



SRI LANKA

– the Asian Teardrop

With 33 endemic bird species and some appetite-whetting mammals, Sri Lanka is well worth a visit. **David Chandler** tells us more

This teardrop-shaped island off India's south-east coast measures around 270 miles from top to bottom and 150 west to east. Much of it is lowland but there are mountains in the south that peak at higher than 2,500m. It has a wet zone, a dry zone, an intermediate zone between them and about 380 birds listed as regulars. My March visit was my first time in Asia.

Sigiriya and thereabouts

This World Heritage Site sits in the dry zone amid evergreen forests. We are seeing endemics from the first afternoon – Black-capped Bulbuls freshen up in the birdbath, while we eat lunch; and there are Brown-capped Babbler between a parked motorbike and a tuk-tuk. A non-endemic male Asian Paradise Flycatcher is more spectacular, though – with a crested black hood and impractically elongated tail streamers. A White-rumped Shama, glossy, long-tailed and orange-bellied, responds to my guide's whistling. A Sri Lanka Junglefowl calls (it's an endemic chicken). Indian Peafowl adds a touch of pub garden (they're wild and common here), and Malabar Pied Hornbills certainly impress.

There are two – big, with a casque on the upper mandible, a status symbol and boom box rolled into one perhaps. Coppersmith Barbet came later – a beautiful bird.

Then Indian Pitta on the forest floor, Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, Orange-headed Thrush and more endemics... Crimson-fronted Barbet, Lesser Sri-Lanka Flameback (a woodpecker) and a trio of Grey Hornbills.

After a night in an upmarket treehouse, where Asian Elephants stroll by and Toque Macaques can enter and help themselves (they didn't) we set out at 6.35am to climb



The best-dressed birder with leech socks



Sigiriya, an ancient marvel of civil engineering. There are birds to be seen before we begin the climb, including more endemics – Sri Lanka Green Pigeon and Sri Lanka Woodshrike. Getting to the top and the 5th Century rock fortress is quite a climb – not for the faint or weak-hearted but worth it.

A Shahin, a Peregrine subspecies with orange underparts, flies onto the rock face and I look down on Little Swifts, white rumps splitting black uppers, the same species that I've seen in southern Spain.

We descend and drive to breakfast past a Blue-faced Malkoha (a sort of non-brood parasitic cuckoo) and a metre of Water Monitor bearing little resemblance to the milk monitor of your school days.



Malabar Pied Hornbill



Kandy Royal Botanic Gardens

Kandy's Royal Botanical Gardens have plants, birds and a mammal spectacle. It's Sunday and the gardens bustle with Kandy life, but that doesn't stop the birds – about 10 endemics live in the urban botanica. First, Layard's Parakeet, then, in a tree-top, the bluish chin and throat of a Yellow-fronted Barbet.

Not all the birds are endemic of course. There are Palm Swifts by palms – long with a swallow-like tail. A White-throated Kingfisher perches quietly; a Small Minivet sings a tinkly song; a Forest Wagtail wags its tail; a Greater Coucal runs; a Black-hooded Oriole sits on a suspended nest. Then another endemic – Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot.

As for the mammals... how do 1,000 or so flying foxes sound? Like a Starling roost that's how, but with 1.2m wingspans. They are spectacular. Honorary big birds!

Wet, wet, wet

We are about 700m above sea level in the wet zone, near a rocky stream. Light cuts through forest. Asian Brown Flycatcher, Copper-rumped Sunbird, Black Bulbul, Dark-fronted Babbler, Yellow-browed Bulbul, Asian Paradise Flycatcher again. Another endemic – with white brows and a scimitar for a beak – Sri Lanka Scimitar

Babbler – very handsome. Then more Hanging Parrots – these are Sri Lanka's smallest parrots and they hang to feed as well as sleep.

By late afternoon we have checked in to the luxurious, colonial-style Grand Hotel in Nuwara Eliya. Victoria Park is nearby, and Kashmir Flycatcher is a highlight – winter visitors to just a small part of the island. The chat-like male has dark lines part-framing a rusty throat and breast. His setting is a malodorous, rubbish-strewn stream, with an urban noise soundscape. But the bird is no less beautiful.

Going up

There are 30,000 hectares of Horton Plains. It has endemic lizards and sits in the Central Highland World Heritage Site. But the endemics we seek wear feathers not scales. We stop near Pottipola station and like buses, three endemics come in quick succession – a Dull Blue Flycatcher that seems embarrassed to sing, Sri Lanka Wood Pigeons, and Sri Lanka White-eye – greener and sharper than Oriental White-eye and with a glowing white eye ring. We continue upward, through pygmy forest and past countless cycads, to reach the national park. I had imagined cloud forest, but it's more open than that, with

peaks over 2,000 metres above sea level. A visit to public toilets yields our next endemic. There's a Wren-like 'tak' and glimpses of a bird – Sri Lanka Bush Warbler, or should that be Bog Warbler?!

Later, we bird at a beautiful roadside pond. Our first 'bush warbler' here morphs into Blyth's Reed Warbler. The second and third are the real thing. I glimpse Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush, a Yellow-eared Bulbul bathes and preens, and a Grey Wagtail pads on lilies.

By the end of the afternoon, we're back in Nuwara Eliya, descending a track beside a roadside stall. There's traffic noise, rubbish, and a well-vegetated rocky stream. Purple-faced Leaf Monkeys move from tree to tree, and a male Indian Blue Robin, orange under with a black face and fine white eyebrows, feeds unobtrusively.

It's nearly 6pm, and the light is fading. Farm workers wash their tools in the stream. At 6.25pm we see it. The moon is full and the bird is close, a hint of blue on its shoulders. It calls – like no other bird sound I've heard – an ear-piercing whistle that almost hurts to hear – a Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush just a few metres away. It's globally threatened and hard to see – there may be fewer than 1,000 pairs. It's one of the rarest birds I've seen!



Yellow-eared Bulbul



Indian Flying Foxes

Kithulgala and Sinharaja

After lunch we take in more endemics – Spot-winged Thrush and Chestnut-backed Owllet, with washing hanging nearby.

Ferry is too big a word for the boat that crosses the river to Kithulgala, then we are in rainforest with houses, gardens and school children, birding around gardens! We follow a path into dense forest. A Black Bulbul pants on its nest in 90% humidity. A path-side web hosts a Giant Wood Spider – 15cm toe-to-toe. We emerge at a wonderful river, with a big Blue Mormon (a butterfly) and a Spine-tufted Skimmer (a dragonfly) for company and head back into forest on a busy path.

The bird on a stick nest a metre or so away is another Spot-winged Thrush – amazing. Giant Millipedes catch my eye and a leech samples the blood of one of my guides, high on the thigh. The afternoon is disappearing, but the endemics aren't. Three Orange-billed Babblers – the bill is almost pink – at a stream, two Sri Lanka Swallows and the 'coo-coo' of a Green-billed Coucal, an endangered cuckoo.

Five noisy Layard's Parakeets (endemic) hang out on a tree snag, and a male Greater Sri Lanka Flameback, an endemic woodpecker, preens. It's time to leave. We cross the river on a long, cable suspension bridge – not everyone's cup of Ceylon tea.

The next day sees us in Sinharaja. We follow a flip-flop-clad guide up a vague path that drifts off the more beaten track. My heart pumps and sweat oozes. He takes us to the bird – a small, lance-shaped, cinnamon-coloured owl, with cat-like eyes and black spots and bars. It is very cryptic and just 6m away, a Serendib Scops Owl, endangered, endemic and only added to the scientific record in 2004. With a population of 150-700 this is probably the actual rarest bird I've seen!

It wouldn't have happened without the local guide, who is up at 4am to track it down. He gets a decent tip. Ecotourism benefits the local community, giving wildlife a tangible value.



Horton Plains

“THE RAIN IS HEAVY SO WE TAKE ADVANTAGE OF A SIMPLE SHELTER, WHILE CICADAS YELL. A LEECH IS REMOVED FROM MY LEECH SOCK...”

The owl wasn't in the pay-to-enter World Heritage Site, but our afternoon is. It is rainforest and it really rained! I bought leech socks at the entrance. The field guide cover bird came fairly soon: (endemic) Sri Lanka Blue Magpie, an adult feeding young. I am taken off-piste, through mud into forest, to meet two Sri Lanka Frogmouths, grey male and rufous female!

The rain is heavy, so we take advantage of a simple shelter, while cicadas yell. A leech is removed from my leech sock. The rain eases and the birding continues with half a dozen or so Sri Lanka Drongos, a Red-faced Malkoha, Legge's Flowerpecker, two Sri Lanka Hill Mynahs high in a dead tree, and more blue magpies; all endemic. I was sodden, but hadn't fed a single leech!

Yala National Park

Yala's birds are good, but it's the mammals people come for. We see Mugger Crocodile and Wild Boar soon after entering the park. There are assorted shorebirds, Wild Buffalo, Grey Langur (a dapper, grey-faced monkey) and a monitor. The Bee-eaters so far have been Green Bee-eaters, so Chestnut-headed is a nice addition; and then more Grey Langurs, looking out for a Leopard perhaps...

We park on a sandy track, hoping.

A Coppersmith Barbet helps fill the wait, gorgeous, with a red chest spot. I see the Leopard first. She strolls around the bend then sits, completely at ease. She ambles toward us, we move closer and she drifts into the bush. Yes!

We drive further to Gonagala Wewe and the view is good – water, rocks and trees beyond, umbrella-leaved lilies, Water Buffalo, Spotted Deer, Pheasant-tailed Jacana, Open-billed Stork and a Sambur Deer. My guide points out a White-breasted Kingfisher and I focus beyond it to see Asian Elephants in the background. It hadn't been a bad afternoon...

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Asian Openbill



Pheasant-tailed Jacana with chicks