

## Yala National Park: A Park with Many Faces



Elephants, bears, leopards and a variety of birds can be seen at the Yala National Park - An ideal spot for the wildlife enthusiast. An on the spot report from Lal Anthonis.

Tucked away in the south-east corner of the island, almost where the south coast takes an upward curve to the east coast, is the Yala National Park, also known as the Ruhuna National Park after the ancient but still extant name by which the south of Sri Lanka is known. There are many ways by which one could get to the park from Colombo. The most well known is along the Galle Road via Galle, Matara, Tangalla and Hambantota. The other is via Avissawella, Ratnapura, Pelmadulla, Uda Walawe and Tanamalvila. When travelling to

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Yala, all roads lead to Tissamaharama. From there a mere eight miles along the Kirinda road brings one to the turn-off. This national park has a long and ancient history. Near the Yala Plain, in the eastern end of the park, is a fairly large tank known as Andunoruwa. It is now known that Andunoruwa was an irrigation tank in the "hey-day" of Ruhuna. The area surrounding the tank, it is believed, was all paddy fields which included the Yala Plain. With the march of time and as the glory of Ruhuna faded away, these areas were abandoned and the jungle took over. Many centuries later, the British, under whose banner this island was at the time, noticed the rich and varied game in the area and declared it a "National Sportsman's Reserve". Then on 25th February 1938, the Government, still British, declared this area a national park, thus giving total protection to its fauna and flora. While on the history of this park it is perhaps fitting to mention the annual pilgrimage to Kataragama. The pilgrim route passes through the park, and during the Kataragama festival time, pilgrims who walk all the way from Potuvil are permitted to use this traditional trek through the park without any formalities. Yala is a park with many faces and many moods that change with the months and the weather. Generally the "Yala country" is open with large grassy areas known as plains, semi-desert type brush and gnarled - looking trees, often umbrella shaped in branch formation country that somewhat reminds one of the African bush. The "plains of Yala", which perhaps could very well be a misnomer, are really large open glades that are grassy and dotted with thorny trees and scrubs. Some have a couple of water-holes in them and most of the time one could see a variety of game and birds scattered on these expanses.

As one gets closer to the river, the Menik Ganga (river of gems) which flows through the park from the north-west to the sea at its southeast tip, the dry bush country gives way to vegetation which is more luxuriant in growth and riverine in character. The area becomes greener, with the floor covered with fleshy, large-bladed grass and the trees grow closer to each other; the mighty pale-barked kumbuk trees dominate the side of the river, spreading their healthy branches overhead and almost forming a canopy over the murmuring waters. During the dry weather the banks of the river are a superb place to watch game as they come down to quench their thirst.

Another characteristic feature of the Yala scene is the numerous large rock outcrops and areas strewn with boulders, favourites among the leopards and bear. The most famous of these is Vepandeniya, also known loosely and for good reasons as "leopard rock". Then there are the three giants: Akasa Chetiya or elephant rock, Jamburagala and Patanangala. The Akasa Chetiya dominates the scene at Yala, majestically visible from almost every point of the park towering over the jungle skyline. It is also known that Portuguese and Dutch mariners used the great rock as a landmark when sailing to Patanangala and Amaduwa

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bays, which were used by them as stopover ports and perhaps also points for collecting fresh water. The best views of its colossal elephant shape, however, are looking north and across the Buttawa plain, and north again across the waters of the beautiful Buttawa tank, which lies about a mile's drive from the plain.

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A leopard stalking on the trees.

Of the many national parks in the island, Yala would indeed be the finest place to see game quickly and conveniently the elephant being the speciality. Except during the very dry period, which is usually during July and August, a visitor is bound to come across a number of these great creatures on a half day tour of the park. Soon after the rains the elephants that had migrated to the north and east to greener pastures during the drought begin to return to the park, some across the Menik River. Sometimes herds cross the river by day and this would undoubtedly be a scene that would be difficult to match. The best time of the year to see these great beasts would be between November and June, when one would see herds of these animals usually numbering around ten or even much bigger.

Elephants are widely distributed and one would come across them in all sectors of the park. The greatest concentration, however, is within the area that is usually used for wildlife observation, places such as Buttawa, Uraniya and the water-holes nearby. It would not be unusual to see, around mid-day, a whole herd frolicking in the cool water in one of these water-holes or tanks. This is indeed one of those sights that would remain in your mind for ever.

If, however, the drought is extended and the plains become dry, the herds tend to move towards the river and to areas such as Heenwewa and Jamburagala. During the months between February and April visitors are bound to see a number of calves among the herds.

The other feature of the park is its tuskers. No strict count has been done, but with the sightings recorded, one could put the number of resident tuskers at around twenty-five. The best known tusker in Yala today is the Maha Puttuwa or big crossed tusker. A majestic animal with large head and big in body, it has a long pair of tusks that cross at the tip, thus its name. Most of the elephants at Yala are quite used to vehicles and are easily observed. However, visitors are well advised to keep a fair distance and follow the guides instructions when among elephants. Though peaceful most of the time, a herd can get agitated when there are calves around. Sometime ago it was thought that Yala had an extremely poor leopard population. But during recent years it has been firmly established that Yala is a fine place to observe these beautiful cats. Sightings have become more frequent and may very soon compete with Wilpattu National Park, which is world famous for its leopards. On a recent visit to Yala I made seventeen different sightings in a five day stay. These cats at Yala, unlike their relations at Wilpattu, seem to be a bit wary of vehicles and slink away at one's approach. There are exceptions to the rule, however. Two such leopards are the couple one often finds sunbathing on top of the Vepandeniya or leopard rock The leopards

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here are fairly well distributed and one could see them in all sectors of the park. A good time to see these cats would be either early morning or in the evening. Sometimes one would come across them in the heat of the day too. This would be probably at a water-hole or, more often, stretched out comfortably on the branch of a palu or tamarind tree.

Bear in Yala is not a common sight. They could, however, be seen in the more rocky and remote areas of the park. They are quite wary of vehicles and must be observed very quietly. During the rains one would see these creatures breaking into an anthill to get at its occupants with their long snouts. Bear is best observed in the park during May and June. Spotted deer can be seen in large numbers and most of them are quite used to vehicles and could be observed at close quarters. But once again as in the case of all wild animal, one must stay quiet and avoid any sudden movements. Sambur, Sri Lanka's largest species of deer, could also be seen in the park. While most of them are shy and timid, some of the bigger stags do tend to stand their ground watching their observer very carefully. Any sudden movement, though, will send them scampering through the bush. The saline waters of Gonalabba seem to have a special attraction for these creatures, and this would undoubtedly be the best place in the park to observe them, sometimes in whole groups.

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Two species of monkey could be seen in Yala: the grey langur and the macaque. They are not widely distributed in the park and are wont to stay close to the river. Visitors to the Yala lodge could watch a troop of macaques that have taken abode on the nearby tree tops.

One of the glorious specialties of the Yala National Park, and one which it has become famous for is the mating dance of the peacock. During the season, from about November to February the peacock develops long tail feathers which he erects and spreads out in a speckled emerald fan and, accompanied by loud raucous calling, struts around the female, who moves about pecking at the ground feigning to be totally unimpressed.

The migratory season brings a host of birds to Yala from distant lands. Mingling with the resident aquatic types, which include the common but very pretty painted stork, the egrets and herons, the lapwings and plovers, would be the sandpipers, stints, avocets, stilts, turnstones and the godwits. Buttawa plain would be the best place in the park to observe most of these birds together. When at Buttawa keep your eye open for the rare and beautiful black-necked stork.

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Menik Ganga offers the birdwatcher the best venue for observing the kingfishers. Yala has all the type found in the island, and the Talgasmankada Lodge is recommended. I have found this the best place to see the uncommon and exquisite three toed kingfisher. They are very shy and timid and one should be very careful and quiet when closing in on these winged wonders.

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In this paradise for the birdwatcher, Yala has a fine array of birds of prey. The commonest of them are the brahaminy kite, the serpent eagle, the hawk eagle and among the nocturnal types the fish owl. The small but powerful shikra is another smart bird of prey seen in the park, while the pretty European kestrel is also encountered during the migratory season. The majestic white-bellied sea eagle, the island's largest bird of prey, is often seen near the Menik Ganga, either sitting on the branch of a giant kumbuk or soaring effortlessly in the warm breeze. There are six lodges in the park available to visitors. All these lodges are very scenically situated with either an open plain and water-hole before them or as in the case of Yala on the banks of the Menik. All the lodges in the park are visited by lone bull elephants. If left undisturbed they come almost to the doorstep. They are quite used to people moving about and are not shy, but it is best to stay well within the lodge when you have one of these visitors. Sometime ago, two elephants almost made 'their' homes in the vicinity of Yala and Buttawa lodges respectively, and would be around them for months on • end. They were affectionately called "Buttawa Bill" and "Yala Yokel". Bill was known to climb the rock opposite the lodge and open the tap that was placed on top of a groundlevel tank and quench his thirst, though unfortunately he never learned the art of closing it when he was done. Alas, both "Buttawa Bill" and "Yala Yokel" are no more.

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Tusker - a rare sight at Yala