

Sri Lanka (January 2018)



This was a custom tour arranged for 3 participants using 'Walk with Jith' as ground agents. <http://walkwithjith.com>. I found this company excellent throughout and particularly appreciated the speed with which emails were answered and their willingness to help when life got difficult: highly recommended. According to current taxonomy (IOC) there are **34 endemic birds** in Sri Lanka (**named in bold in the text**). Our aim was to connect with them all, see lots of other good birds and also see as many of the Sri Lanka 'Big 5' mammals as possible (Leopard, Asian Elephant, Wild Water Buffalo, Blue Whale, Sloth Bear). We managed these targets in nearly every respect, only missing out on one of the mammals (Sloth Bear).

DAY 1/2 (5th/6th Jan)

I was flying with Emirates from Manchester whilst my companions were travelling from Newcastle, we were then to meet up in Dubai for the connecting flight to Colombo. On the morning of departure I received a text that my flight was considerably delayed so I never made this connection. In fact it turned into a bit of a nightmare journey with the plane taking off nearly 9 hours late from Manchester, an extremely rapid transfer

between gates in Dubai and the connecting flight now putting down in The Maldives for 2 hours.

Eventually I arrived in Colombo a full 11 hours behind my companions, who were already in the first hotel in Kitulgala, another 3 hour drive away... and with a day's birding under the belt! Regrettably my luggage never made the rapid transfer in Dubai so more delays and form filling before I eventually met up with my emergency driver to take me to Kitulgala Rest House. This unscheduled journey was arranged by Jith at his own expense, another example of excellent service. I arrived at the hotel at 23.15 and met our guide Thilina Lakmal (Tilly) to learn that I had already missed 5 key endemics, Sri Lanka Green Pigeon, Yellow-fronted and Crimson-fronted Barbets, but most notably Serendib Scops Owl and Sri Lanka Blue Magpie.

Day 3 (7th Jan)

After a little sleep and alarm set for 05.00 I donned my leech socks, met my pals for a quick coffee then off for a bit of birding around Kitulgala Village. Here we connected with my first endemics, **Spot-winged Thrush**, **Orange-billed Babbler** and **Chestnut-backed Owlet** plus a diminutive but garishly coloured Black-backed Dwarf Kingfisher, which lit up in the dark of the forest.



Chestnut-backed Owlet



Black-backed Dwarf Kingfisher

Good birds kept on coming with **Sri Lanka Swallow**, **Black-capped Bulbul** and **Brown-capped Babbler**, Imperial Green Pigeon and Brown-breasted flycatcher quickly nailed. Plus re-acquaintances with birds such as Asian Openbill, Emerald Dove and Tickell's Blue Flycatcher.

Back to the hotel for a breakfast of fish curry, rice and dahl. It has to be said that Sri Lankan food is not yet haute cuisine.

A couple of hours in the hotel gardens and more endemics tumbled: **Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot**, **Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill**, **Legge's Flowerpecker** and **Layard's Parakeet**. A Brown-headed Barbet came to the feeders whilst a wild male **Sri Lanka Junglefowl** tried hard to imitate a domestic rooster. The white-water rafters were oblivious to the **Sri Lanka Myna** on the opposite side of the river. This took us to lunch and the much anticipated ferry crossing into the reserve proper. The ferry was a small affair propelled by a chap with a single paddle and he had to take a wide arc to account for the fast flowing river.

Within the reserve I caught up with the much wanted **Serendib Scops Owl**, a species discovered as recently as 2001. It was partially hidden in its roost site and didn't present the best photograph but for me it was the first catch-up bird from my missed day. We also came across a **Red-faced Malkoha** and a loose feeding flock which contained Malabar Trogon, **Sri Lanka Crested Drongo**, Yellow-browed Bulbul and **Red-backed Flameback**. We stayed out owling till 20.00 but only heard Indian Scops Owl and saw a Sri Lanka Frogmouth. The march back to the ferry by torchlight was memorable for the stunning milky way overhead. Fifteen endemics on my first day, I said Tilly was good!



Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot



Brown-headed Barbet



Sri Lanka Junglefowl



Paddle ferry crossing



Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill



Serendib Scops Owl



DAY 4 (8th Jan)

Another pre-breakfast early start and a short drive to another Kelani River crossing, this time by a suspension bridge. One of my companions is not too keen on heights so was advised not to look down through the wide spaces in the planks. The other side was more rural with scattered farmsteads and small tea plantations. The main target here was **Green-billed Coucal**, which duly obliged, plus a bonus **Yellow-fronted Barbet**, another catch-up from my missing day. Our first encounter with leeches here and we were glad of the leech socks. More good birding followed before we enjoyed a snack of tea and hoppas (a crispy edged pancake) near the suspension bridge, hopefully bringing eco-tourism a little closer to the locals.



One of the little blighters. The locals roll them between finger and thumb and flick them away.



Green-billed Coucal. A secretive endemic that is often difficult to photograph



Yellow-fronted Barbet. Another endemic that was a nice catch up for me.



Hoppas - sweet or savoury

Hotel check-out and on the road for a short drive to Nuwara Elija in the hill country. We travelled through seemingly endless tea plantations as the elevation rose from 150 to 1900m and the temperature dropped from 33 to 18 degrees. Our new accommodation, the Lake View Hotel, overlooked the scenic Gregory's Lake but we were soon out again investigating the nearby Victoria Park. Here we found **Sri Lanka White-eyes, Sri Lanka Scimitar-babblers**, Indian Pitta, Kashmir Flycatchers and Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher. Pied and Sri Lanka Thrush eluded us. We visited another 'secret' location a short drive away and, as dusk approached, **Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush** was also safely under the belt.



Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher

DAY 5 (9th Jan)

An even earlier start today with alarm set for 04.00. We drove in the dark up a winding mountain road to reach the gates at Horton Plains before dawn, so had to wait for the gates to open at 06.00.

After our success the previous day we didn't need to stake out the reliable Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush site but a number of key endemics tumbled in quick succession: **Sri Lanka Bush Warbler, Sri Lanka Wood Pigeon, Yellow-eared Bulbul** and **Dull-blue Flycatcher** (a complete misnomer as it is stunningly coloured). Some nice identification challenges here as well as we sorted out Blyth's Reed Warblers and Green Warblers.

After a picnic breakfast we climbed to even higher elevation (2175m) and enjoyed Hill Swallows and Crested Hawk-eagles overhead in stunning mountain scenery before heading back to the hotel as the bird action rapidly quietened down mid-morning. Sambar Deer and Dusky palm Squirrels were added to the mammal list.



Sri Lanka Bush-warbler



Sri Lanka Wood-pigeon



Horton Plains



Common Tailorbird

The plan for the afternoon was a repeat visit to Victoria Park for the thrushes we missed yesterday but they still proved elusive. We scored our first Forest Wagtails, Velvet-fronted Nuthatches, Bar-winged Flycatcher Shrikes, a beautiful Lucinia in the shape of an Indian Blue Robin and better views of Indian Pittas. These thrushes were becoming a problem.

We went back to the Lake View Hotel at dusk and made new plans for the following day.



Indian Pitta

DAY 6 (10th Jan)

After overnight rain the day started with a third visit to Victoria Park. This time a stunning male Pied Thrush duly obliged and my poor photo does it no justice at all.



Male Pied Thrush

After breakfast (English this time) we visited Surrey Bird Sanctuary, mainly for a roosting Brown Wood Owl, but we also found another male Pied Thrush and another Indian Pitta.



Brown Wood Owl

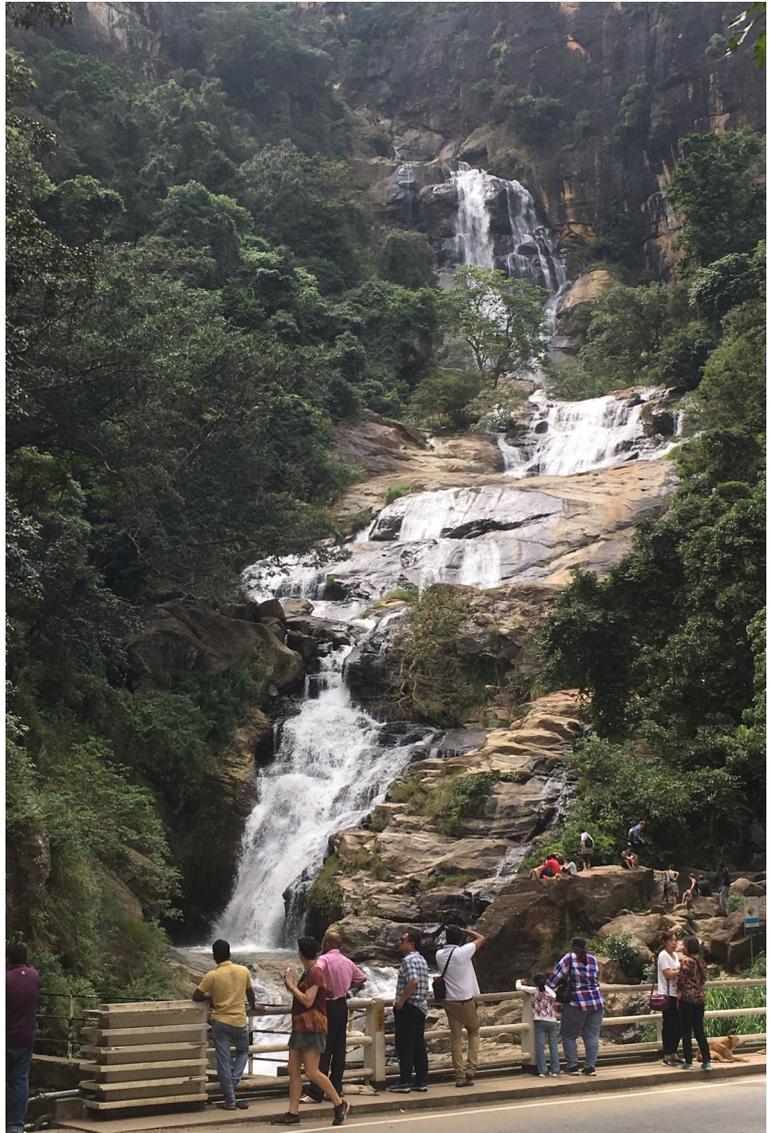
Today was a fairly long transfer day to Tissamaharama (most abbreviate it to Tissa) but we made frequent stops for Black Eagles, Common Hawk Cuckoos and, at a tea stop, Crested Tree-swifts, Crested Hawk-eagles and a Common Rat Snake.



Common Hawk Cuckoo

We also passed popular scenic waterfalls where Toque Macaques thrived on carelessly discarded sweet corn husks.

As we lost altitude we entered the dry zone, gaining temperature and humidity. We skirted Uda Walawe National Park. No time for us to visit its high elephant population on this occasion but as we passed by we noticed Indian Peafowl, Indian Rollers and a new bird in the shape of Orange-breasted Green Pigeons. Eventually we arrived in Tissa driving by a 'tank' (lake) crowded with birds. 100s of Cattle Egrets, Black-necked Ibises, Spot-billed Pelicans, Indian Cormorants and Oriental Darters. Eventually we arrived at our next hotel, the luxurious Hibiscus Garden.



Rawana Falls

A quick turn around and we were off to a small farmstead in Tissa where White-naped Woodpeckers were known to nest. There followed a little cameo with the female White naped Woodpecker visible just inside the nest hole but refusing to show properly. A **Black-backed Flameback** (a recent split and now considered to be the 34th endemic) came to investigate and slowly approached the nest hole. At first the White-naped retreated further but when the Flameback came almost to the rim of the hole she dashed out to see off the intruder showing the white-nape to perfection. Another Indian Pitta pottered around, Indian Fruit Bats flew overhead as they left their roost and a Collared Scops Owl called nearby but only showed in silhouette.

With nightfall approaching we retired to the Hibiscus Garden for an excellent meal, a couple of lion beers and early to bed. Tomorrow was our first Jeep safari into Yala and we had been given a choice, visit Block 1 where we might expect better chances of Leopard but in the company of many other vehicles as this is the most popular area, or visit Block 5, which is birdier, has fewer visitors but also has chances of Leopard. We chose Block 5.

DAY 7 (11th Jan)

After a very early alarm we transferred to the Jeep and drove to Yala National Park, Block 5, arriving outside the gates 20 minutes before they opened at 06.00. Here we learned that a Leopard had been seen the previous day on the opposite side of the road (Block 4) and when dawn broke we investigated but no luck so we soon returned and entered Yala Block 5. There followed some superb birding with new birds all over the place. Jerdon's Bushlarks fed on grass seeds within feet of the Jeep. The value of a guide who knows his calls again became evident as Tilly heard a distant Fork-tailed Drongo Cuckoo, then called it in overhead. Without moving the vehicle we also had Common Hawk Cuckoo and Indian Cuckoo. A Rufous Woodpecker vied for attention with **Sri Lanka Green Pigeon** (another catch-up from my missing day 1). Indian Robins hopped on the track, Blue-tailed and Little Green Bee-eaters posed obligingly, Jungle, Plain and Ashy Prinia identifications were sorted out. All in all an absolutely mind-blowing birding session.



Little Green Bee-eater

We picnic-breakfasted by a lake in company of Mugger Crocodiles, Grey Langurs, Racket-tailed Drongos, Grey-headed Fish-eagles and a Barred Buttonquail before striking off to explore other tracks. Since we first entered the park main gates we had not seen another vehicle but we had a surprise around the corner, a large bull Asian Elephant was searching for food in a parked jeep. Not finding anything it then walked slowly towards our vehicle becoming larger and larger as it approached. These Jeeps are, of course, open sided and a very close encounter ensued. Very close!



About 6 inches closest!

We must have been close to at least one Leopard as both Grey Langurs and Spotted Deer repeatedly gave alarm calls but the best mammals we could muster were Asian Wild Boar, Grey and Ruddy Mongoose and a single Wild Asian Water Buffalo, *Bubalis arnee* (although there were many semi-domesticated Water Buffalo, *Bubalus bubalis*).

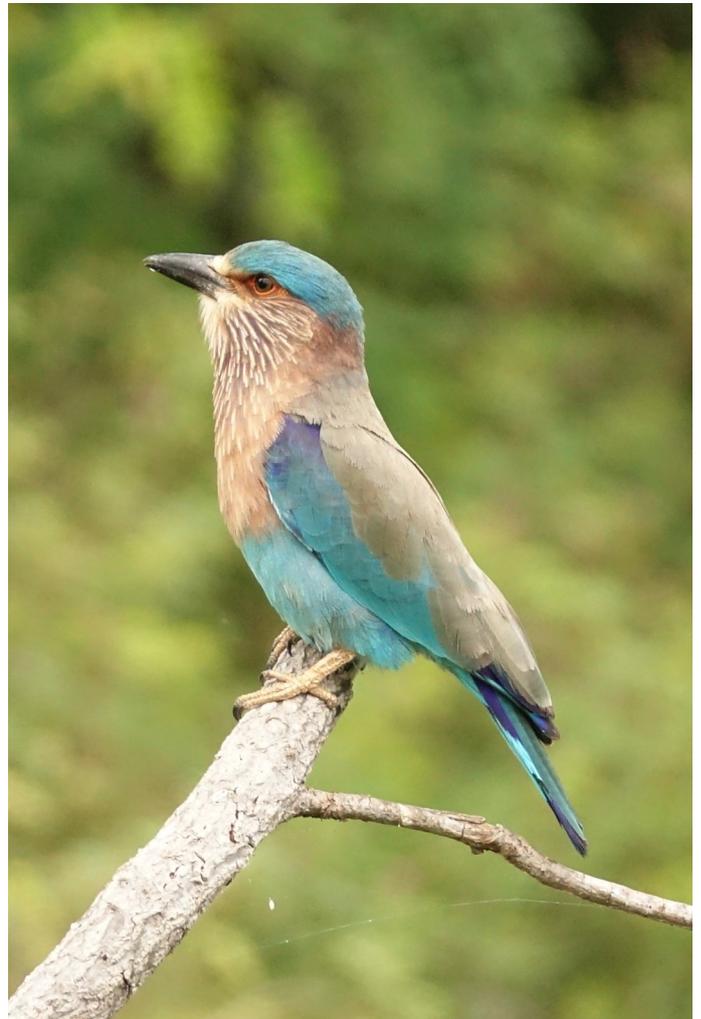


Spotted Deer (Chital)



Wild Asian Water Buffalo

The stream of great birds continuing unabated. Black-headed Cuckooshrike, Marshall's Iora, **Crimson-fronted Barbet** (the 4th endemic catch-up from day 1), **Sri Lanka Woodshrike**, Blue-faced Malkoha, Sirkeer Malkoha, White-browed Fantail, Malabar Pied Hornbill, Yellow-eyed Babbler, Painted Stork, Indian Roller, Brown Fish Owl and many more.



Good birds but no Leopard and after almost 12 hours in the Park it was time to move towards the exit as the gates closed at 18.00. There were actually more vehicles in Block 5 than I realised and probably 6-8 were wending their way out when the news broke and the Whacky Races started. Our jeep driver was determined to be first and he succeeded, we just held tight. The Leopard was basking on rocks by the reserve entrance. An absolutely magnificent animal that eventually rose, stretching like a domestic cat and walked away majestically. Still time for more birding on the way home with a Jerdon's Nightjar seen well (My 4000th world bird). What a way to top a stunning day.

