

# Sri Lanka - Blue Whales & Leopards

Naturetrek Tour Report

10 - 19 February 2013

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Blue Whale

Report & Image kindly compiled by tour participant Janet Young

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On February 10th 2013 I travelled to Sri Lanka; hopefully to achieve one of my lifetime's deepest wishes – to see a Blue Whale – the largest creature on earth. Diurnal Leopards were also a draw, as I had only seen these lovely cats by infra-red light at night around waterholes in Etosha when I visited Namibia, and the end of a tail somewhere in Tanzania!

On arriving at Colombo, via Dubai, the outside temperature soon reminded us that we were in the tropics, and the few snowflakes I had left at Heathrow were quickly forgotten. After meeting the rest of the group, and our guide Susantha, we travelled down to Mirissa on the south coast for the first part of our stay. It was interesting to see the lowland tea plantations and spice groves (cinnamon is the spice most produced in Sri Lanka)] as well as the coconut palms and other fruit trees. Our first afternoon was spent walking around the village looking at the birds, fruit bats and exotic plants – and our first encounter with the local bread man, who cycled round pulling a small wagon, playing an icecream-like jingle to tell the village he was on his way! He seemed to do the same route several times a day.

Near Mirissa there is a bay in the Indian Ocean where Blue Whales congregate together to feed during November to early April; usually they are only solitary. Our first morning boat trip was full of expectations - would we see a Blue Whale? We had only been travelling at sea for about 15 minutes when we saw our first whale blow – this reaches about 30 feet in height - and then our first whale and then the magic moment when that huge fluke rises up as the whale dives. The tail was wider than our boat! I remembered the TV programme when David Attenborough was sitting in a boat enthusing about seeing a Blue Whale close up – and I knew exactly how he felt! This outing was sheer magic, as altogether we had 10+ Blue Whale sightings, including a heart stopping moment when a Blue Whale swam alongside our boat, and I could see down its blowhole – as big as good sized dinner plate! Although the strong fishy smell as it blew was something best forgotten!

In the afternoon there was an excellent wildlife walk in a wetland area, but I must admit part of me was still out on that ocean reliving my dream...

The next two days saw two further boat outings and more Blue Whales. Altogether we saw 30+ Blue Whales, a Bryde's Whale, Spinner Dolphins, flying fish, a sailfish and Loggerhead Turtle, as well as a good variety of seabirds.

On the beach at Mirissa, near to where we were staying, was a small turtle hatchery, where we saw baby Ridley's, Loggerheads, Green Turtles and a Leatherback. Small areas on the beach were 'fenced off' to protect the turtle eggs which were still in the sand; when the baby turtles hatched they would be kept in the hatchery until they were a good size to be released into the sea.

What a first three days! ...now what about that Leopard?

On the morning of the 14th February we travelled a short distance up the SW coast to stay just on the edge of Yala National Park at Chaaya. We were told to be aware of wild animals as we moved about, and we had to have an escort when it was dark – just in case. As I went for my lunch there were two large Monitor Lizards outside my room – looking for their lunch too. And one night after dinner there was a Buffalo and its calf lying at the side of my chalet.

The next day was my birthday, and our first full day in the park. I'd considered having seen all those Blue Whales as a fantastic birthday present, but even before our picnic lunch we'd seen our first wild Indian Elephant, a rare Sloth Bear and – best of all – the most amazing view of a Leopard I could ever wish for. There it was lying along the branch of a tree. We watched it sleeping for about ¾ hour, saw it stretch, sit up and look at us and then settle down to sleep again with its head on its front paws, facing us. Things just got better and better with close encounters of a fantastic number of birds, crocodiles, mongoose, buffalo, Wild Boar and even a Star Tortoise! And to complete the day I was presented with a surprise birthday cake at dinner. Never was a chocolate cream cake eaten so quickly before it melted! I shall never forget my 2013 birthday!

The next day in Yala was just as amazing. We had seven more Leopard sightings, though none as good as the previous day. We watched an Elephant feed close beside us, then cross over into the water at the side of our jeep and have a 'shower'; two mother elephants with two babies crossing the road in front of us; a parent and naughty 'teenage' Ruddy Mongoose digging for beetles (which the young one tried to steal from its mother's mouth); Muggur Crocodiles in just about any area of water; Macaques and Langur monkeys, Golden Jackal, boar and Spotted deer, Sambar, buffalo, beautiful Indian Hares and the cutest Grizzled Giant Squirrel with a bright pink nose which sat in a tree chattering at us whilst we had dinner!

Needless to say, the bird life everywhere was amazing. Some species I'd seen before, but lots of 'new' ones to add to my list included storks, herons, bitterns and water birds, rollers, bee-eaters, Brahminy Kites and three different kinds of eagle; kingfishers, orioles and mynah birds amongst them. There were lots of different butterflies and my first close up of a Giant Praying Mantis sitting so still on one of the water urns at breakfast! Everywhere we were surrounded by the most beautiful flowers and plants. Our guide was so knowledgeable and proud of Sri Lanka that I doubt we missed much!

As well as all the wildlife we saw the small mines where sapphires and rubies were mined – they just looked like small holes in the ground – not at all what I expected. Although we were able to see something of the town life in the area we visited, and learn something of Sri Lanka's history, although for me the holiday focus was the great variety of wildlife around us. Such a beautiful island made it difficult to think of going home - but home we had to go...and with my head spinning from all the wonderful things I'd seen I got back to Heathrow at a temperature of minus two degrees – just a little contrast from the 80+ degrees I'd left back in Sri Lanka! Sri Lanka is definitely a place I would recommend anyone to visit if they had the opportunity!

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## Species List

### Birds

Spot-billed Pelican, Indian Cormorant, Little Cormorant, Darter, Grey Heron, Great White, Intermediate and Little Egrets, Cattle Egret, Indian Pond and Black-crowned Night-herons, Cinnamon Bittern, Black Bittern, Painted, Asian Open-billed and Woolly-necked Storks, Glossy and Black-headed Ibis, Eurasian Spoonbill, Lesser Whistling Goose, Northern Pintail, Garganey, Crested Honey Buzzard, Great Thick-knee, Yellow-wattled, Red-wattled Lapwings, Pacific Golden Plover, Ringed Plover, Little Plover, Lesser Sand Plover, Pin-tailed Snipe, Black-tailed Godwit, Common, Marsh & Green Sandpipers, Greenshank, Redshank, Ruddy Turnstone, Little, Gull-billed, Caspian, Whiskered and White-winged Terns, Lesser Crested and Great Crested Terns, Rock Dove, Spotted Dove, Orange-breasted Green Pigeon, Pompadour Pigeon, Rose-ringed Parakeet, Pied Cuckoo, Asian Koel, Blue-faced and Sirkeer Malkoha, Greater Coucal, Asian Palm Swift, Little Swift, Crested Tree Swift, Stork-billed, White-throated, Pied and Common Kingfishers, Little Green, Chestnut and Blue-tailed Bee-eaters, Indian Roller, Hoopoe, Malabar Pied Hornbill, Coppersmith Barbet, Lesser Yellownappe, Black-rumped Flameback, Jerdon's Bushlark, Oriental Skylark, Barn Swallow, Sri Lankan Swallow, Paddyfield Pipit, Yellow Wagtail, Small Minivet, Red-vented Bulbul, White-browed Bulbul, Common Iora, Oriental Magpie Robin, Indian Robin, Asian Paradise Flycatcher, Common Tailorbird, Jungle Prinia, Plain Prinia, Yellow-billed Babbler, Purple-rumped Sunbird, Purple Sunbird, Long-billed Sunbird, Pale-billed Flowerpecker, Black-hooded Oriole, Brown Shrike, White-bellied Drongo, House Crow, Large-billed Crow, Rosy Starling, Brahminy Starling, Common Mynah, House Sparrow, Baya Weaver, White-rumped Munia, Scaly-breasted Mannikin, Tricoloured Munia, Brahminy Kite, White-bellied Eagle, Grey-headed Fish Eagle, Crested Serpent Eagle, Shikra, Changeable Hawk-eagle, Common Kestrel, Sri Lanka Jungle Fowl [*Sri Lanka's national bird*], Indian Peafowl, Barred Buttonquail, White-breasted Waterhen, Watercock, Purple Swamphen, Moorhen, Pheasant-tailed Jacana, Black-winged Stilt.

### Other taxa

Toque Macaque, Grey Langur, Golden Jackal, Sloth Bear, Indian Grey Mongoose, Ruddy Mongoose, Leopard, Indian Elephant, Wild Boar, Chital, Sambar, Water Buffalo, Indian Palm Squirrel, Grizzled Giant Squirrel, Indian Hare, Indian Flying Fox, Blue Whale, Bryde's Whale, Spinner Dolphin, flying fish, Remora, Puffer Fish, Sailfish, Ocean Sunfish, Green Turtle, Ridley's Turtle, Loggerhead and Leatherback Turtles, Mugger Crocodile, Land Monitor Lizard, Star Tortoise, Praying Mantis, Common Skink, Garden Lizard, Soft-shelled Terrapin, plus a good selection of butterflies.