

Experience Wild Sri Lanka February 2018 – Trip Report

Jenny and I were greeted on arrival at the airport by our local guide, Upali Ekanayake and the proprietor of Starron Tours, Shyami Desanayake. Andrew, Chris, Peter and Mary had already arrived, Sally and Fi arrived soon after us and Keith and Lindsay arrived around midnight.

We were taken to our accommodation at the nearby Tamarind Tree Hotel, checked in and had our first group dinner (without Keith and Lindsay unfortunately) at 7:30pm.

Day 1 Sunday 4/2/18 Katunayake (Wet Zone) to Habarana (Dry Zone)



Journal – Next morning we met in the foyer to do some dawn birding at 6:15am in the gardens around the Tamarind Hotel grounds, and we started to get acquainted with the avian sights and sounds of Sri Lanka. House Crows, Common Mynas, Red-vented Bulbuls, Spotted Doves and Indian Pond Herons were quickly identified as being the everyday birds. Other common birds such as Brown-headed Barbet, Pale-billed Flowerpecker and Brahminy Kite were seen. Some less common birds were there too, such as Black-hooded Oriole, Indian Golden Oriole, Coppersmith Barbet and Red-backed Woodpecker.

After the first of many delicious Sri Lankan breakfasts, we departed for Habarana. On the way we passed Teak and Coconut plantations, noted that the many mango trees were flowering well, and stopped a couple of times for bird sightings and rest rooms.

On arrival at 'The Other Corner' (TOC) some of us had good views of an Orange-headed Thrush and Asian Paradise Flycatcher on the edge of the trees and shrubs near our rooms. We were then treated to a traditional 'Ayubowan' welcome TOC style.

After checking in we birded around the grounds and then along the bund wall of Lake Habarana.

Bird(s) of the day – Coppersmith Barbet, Stork-billed Kingfisher



Accommodation - The Other Corner, Habarana.

Day 2
Monday
5/2/18
Habarana to
Mannar
Island (Arid
Zone)

*Breakfast at
TOC*



Journal – Those of us who missed the Orange-headed Thrush the day before searched in earnest, saw new birds, but not the thrush... We did have a great view of a family of Brown-capped Babblers. After breakfast we left TOC for Mannar. A few metres down the road some Malabar Pied Hornbills flew across the road and landed at the top of a big tree on our left. We all had good views of these birds, and with several more good sightings to be had at various location on the remainder of the trip.

On the way to Mannar we stopped a few times. We had Ceylon Swallows at a comfort stop, later our first Black Drongo then great close-up views of a Shikra perched on a bare branch close to the road.

Seventeen kilometres before our destination at Mannar we stopped at Giant's Tank*. We climbed up to the top of the bund wall and beheld the sight of perhaps 8,000 Asian Openbills! There were many other waterbirds too, including Painted Storks and Glossy Ibis.

\After check-in and lunch at Palmyrah House we went for our first excursion of Mannar Island. Special sightings included hundreds of Greater Flamingoes seen from the causeway, at quite a distance, unfortunately, but flamingoes nonetheless. Other notable sightings included a Common Hoopoe, Grey Francolin and a very healthy population of waders.

Bird(s) of the day – Asian Openbill(s), Painted Stork, Hoopoe

Accommodation – Palmyrah House

**Information on Giant's Tank – Built by hand in the 5th century, the tank's bund is approximately 7 k long and 3 m high whilst the tank was originally transferred to numerous minor irrigation tanks via a 39 kilometre main channel and 39 kilometres of branch channels.*

The tank's height was 4 m but it was capable of holding 3 m safely. The tank's storage capacity was 38,854,678 m³ in 2009 and it was capable of irrigating 10,927 ha. (Information from Wikipedia)



Day 3 Tuesday 6/2/18 Explore Mannar Island



Journal – We birded before breakfast, searching the fields and scrub adjacent to the long driveway entrance to Palmyrah House. We even better views of a Hoopoe and some Grey Francolin. After breakfast we went in the bus out to the Adam's Bridge area. Here there were many shorebirds including several Terek Sandpipers, and terns and gulls. The terns were mostly Caspian, Lesser Crested and some Greater Crested. The gulls were mostly Brown-headed, but there was one Heuglin's and one Pallas's.

In the afternoon we went back out to the causeway and saw the Flamingoes again, this time not quite so distant. We then went to the Thallady Pond area where the highlights were Pintailed Snipe, Yellow Bittern and a Long-tailed Shrike.

Bird(s) of the day – Hoopoe, Terek Sandpiper, Hueglin's Gull, Pintail Snipe

Accommodation - Palmyrah House

Day 4 Wednesday 7/2/18 Explore Mannar Island

Journal – We explored many of the same areas again and this time Upali found first two then eventually about nine Crab Plovers. They were quite distant but we all had satisfactory views of this very interesting shorebird through the scopes.

Interesting raptors were Marsh Harrier and Booted Eagle. Black Kites were seen in good numbers here. Curiously Black Kites are only seen in Sri Lanka in this northern coastal region.

Bird(s) of the day – Crab Plover, Eurasian Curlew

Accommodation - Palmyrah House

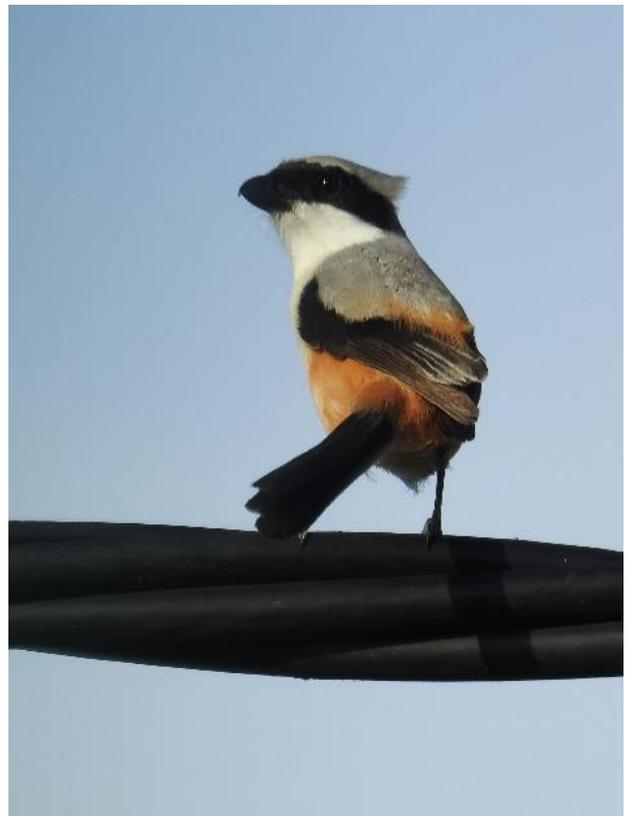
Day 5 Thursday 8/2/18 Mannar to Habarana

Journal – Today we start off with a walk along the Palmyrah House driveway and get great views of a Grey Francolin in the open, Zitting Cisticolas, Brown Shrikes and Jerdon's Bushlarks.

We left Palmyrah House and headed back to TOC at Habarana, stopping for another look at Giant's Tank along the way. On arrival at TOC, we birded around Habarana Lake and had delightful views of Malabar Pied Hornbill, Red-backed Woodpecker, Coppersmith Barbet and, at twilight, Jerdon's Nightjar.

Bird(s) of the day – Malabar Pied Hornbill

Accommodation – The Other Corner



Day 6 Friday 9/2/18 Habarana to Kandy (Wet Zone)



Journal – After another very nice traditional Sri Lankan breakfast, and some great views of a friendly Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, we left TOC and proceeded to spend the morning at nearby Sigirya Rock. While many tourists like to climb the rock and investigate the ancient frescoes, we concentrated on the birdlife. Here we had our only view of Woolly-necked Stork. Upali lined up the scope on a tree hollow to find a Brown Fish Owl well hidden from unsuspecting birders.

On the way to Kandy we stopped at a roadside stall and bought some bananas for lunch.

We checked in to the very lovely Suisse Hotel at Kandy and then went to the Peradeniya Royal Botanical Gardens. It rained a little but not enough to stop us from seeing some Alexandrine Parakeets investigating a tree hollow, Sri Lanka Hanging Parrots and a Crimson-fronted Barbet.

Bird(s) of the day – Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, White-rumped Shama, Paradise Flycatcher (white morph) Crimson-fronted Barbet

Accommodation – Suisse Hotel

Day 7 Saturday 10/2/18 Kandy to Nuwara Eliya (Wet Zone)

Journal – After a 6.30am breakfast at the Suisse, we visited the nearby Udawattakele Sanctuary. Here we had great views of Crimson-backed Flameback, White-rumped Shama, Brown-breasted Flycatcher and an Asian Openbill with a freshwater mussel.



Next, we stopped at the Glenloch Tea Factory, ate our lunch there and had a tour. We were hoping to see Hill Swallow as this is usually a reliable location for them, but not this time.

We continued on to Nuwara Eliya, enjoying the very scenic climb up to the almost 2000m elevation. We explored the Victoria Park gardens and saw Kashmir Flycatcher, Pied Thrush, Sri Lanka White-eye and Indian Pitta.

Our night at Nuwara Eliya was memorable for the enthusiastic election PA announcements that went at regular intervals throughout the night.



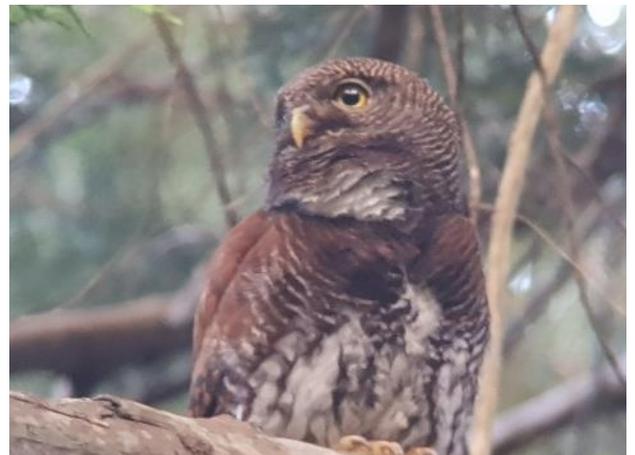
Bird(s) of the day – Indian Pitta, Pied Thrush, Crimson-backed Flameback

Accommodation – Stamford Star Hotel

Day 8 Sunday 11/2/18 Explore Horton Plains (Wet Zone, Hill Zone) and Nuwara Eliya



Journal – At 4.30 am we boarded two specially modified vans for the steep climb up to be at Horton Plains at first light. We braved the cold and searched the area around Arrenga* Pond for the endemic species that live there. Our van drivers were amazing, without binoculars they were spotting our targets and calling us in to get good views. In time we had very good views of all our target species, including the Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush, Dusky-blue Flycatcher, Sri Lanka Bush Warbler and Sri Lanka Wood Pigeon. We continued on to the rest rooms where we saw some Sambar Deer and Hill Swallow.



On our way back to Nuwara Eliya we stopped at a local tea house and enjoyed tea and some spicy snacks. Later we went to the Hakgala Botanical Gardens and had great views of Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher, Sri Lanka Scimitar Babbler and Chestnut-backed Owlet. Upali picked up the owlet's call and rushed us to the spot where we were able to get good views through the scopes.

**Arrenga is the local name for Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush*

Bird(s) of the day – Sri Lanka Scimitar Babbler, Chestnut-backed Owlet, Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush

Accommodation - Stamford Star Hotel



Day 9 Monday 12/2/18 Nuwara Eliya to Tissamaharama (Arid Zone)

Journal – After breakfast and check-out we headed to Tissamaharama. We made a refreshment and comfort stop at a beautiful waterfall near Ella. At Tissa we had lunch then explored the surrounding gardens and tanks.

Upali gave Sachintha, Nipun and Omesh a call and these three lads led us to some very special birds. They guided us through local gardens, backyards and waterways to locations where we had wonderful views of Jungle Owlet, Indian Scops Owl and Brown Fish Owl.

Then we searched a nearby tank with many Pheasant-tailed Jacana, various egrets, herons and cormorants until we found some Yellow Bittern and a Watercock. We hoped to see Black Bittern here but they were not to be found this time.

Bird(s) of the day – Jungle Owlet

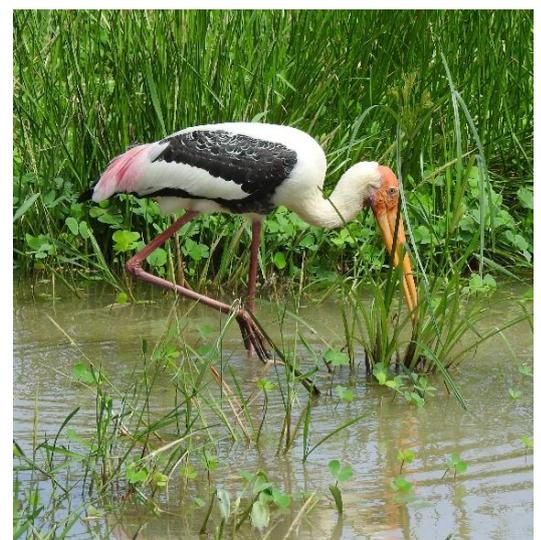
Accommodation – Hibiscus Gardens



Day 10 Tuesday 13/2/18 Explore Yala National Park (Dry Zone) and Wetlands around Tissa

Journal – Today we left the Hibiscus Gardens at 5am in the bus and drove to Yala National Park, where we transferred to 'jeeps'. Target here in addition to the many bird species are Leopard, Sloth Bear, Elephants and other mammals. We saw Elephants, Wild Boar, Spotted Deer, a huge Indian Python and some Ruddy Mongooses. Despite the hectic pace of the jeeps, we did manage to get good views of some birds, including our closest view of Painted Stork. On our arrival back at Hibiscus Gardens a Blue-faced Malkoha was spotted briefly. Sampath, our driver's assistant, re-located this shy bird and with his help most of us got good views.

In the afternoon we did some more birding around tanks and gardens in Tissa, highlights included a pair of White-naped Woodpeckers changing over at the nest in a Coconut Palm hollow.



Bird(s) of the day – Pied Kingfisher, Streaked Weaver, White-naped Woodpecker

Accommodation - Hibiscus Gardens

Day 11 Wednesday 14/2/18 Tissa – Bundala NP (Dry Zone) – Udawalawe NP (Intermediate Zone)

Journal – Another pre-dawn start, with 5.30am checkout and bus ride down to Bundala National Park. Here we had the services of two excellent jeep drivers, who knew, and actively sought out birds for us. We were heartened by the amount of shorebirds here, and had good views of Green Sandpiper and others. The salt works were outstanding from a birding perspective and we saw 4 or 5 Ruff as well as Red-necked Phalaropes.



In the afternoon we checked in at the Grand Udawalawe and then went for another jeep trip, this time at Udawalawe National Park. Here we saw a good number of elephants and birds, including Marshall's Iora and Sirkeer Malkoha. Again, our jeep drivers were very good, and quite adept at spotting birds for us.



Bird(s) of the day – Pied Kingfisher, Sirkeer, Peacock experience (male displaying while females totally ignored him).

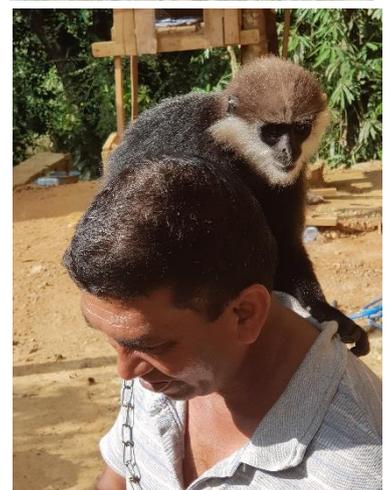
Accommodation – Grand Udawalawe

Day 12 Thursday 15/2/18 Udawalawe to Sinharaja (Wet Zone)

Journal – We check out at 5.45am and head back to Udawalawe National Park. We see more elephants, peacocks, raptors, Mugger Crocodiles and a Golden Jackal!



Then we drive the steep windy route to Sinharaja. After checking in we walk around the grounds and then down to the area around the Magpie Lodge. Here we see Plum-headed Parakeet, Gold-fronted Leafbird and Crested Tree Swift. The owners of the lodge have a young female Purple-faced Leaf Monkey. She is beautiful and affectionate but not a suitable pet and they are trying to get the wildlife authorities to place her at a zoo. A beautiful white morph Asian Paradise Flycatcher entertained us as it flew around with its tail following like a stylish ribbon dance.



Bird(s) of the day – Asian Paradise Flycatcher, Barred Buttonquail, Golden Jackal

Accommodation – Sinharaja Birders Lodge

Day 13 Friday 16/2/18 Explore Sinharaja Rainforest

Journal – After a 6am breakfast at the lodge, we travel in jeeps along the narrow, winding, rocky and steep road to Sinharaja ticket office. We were led by the forest tracker up to a Sri Lanka Frogmouth day roost! All had good views and the Frogmouth did not even look at us or open its eyes... from there we get back in the jeeps and continue on to the check point. From here we walk along a trail that takes you through beautiful jungle up to a research station. Along the way we saw Crested Drongo, Blue Magpie, Malabar Trogon and Legge's Flowerpecker. There was a frenzy of activity when a 'bird wave' or 'mixed species feeding flock' was encountered and we managed to see Ashy-headed Laughing Thrush, Orange-billed Babbler, Lesser Yellowthroat and others.



We were overtaken along the walk by various school groups and ecology students. Near the research station we searched (unsuccessfully) for Scaly Thrush but saw an impressive Hump-nosed Viper. We walked back, had a picnic lunch, then did the walk again. This time we had distant but good views of the endemic White-faced Starling. At the start of the second walk we came across a female Green Garden Lizard starting a hole to lay her eggs. On the return trip she had finished the hole and laid a few eggs, it started to rain and we continued back to



shelter at the check point. The rain set in and was quite heavy. Eventually the jeeps arrived to take us back to the lodge.

Bird(s) of the day – Sri Lanka Frogmouth, Malabar Trogon, Lesser Yellownape

Accommodation - Sinharaja Birders Lodge

Day 14 Saturday 17/2/18 Sinharaja to Kitulgala (Wet Zone)

Journal – The jeeps take us at 5.30 to the ‘Spurfowl House’, a private home in the jungle which is owned by a ‘birder friendly’ family who make birders welcome in their home. Here we stake out our positions in the family dining room, staring out the window opening into the early morning gloom, hoping to see the endemic Sri Lanka Spurfowl... we had great views of Sri Lanka Junglefowl, Spot-winged Thrush... and then the Spurfowl. There were also a Slaty-legged Crake and Ruddy-breasted Crake. Later we saw Green-billed Coucal and wonderful parting flyover by a Blue Magpie.



We go back to the lodge and depart in the bus around 10am, for Kitulgala.

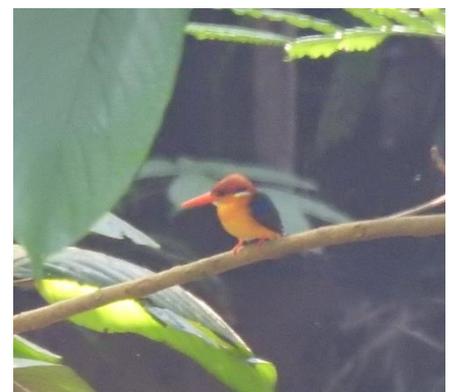
At the Kitulgala Rest House we bird around the gardens and have good views of Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot, Layard’s Parakeet, Stork-billed Kingfisher and Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill.

Bird(s) of the day – Sri Lanka Spurfowl, Sri Lanka Blue Magpie, Green-billed Coucal

Accommodation – Kitulgala Rest House

Day 15 Sunday 18/2/18 Explore Kitulgala

Journal – We go down the ‘Police Station’ and bird along the road, eventually into the backyard of a guest house under construction. We were directed to a large hole with some tiny nest holes in the sandy sides that we were told belonged to a pair of Oriental Dwarf Kingfishers. We saw Lesser Yellownape, Spot-winged Thrush, Asian Paradise Flycatchers... and eventually Keith spotted the diminutive Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher. The little bird sat in clear view for a long time, more than enough for everyone to have a good view. Later we birded a grassy area and had some good views of a Chestnut-backed Owlet. The owlet eventually flew into a tiny hollow in a palm tree.



After lunch we went down to the historic location for the filming of the ‘Bridge on the River Kwai’. We eventually had good views of the Black-capped Bulbul, and other good birds. Unfortunately the film location is being transformed by a hydro-electricity project. Time will tell how this affects the flow of the river and the white-water rafting industry that thrives in the area.

Bird(s) of the day - Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher, Black-capped Bulbul

Accommodation - Kitulgala Rest House

Day 16 Monday 19/2/18 Kitulgala to Katanayake

Journal – Before breakfast we are out on the lawn overlooking the river, searching for birds. This is the last day of our tour and we don't anticipate seeing any new birds today. Instead we are seeing and hearing familiar species and feeling quite relaxed about absorbing the beauty of our surroundings.

After breakfast we board the bus and head off to Negombo. The plan is to spend some time looking at souvenirs, enjoy a lunch by the sea, and then check in to the Tamarind Tree Hotel for our last night.



We enjoy our last dinner together, and each member of the group took the opportunity to express their feelings about the whole tour. Lindsay and Chris tied for the Bird Species Guess. Lindsay guessed 243 and Chris guessed 253, the total was 248... plus 17 mammals and 12 reptiles.

Bird(s) of the day – Small Minivet

Accommodation – Tamarind Tree Hotel

Day 17 Tuesday 20/2/18 Say our goodbyes...

Lindsay had a list of awards to read out (see below).

Lindsay's Awards

The most distant view – Flamingo

Briefest view – Red-faced Malkoha

Closest view – Sri Lanka Scimitar Babbler

Most colourful – Threeway tie-Blue-tailed, Green and Chestnut-headed Bee-eaters

Noisiest – Malabar Pied Hornbill (20 of them, at Udawalawe National Park)

Hardest to find – Spot-winged Thrush

Most confusing – Sri Lanka Spurfowl

Best behaved – Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher

Most unexpected – Budgerigar (in a cage at Kitulgala)

Best birding site – Bundala NP, Habarana Lake, Sinharaja

Best mammal – Elephant, Purple-faced Leaf Monkey, Sri Lankan Leopard

Best reptile – Hump-nosed Viper, Garden Lizard, Muggar

Best accommodation – TOC, Suisse, Palmyrah House, Tamarind Tree Hotel

Best meal – Kitulgala Rest House, Grand Udawalawe, Suisse

Best lunch – Sinharaja (packed lunch)

Best guide – Upali

Best supporting guide – Mike

Best financial officer – Jenny

Best endemic bird – Sri Lanka Blue Magpie, Sri Lanka Spurfowl, Chestnut-backed Owlet