawing fast as we headed back through rocky parkland when ahead of us appeared a black ball of fur which we soon recognised as the elusive bear who made his sojourns mostly at dusk. It was ambling slowly along the track ahead of us and we followed it for a few minutes till we entered the denser forest. It bounded away into the scrub and we decided to abandon the chase as night was on us and headed for home...the Park Bungalow.

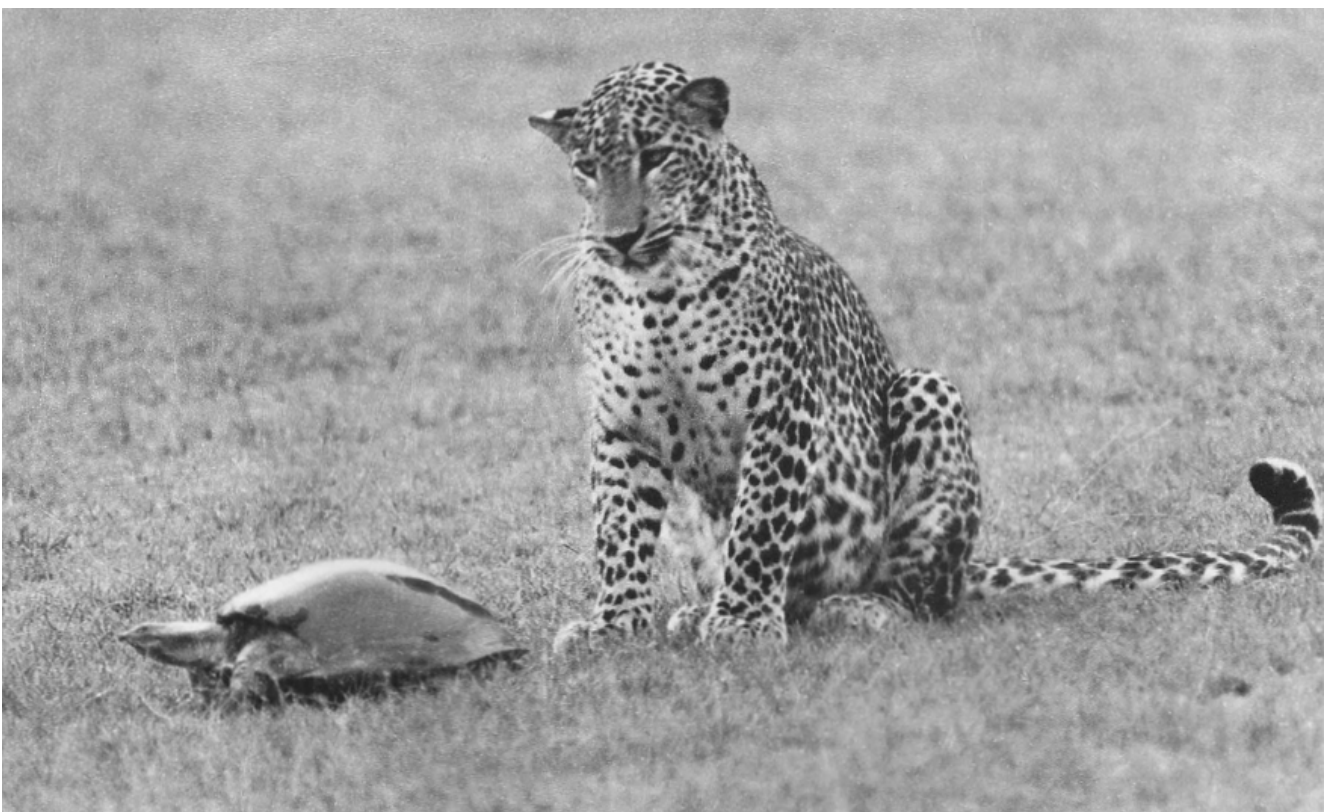
Yala (305 km south of Colombo) National Park Park Bungalows maintained by the Department of Wildlife Conservation are available with basic amenities such as water on tap, refrigerator, toilet, cutlery, crockery and pressure lamps. Services of Bungalow Keeper and assistant provided. Reservation:- Minimum of five persons (children under 12 years at half rates) at Rs. 125/- per person per day, bookings through Department of Wild Life Conservation Transworks House, Lower Chatham Street, Colombo 1. Tel: 33012, 33787, 32698 & 34040.

All tourists who visit the National Park are required to pay a Park Fee and Vehicle Fee. This applies to those who rent Park bungalows as well. Park Fees: Rs. 100/- per person per day Vehicle Fees: Rs. 10/- per jeep (wheel drive vehicle) Casual Visitor: Conducted leaving Yala Park Office at 6 a.m. & 3 p.m.to. a 2 1/2 hours tour of the park. The park entry fee is Rs 50- per pax. Jeep hire for a pax of 5 is Rs. 625- including park fees) Seat in a mini coach at Yala is Rs. 140/(inclusive of park fee).

All visitors to the National Park must accompanied by a guide provided by the Department of Wild Life Conservation.



Scanning for Prey-A fishing Eagle or “Lool Maaralla” at Yala.



Intrigued : Leopard at Yala is curious about tortoise crossing his path.



Sambhur at the water-hole.