

Sri Lanka – Blue Whales and Leopards

Naturetrek Tour Report

19 - 28 March 2011



Blue Whale fluke



Leopard



Little Green Bee-eater



Indian Elephant

Report and images compiled by Gerald Broddelez



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Day 1

Saturday 19th March

In Flight

We departed from London on a scheduled service flight to Colombo.

Day 2

Sunday 20th March

Mirissa

Following a very early morning arrival at Colombo, we adjourned to a nearby airport hotel for our first cup of Sri Lankan tea and the opportunity to freshen up after the overnight flight. After an early breakfast we set off on the long drive south, stopping briefly at the Rock Hotel to pick up some extra guests. A brief look around the garden produced our first birds as Ring-necked Parakeet and Common Myna.

The drive from Colombo went by swiftly and early afternoon we arrived at our lovely hotel by the beach. After settling in to our rooms and a buffet style lunch some opted for a short bird watching outing to some nearby marshy area, while some others relaxed and sampled the resort amenities or simply sat on the sandy beach watching the waves breaking on the sand.

The birders first stop was at a small lake. Here one of the best birds was a pair of Cotton Teal and several Lesser Whistling Ducks. We then walked along the dykes of a marshy area adding many new birds to the list. We had great views of the huge Stork-billed Kingfisher perched close by, a Black Bittern was perched in a small tree and the open areas held many Openbill and Painted Storks.

Day 3

Monday 21st March

Mirissa

A ten minute drive from the hotel is the small fishing port of Mirissa and it is here that we boarded a whale-watching vessel for our morning excursion in search of Blue Whales. As we boarded the vessel we saw our first of many Little Terns flying around the harbour. Heading out into the open sea we briefly spotted two Spinner Dolphins. For the next hour we steamed south-westwards and as soon as we passed the shipping lanes we spotted our first Blue Whales. Despite their huge bulk, Blue Whales have a very small dorsal fin and are not always easy to find especially when the seas are a bit choppy. The best way to spot them is to look out for the tall columnar blow and its 9 metre high plume of condensed water vapour. We followed one whale for a while and after a while he displayed his large curved tail flukes before diving - making all the photographers smiles even broader!! The captain took the boat as close as he could without causing disturbance to the whale and by drifting with the current we allowed the whale to approach alongside the vessel! Over the next few hours we followed several more whales and were able to get close views of the Remoras that hang on their bodies. It was exceptional to see the whales that well. Birdlife was less plentiful at sea, although we managed good sightings of Greater Crested and Bridled Terns.

We returned for lunch to our hotel and after a siesta went out to the Marshy area again. Many of the birds were similar to the ones seen yesterday, but Yellow Bittern and Watercock were all new for the list.

Day 4

Tuesday 22nd March

Mirissa

At first it was doubtful that we could go out this morning as a low front with quite a bit of wind and tropical showers passed by early morning. Fortunately things calmed down very quickly and soon we were out on the open sea looking for Blues again. We had just left the small harbour as we found a small pod of Indo-Pacific Bottle nosed Dolphins bow riding and swimming alongside the vessel for a while, allowing excellent views.

We then steamed south-west for the next hour spotting the occasional Bridled Tern and Flying Fish until we passed the shipping lanes and were in “Blue” territory again! We again saw several Blue Whales at close range. The spotters on board were exceptional and for the next couple of hours we “steamed” from one whale to the next. An incredible morning was spent with these giants. On some animals we could again clearly see several Remoras attached to the body, some at least a metre long, but looking like dwarfs on these big whales!

After lunch at the hotel we checked out an Indian Flying Fox colony that I had spotted from the boat earlier this morning. It proved to be a good move. Soon we were standing under a huge tree full of these huge flapping fruit-eating bats. They gave excellent views although we were distracted several times by Yellow-billed Babbler, Green Imperial Pigeons and our first group of Toque Macaques.

On the walk back we spotted several rare Purple-faced Leaf Monkeys high in a tree. It was a nice surprise to find these beautiful monkeys so close to civilisation, definitely one of the (many) mammal highlights of the trip. Brown-throated Barbet, White Bellied Drongo and a Green Heron perched high in a palm tree rounded off a fantastic afternoon.

Day 5

Wednesday 23rd March

Mirissa – Galle

The morning was spent again going out at sea to watch Blue Whales. We found them more or less in the same place we had left them yesterday. The seas were very calm and allowed again for fantastic looks at these giants. On several occasions we were lucky enough to see “the fluke” as the animals were diving allowing for some great photographs and ever lasting memories.

The afternoon was spent visiting the historical town of Galle. Galle Fort is the largest intact Dutch fort in Asia. It was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1988. Located facing the Indian Ocean, on the southern coast of Sri Lanka, Galle Fort is one of the best preserved examples of 17th Century colonial fortifications in the world. The Dutch continued to work on this fort right up to the beginning of the 18th century. The fort is so strong that it withstood the 2004 tsunami which left Galle town utterly devastated.

The bird highlight was seeing a White-breasted Kingfisher at close range on a wire, and we saw a beautiful red male Garden Lizard on a telegraph pole.

Day 6

Thursday 24th March

Yala

After breakfast we drove eastwards towards Yala National Park. En route we made various stops to break the journey especially at the large expanses of open water known in Sri Lanka as ‘tanks’. Our first stop at a muddy area added a large variety of shorebirds to the list. Best were Broad-billed and Curlew Sandpiper, Ruddy Turnstone and Little Stint. During a short coffee stop we had good looks at our first Grey Mongoose. A small marshy area with some trees held a nice mixed colony of Streaked and Baya Weavers. It was a good opportunity not only to compare the birds but also the shapes of their totally different nests. Our last stop before arriving at Yala was at the salt-pans of Bundala Reserve. Here both Thick-knees were seen as well as a good selection of waders and swallows.

After checking in to the Yala Village Hotel and having a great lunch, some were ready to explore the nearby lake and surrounding brushland on foot. Several large crocodiles were seen on the banks of the lake, while a group of Water Buffalo were bathing in the lake (the ones at Yala originate from wild stock). sBirds were seen in good numbers too, Indian Silverbills were building a nest, Little Green Bee-eaters posed for the photographers as well as Paradise Flycatchers who were showing off their long tails.

After a sundowner from the top of the tower and dinner we were ready for a short night drive outside the park. It proved to be a good move. We saw several Indian Nightjars, Indian Gerbils, Black-naped Hare and a Small Indian Civet crossed the road, but it was the cats that were the stars of the show...by slowly driving and spotlighting we all had incredible views of several Jungle Cats (one with a freshly killed mouse in its mouth), and best of all a rare single Rusty-spotted Cat! Just amazing.

Returning back to the hotel we spotted our first Elephant feeding right next to the road.

Day 7

Friday 25th March

Yala NP

After an early start we entered the National Park in jeeps for a full day of bird and mammal watching. We used a network of tracks criss-cross the accessible areas of the park. Herds of Spotted Deer were common and a single Sambar Deer was seen grazing in the riverine forest. Peacocks and Sri Lanka Junglefowl were common and in the first few hours after dawn several emerged from cover to display and call. Raptors seen include great close up views of a perched Changeable Hawk-Eagle and two Grey-headed Fish-Eagles flying by. Land and Water Monitors were numerous and several large Mugger Crocodiles could be seen basking in the sun along the bigger pools. Wild Boar were common and both Ruddy and Grey Mongooses were seen on several occasions. Elephants are widespread inside Yala but surprisingly elusive and hard to see amid woodland. Still we found several small groups, one closely watched by a Brown Fish Owl in a nearby tree!

After lunch (a picnic meal inside the reserve) we continued our game drive in the park. Once again Leopards were a high priority. Finally after many more hours of crisscrossing the network of roads most of the group were rewarded with incredible views of a male Leopard! Totally unconcerned, it walked along the road ahead of the jeeps before deciding to lay down and have a rest in the middle of the road!! What a fantastic end to an incredible wildlife day!

On the return to the hotel a tropical shower cooled things down a lot and delayed our dinner a bit as millions of termites decided to leave their burrows and were attracted by the restaurants lights...quite a spectacle!

Day 8

Saturday 26th March

Yala NP

Another full day game drive in the National Park for most. Many of the mammals seen were similar to yesterdays, still a Leopard put in an appearance just as we entered the park and another was seen later in the day (thus 3 different animals were seen in 2 days!). Another highlight of the day was seeing Sloth Bears – a mother and 2 cubs were seen from a safe distance on a rocky outcrop near a small fishing village. It was all a bit hectic with jeeps manoeuvring back and forth to get the best views, but in the end all had good looks and even some good photographs!

Some of the birders had opted to return to the hotel for lunch and went out for some bird watching during the afternoon. They were rewarded with a male Paradise Flycatcher and several Indian Pittas! Blue-tailed and Little Green Bee-eaters perched in the same tree.

After dinner another short night drive was done. We again saw many Black-naped Hares, a large Crocodile and several Jungle Cats (one of which was a hybrid, hence its white legs!)

Day 9

Sunday 27th March

Colombo

We made a leisurely return to Colombo with various stops along the way. We stopped for lunch at a local hotel with attending Scops Owl perched high in a tree.

We arrived back in Colombo at our hotel and had our goodbye dinner party. We all agreed it had been an incredible trip with many mammal highlights and some unexpected bonuses. We also said goodbye to the lucky ones that went on to Northern India and wished them luck with their Tiger search!

Day 10

Monday 28th March

London

The return flight from Colombo mid-morning passed by quickly and all arrived back at Heathrow later the same day.

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Species Lists

Birds

Common Name	Scientific Name	Common Name	Scientific Name
1 Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	75 Bridled Tern	<i>Stern anaethetus</i>
2 Spot-billed Pelican	<i>Pelecanus philippensis</i>	76 Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>
3 Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	77 Spotted Dove	<i>Streptopelia chinensis</i>
4 Indian Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax fuscicollis</i>	78 Orange-breasted Green PiG	<i>Treron bicinctus</i>
5 Little Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax niger</i>	79 Pompadour Green Pigeon	<i>Treron pompadora</i>
6 Darter	<i>Anhinga melanogaster</i>	80 Green Imperial Pigeon	<i>Ducula aenea</i>
7 Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	81 Rose-ringed Parakeet	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>
8 Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>	82 Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot	<i>Loriculus beryllinus</i>
9 Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	83 Pied Cuckoo	<i>Clamator jacobinus</i>
10 Intermediate Egret	<i>Egretta intermedia</i>	84 Asian Koel	<i>Eudynamys scolopaceus</i>
11 Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	85 Blue-faced Malkoha	<i>Phaenicophaeus viridirostris</i>
12 Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	86 Sirkeer Malkoha	<i>Phaenicophaeus leschenaultii</i>
13 Indian Pond Heron	<i>Ardeola grayii</i>	87 Greater Coucal	<i>Centropus sinensis</i>
14 Striated Heron	<i>Butorides striata</i>	88 Indian Scops Owl	<i>Otus bakkamoena</i>
15 Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	89 Brown Fish Owl	<i>Ketupa zeylonensis</i>
16 Yellow Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus sinensis</i>	90 Indian Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus asiaticus</i>
17 Cinnamon Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus cinnamomeus</i>	91 Indian Swiftlet	<i>Aerodramus unicolor</i>
18 Black Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus flavicollis</i>	92 Brown-backed Needletail	<i>Hirundapus giganteus</i>
19 Painted Stork	<i>Mycteria leucocephala</i>	93 Asian Palm Swift	<i>Cypsiurus balasiensis</i>
20 Asian Openbill	<i>Anastomus oscitans</i>	94 Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>
21 Woolly-necked Stork	<i>Ciconia episcopus</i>	95 Little Swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>
22 Lesser Adjutant	<i>Leptoptilos javanicus</i>	96 Crested Treeswift	<i>Hemiprocne coronata</i>
23 Black-headed Ibis	<i>Thres melanocephalus</i>	97 Stork-billed Kingfisher	<i>Pelargopsis capensis</i>
24 Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	98 White-throated Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>
25 Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	99 Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
26 Lesser Whistling-Duck	<i>Dendrocygna javanica</i>	100 Pied Kingfisher	<i>Ceryle rudis</i>
27 Cotton Pygmy-Goose	<i>Nettapus coromandelianus</i>	101 Little Green Bee-Eater	<i>Merops orientalis</i>
28 Garganey	<i>Anas querquedula</i>	102 Blue-tailed Bee-Eater	<i>Merops philippinus</i>
29 Crested Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis ptilorhynchus</i>	103 Chestnut-headed Bee-Eater	<i>Merops leschenaulti</i>
30 Brahminy Kite	<i>Haliastur indus</i>	104 Indian Roller	<i>Coracias benghalensis</i>
31 White-bellied Sea Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucogaster</i>	105 Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>
32 Grey-headed Fish Eagle	<i>Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus</i>	106 Malabar Pied Hornbill	<i>Anthracoceros coronatus</i>
33 Crested Serpent Eagle	<i>Spilornis cheela</i>	107 Brown-headed Barbet	<i>Megalaima zeylanica</i>
34 Changeable Hawk-Eagle	<i>Spizaetus cirrhatus</i>	108 Coppersmith Barbet	<i>Megalaima haemacephala</i>
35 Sri Lanka Junglefowl	<i>Gallus lafayetii</i>	109 Yellow-crowned Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos mahrattensis</i>
36 Indian Peafowl	<i>Pavo cristatus</i>	110 Black-rumped Flameback	<i>Dinopium benghalense</i>
37 Barred Buttonquail	<i>Turnix suscitator</i>	111 Indian Pitta	<i>Pitta brachyura</i>
38 White-breasted Waterhen	<i>Amauornis phoenicurus</i>	112 Jerdon's Bushlark	<i>Mirafra affinis</i>
39 Watercock	<i>Gallicrex cinerea</i>	113 Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark	<i>Eremopterix griseus</i>
40 Purple Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>	114 Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
41 Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	115 Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>
42 Pheasant-tailed Jacana	<i>Hydrophasianus chirurgus</i>	116 Paddyfield Pipit	<i>Anthus rufulus</i>
43 Greater Painted-Snipe	<i>Rostratula benghalensis</i>	117 Black-headed Cuckoo-Shrike	<i>Coracina melanoptera</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name	Common Name	Scientific Name
44 Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	118 Small Minivet	<i>Pericrocotus cinnamomeus</i>
45 Stone-Curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicnemus</i>	119 Common Wood-Shrike	<i>Tephrodornis pondicerianus</i>
46 Great Thick-Knee	<i>Esacus recurvirostris</i>	120 Red-vented Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>
47 Small Pratincole	<i>Glareola lactea</i>	121 White-browed Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus luteolus</i>
48 Yellow-wattled Lapwing	<i>Vanellus malabaricus</i>	122 Common Iora	<i>Aegithina tiphia</i>
49 Red-wattled Lapwing	<i>Vanellus indicus</i>	123 Oriental Magpie-Robin	<i>Copsychus saularis</i>
50 Pacific Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis fulva</i>	124 Indian Robin	<i>Saxicoloides fulvicatus</i>
51 Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	125 White-browed Fantail	<i>Rhipidura aureola</i>
52 Little Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>	126 Asian Paradise-Flycatcher	<i>Terpsiphone paradisi</i>
53 Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	127 Common Tailorbird	<i>Orthotomus sutorius</i>
54 Lesser Sand Plover	<i>Charadrius mongolus</i>	128 Plain Prinia	<i>Prinia inornata</i>
55 Greater Sand Plover	<i>Charadrius leschenaultii</i>	129 Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>
56 Pin-tailed Snipe	<i>Gallinago stenura</i>	130 Yellow-eyed Babbler	<i>Chrysomma sinense</i>
57 Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	131 Yellow-billed Babbler	<i>Turdoides affinis</i>
58 Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	132 Purple-rumped Sunbird	<i>Leptocoma zeylonica</i>
59 Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>	133 Purple Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris asiaticus</i>
60 Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	134 Long-billed Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris lotenius</i>
61 Marsh Sandpiper	<i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>	135 Oriental White-Eye	<i>Zosterops palpebrosus</i>
62 Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>	136 Black-hooded Oriole	<i>Oriolus xanthornus</i>
63 Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	137 Brown Shrike	<i>Lanius cristatus</i>
64 Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	138 White-bellied Drongo	<i>Dicrurus caerulescens</i>
65 Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>	139 Ashy Woodswallow	<i>Artamus fuscus</i>
66 Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>	140 House Crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>
67 Broad-billed Sandpiper	<i>Limicola falcinellus</i>	141 Large-billed Crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>
68 Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>	142 Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>
69 Saunders's Tern	<i>Sternula saundersi</i>	143 House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
70 Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>	144 Streaked Weaver	<i>Ploceus manyar</i>
71 Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>	145 Baya Weaver	<i>Ploceus philippinus</i>
72 White-winged Tern	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>	146 White-throated Munia	<i>Euodice malabarica</i>
73 Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	147 Nutmeg Mannikin	<i>Lonchura punctulata</i>
74 Great Crested Tern	<i>Thalasseus bergii</i>	148 Tricolored Munia	<i>Lonchura malacca</i>

Mammals

Common Name	Scientific Name	Common Name	Scientific Name
1 Toque Macaque	<i>Macaca sinica</i>	14 Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>
2 Grey Langur	<i>Presbytis entellus</i>	15 Spotted Deer (Chital)	<i>Cervus axis</i>
3 Purple-faced Leaf Monkey	<i>Presbytis vetulus</i>	16 Sambar	<i>Cervus unicolor</i>
4 Golden Jackal	<i>Canis aureus</i>	17 Water Buffalo	<i>Bubalus arnee</i>
5 Sloth Bear	<i>Melursus ursinus</i>	18 Indian Palm Squirrel	<i>Funambulus palmarum</i>
6 Small Indian Civet	<i>Viverricula indica</i>	19 Grizzled Giant Squirrel	<i>Ratufa macroura</i>
7 Indian Grey Mongoose	<i>Herpestes edwardsii</i>	20 Indian Hare	<i>Lepus nigricollis</i>
8 Ruddy Mongoose	<i>Herpestes smithii</i>	21 Indian Flying Fox	<i>Pteropus gigantea</i>
9 Jungle Cat	<i>Felis chaus</i>	22 Indian Gerbil	<i>Tatera indica</i>
10 Rusty-spotted Cat	<i>Felis rubiginosa</i>	23 Large Bandicoot Rat	<i>Bandicota indica</i>
11 Fishing Cat	<i>Felis viverrina</i>	24 Blue Whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>
12 Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus</i>	25 Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops aduncus</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name	Common Name	Scientific Name
13 Indian Elephant	<i>Elephas maximus</i>	26 Spinner Dolphin	<i>Stenella longirostris</i>
Fish			
Flying Fish	Remora sp		
Reptiles			
Tree Gecko	House Gecko	Common Garden Lizard	Water Monitor Lizard
Land Monitor Lizard	Mugger		
Butterflies			
Glassy Tiger	Common Pierot	Blue Tiger	Plain Tiger
Common Jezebel	Small Grass Yellow	Yellow Orangetip	Common Albatross
Other Insects			
Variogated Flutterer	Pied Peacock	Ruddy Darter	Praying Mantis sp
Carpenter Bee			