Wild Globe Travel Consultancy
Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.
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SRI LANKA

Date - February 2015

Duration - 24 Days

Destinations
Colombo - Sigiriya - Minneriya National Park - Dambulla - Popham Arboretum - Nuwara Eliya - Victoria Park - Horton Plains National Park - Hakgala Botanical Garden - Hakgala Strict Nature Reserve - Kitulgala - Sinharaja Forest Reserve - Udawalawe National Park - Tissamaharama - Yala National Park - Weligama - Mirissa - Galle - Wilpattu National Park

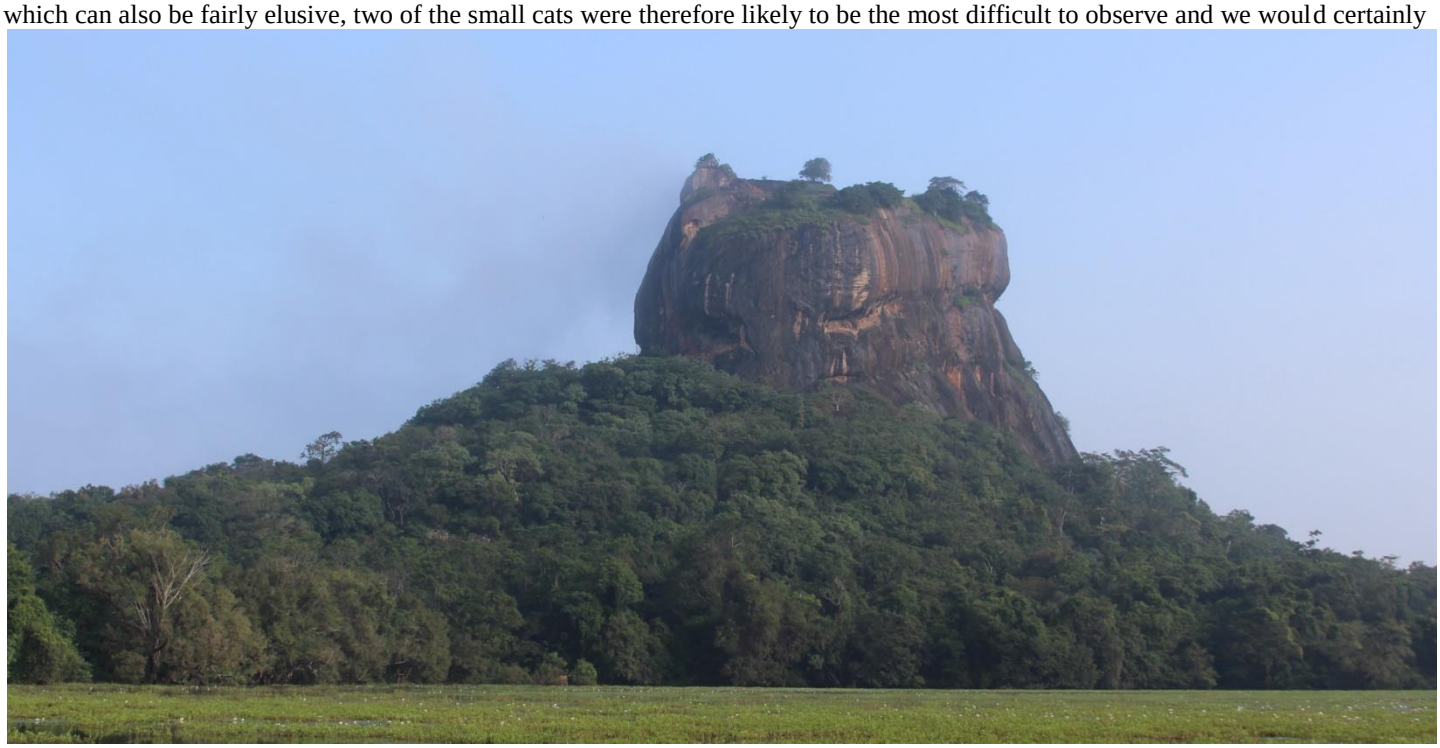
Trip Overview

This was to be the first of three trips to refamiliarise myself with my favourite areas of Southern Asia, the remaining two will be to India in 2016, as I have spent a great deal of time in this part of the world, but have not had the opportunity to do either country justice in recent years. Unlike most of my research trips, when I generally try to spend extended periods exploring one area, albeit at several different lodges, as I had just over three weeks available, on this occasion I decided to travel further afield and to include a few more

destinations, primarily in an attempt to see as much as possible in a relatively short time. Although there were certainly areas that I would have preferred to spend longer at, I equally wish that I had been able to include other destinations visited previously and in all the balance worked fairly well given the time available, particularly in terms of the wildlife encountered. Once again I had the immense pleasure of travelling with my son James, who is proving invaluable in the field and is learning a massive amount on each successive trip. Although he will choose whichever path ultimately suits him, and is already showing some aptitude for wildlife filmmaking, Wild Globe is in very safe hands should he ever decide to take up the mantle. On this particular trip he proved once again how good he is with a spotlight, as he picked up the eyeshine of a number of different animals, including several civets. For once I was not either using my own guide or looking for a new one, as a specialist mammal guide, a very rare entity given the extent to which wildlife travel is dominated by birding tours and guides, had been recommended to me and I was able to secure his services for the entire tour. Whilst we enjoyed a great deal of good fortune throughout the trip, I can honestly say that our greatest stroke of luck arrived almost a year earlier, principally when I learned that this guide was available for the dates of our tour. As I never tire of stating, the success or otherwise of any wildlife adventure can ultimately depend on the ability and enthusiasm of your guide and this guy was one of the best that I have travelled with. Not only is he knowledgeable and experienced in terms of how and where to find many species, he is passionate about the wildlife of his country and as friendly as almost all Sri Lankans are. The wildlife aside, which is diverse and captivating, the people are why I like returning to this part of the world so much, as there is a genuine warmth towards visitors in the region and I have experienced and witnessed extraordinary acts of kindness and humility during my many visits. Although, as in India, the odd grandiose official can occasionally be a total pain in the arse and corruption remains rife within many institutions, the normal Sri Lankan people, again as per their close neighbours, are as friendly and hospitable as you will meet anywhere in the world, indeed, a good deal more so in many cases. Whilst Sri Lanka certainly has its share of severe conservation issues, many of which have been significantly exacerbated in recent years by industrial expansion and commercial farming on a massive scale, historically Sri Lankans have made considerable efforts to protect their wildlife and have a history of sustainable forestry long before it was practiced in many other parts of the world. In fact, around 80% of the country's hill forests were actually destroyed under foreign rule, as Sri Lanka, or Ceylon as it would come to be known, was largely governed by both the Portuguese and the Dutch until the British took control in 1815, following Napoleon Bonaparte's 1795 conquest of the Netherlands. Fearing that the French might also invade The Kingdom of Kandy, an independent monarchy still ruling much of the island, the British, in the guise of the East India Company, rapidly colonised many coastal regions before capturing the unpopular King Rajasinha and seizing control of the entire country in 1815, the same year that Napoleon met his famous Waterloo at the hands of the Duke of Wellington and some timely Prussian reinforcements. The king was eventually forced into exile and Ceylon became a British Crown colony and part of a realm so vast, at its height it was known as 'the empire on which the sun never sets'. Of course an empire of this size requires constant nourishment and the colonies were all utilised to produce the goods and revenue necessary to sustain such a mighty beast. Under British rule coffee, tea and later rubber plantations tore great swathes through the forests and although it is estimated from the records of the time that around 84% of the country was still covered by forest in 1881, this had fallen alarmingly to less than 49% in the late 1920s. Sadly independence in 1948 did not arrest the slide and although the scale of destruction has certainly decreased in recent years, and all lowland and montane rainforests are now fully protected, by 2005 the forest cover had been reduced to less than 30%. As always when returning to a destination that I have an affinity for, I was worried about the almost inevitable habitat loss and was also initially concerned that the presidential elections, held less than a month before we were due to fly to Colombo, might witness a return to the civil unrest that damaged so many lives on this beautiful island for more than three decades. Whilst I do not have enough knowledge of the civil war to speak with any authority, and would never condone the many atrocities that it is now generally accepted were committed on both sides, I did visit Sri Lanka during its height and am fully aware of the pain and suffering inflicted on a largely innocent population. Although violence flared on many occasions prior to 1983, and several ceasefires failed to bring a permanent end to hostilities, the conflict officially raged from July 1983 to May 2009 and was waged between the Sinhalese, the largest ethnic group

in the country, and the minority Tamils. The Sinhalese number around 75% of the population and the Tamils approximately 15%, including the remaining Indian Tamils, who were introduced to the country by the British to provide cheap labour on the plantations. Whatever the cause or attempted justifications of the bloody struggle, and I have heard equally intelligent people refer to the Tamils as both freedom fighters and ruthless terrorists, there can be little doubt that the Tamils were intentionally marginalised over the years and that the ensuing resentment led to the rise of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam or the Tamil Tigers as they became known. Following independence in 1948, the 'Ceylon Citizenship Act' was passed, which made it almost impossible for Indian Tamils to gain citizenship and saw more than 300,000 of them deported back to India. In 1956 the 'Sinhala Only Act', which replaced English with Sinhala as the country's official language, resulted in many Tamil English speakers losing their official positions within governmental departments and the 'Policy of Standardization', implemented in 1971, made it far more difficult for Tamil students to gain university admission. These and other provocative acts led to calls for an independent Tamil state and the 1981 Sinhalese burning of the Jaffna library, the largest and one of the most important libraries in all of Asia, further escalated tensions. In July 1983 a Tamil ambush on an army checkpoint, in which thirteen soldiers were killed, provoked an immediate and uncompromising response, resulting in hundreds and possibly even thousands of Tamil deaths. The civil war had begun in earnest and during the subsequent 26 bloody years it was estimated that up to 100,000 people were killed, including thousands of civilians and the former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who was killed by a female suicide bomber in 1991 as a result of India's direct intervention in the conflict. Ironically, or possibly not given the political turmoil of the region, Rajiv Gandhi came to power in 1981 following the assassination of the previous prime minister, his own mother Indira Gandhi. Although they never actually targeted tourists, which was one of the reasons that life continued with at least a semblance of normality to the outside world, the Tamil Tigers conducted a ruthless and brutal campaign that included the slaughter of thousands of civilians. In deliberately targeting innocent civilians in this way, pioneering the use of suicide bombers and utilising children as soldiers, the LTTE far exceeded what many neutral observers had previously considered to be their legitimate grievances and the situation became so bad that parents travelling to the same office would catch different buses to and from work each day, just to ensure that at least one parent survived to care for their children. Crowded buses, trains and banks were all destroyed at great human cost until the Tamil Tigers were ultimately crushed by government forces in May 2009. The man who presided over the final victory, if victory can ever be the correct term when compatriots fight and kill each other, was President Mahinda Rajapaksa, the same man who stood for re-election in January 2015. A large number of civilians were killed during the final few weeks of combat, as many as 40,000 according to some unconfirmed sources, and there were later substantiated claims of war crimes and human rights abuses by government forces, including graphic film of female 'prisoners', kneeling and with their hands tied behind their backs, being summarily executed. Despite these accusations, which, for what it is worth, are still being investigated by the United Nations, Rajapaksa was expected to achieve a third term as Sri Lanka's president and indeed had called the election two years earlier than he needed to. The fact that he lost to his former ally Maithripala Sirisena and that the transition of power

appears to have gone peacefully, is at least an encouraging sign and it can only be hoped that President Sirisena will lead his people to a peaceful and united future, they certainly deserve it after so many years of tragedy and turmoil. For all my inadequate words on the subject, if you want to learn more about the civil war and the rule of the former President Rajapaksa, please take the trouble to research 'And Then They Came For Me', by The Sunday Leader journalist and human rights activist Lasantha Wickrematunge. It is compelling reading and all the more so if you know that it was published posthumously, as Lasantha was aware that he was going to be killed and penned one final thought-provoking piece, which says more about freedom, justice and simple 'right', than I ever could. Despite earlier claims of an attempted military coup by Rajapaksa and his remaining supporters, all was calm as we landed at Bandaranaike airport to the north of Colombo and prepared for our first wildlife activity, a spotlighting walk in some fragmented forest an hour or so from our airport hotel. It felt very strange to be searching for wildlife so close to an urban environment, particularly as I generally insist on leaving a city as soon as I arrive. However, despite the unfamiliar surroundings and the sound of traffic in the background, it was a highly enjoyable and encouraging start, as we immediately encountered a golden palm civet, as well as a brown palm civet, which some sources suggest is a separate species. Whilst I have no intention of turning these trip reports into dreary scientific journals, small carnivores are of great interest to me and I knew before I travelled that it had been proposed that the golden palm civet, which is endemic to Sri Lanka, should actually be split into three distinct species. Although I encountered all three at various stages of the tour, and it would have been nice to include two additional species on my final mammal list, it has since been argued, fairly convincingly in my view, that there is very little genetic diversity between the proposed new species and that in reality there is only one species of golden palm civet in Sri Lanka, despite the significant colour differences that undoubtedly occur between these nocturnal and largely arboreal creatures. Colour variations alone are not sufficient to determine a separate species, as coat colours can vary massively in carnivores and it is not uncommon to encounter major colour variants within the same area and sometimes even within the same litter. This was the case on our preliminary excursion, as the first civet spotted was the more traditional golden colour and the second, which was discovered in close proximity, was completely brown. It made very little difference to me in any case, as I was thrilled to be watching these fascinating animals so early in the trip and had reasonably high hopes that we might eventually find all fourteen of Sri Lanka's carnivores. As with much of the wildlife in the country, most of the mammals are relatively easy to find and this even applies to many of the predators. Sloth bear sightings are by no means guaranteed, but I had enjoyed a great run with bears over the previous eighteen or so months and was moderately confident that we would encounter at least one of these enigmatic and generally dishevelled animals, particularly as we were going to be spending so long in such good areas for them. The Eurasian otter aside, which can also be fairly elusive, two of the small cats were therefore likely to be the most difficult to observe and we would certainly

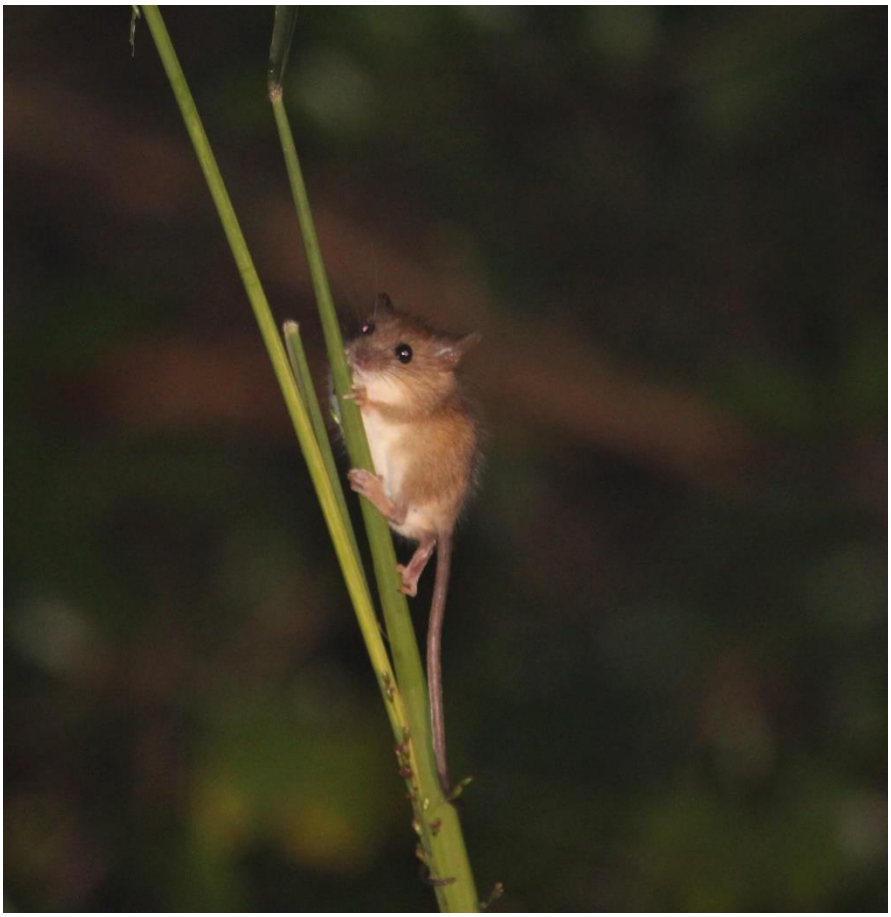


require some good fortune, not to mention a great deal of hard work and patience, to find both the rusty-spotted cat and the fishing cat. Our first major destination to search for either was Sigiriya, home to the famous 5th century city complex and fortress, which thousands of tourists flock to every year. An elaborate complex of palaces, gardens and pools, Sigiriya, or the Lion Rock as it translates, is built on and around a towering 200 metre monolith and was rediscovered by a British army officer in 1831. Parts of the incredibly impressive ancient citadel are only now being excavated and the trip to the top, which includes the opportunity to marvel at the ornate and deeply beautiful frescos of various equally alluring women, is a highlight for most visitors to the country. Sadly I did not have time to visit the higher fortress complex on this occasion, at least half a day is required to do it any sort of justice, but I did take a brief break in what was an absurdly hectic schedule to wander around the lower terraced gardens and moat. Despite the adjacent Minneriya National Park, which we actually barely visited, Sigiriya does not initially appear to be a particularly promising wildlife area, as there is no one obvious location to look for a large number of animals and instead our guide knows several sites that

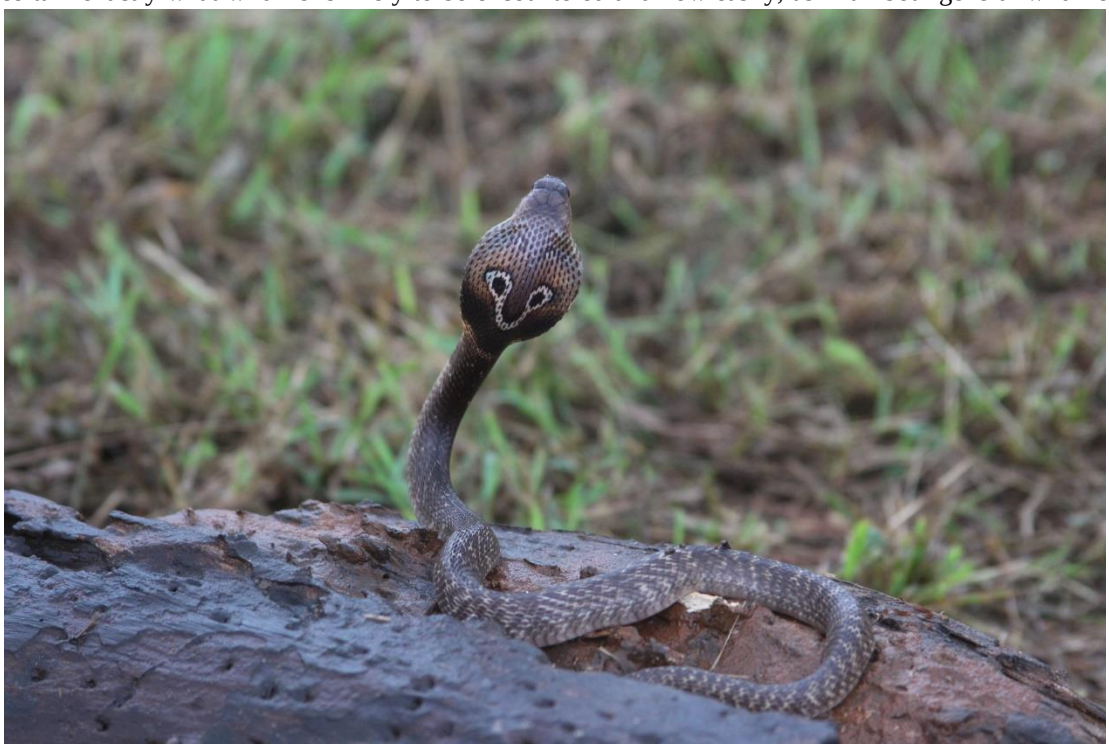
are generally productive in terms of one or two specific species. This was particularly the case at night and we spent a great deal of our time at Sigiriya spotlighting, at least when the weather allowed, as heavy and prolonged rain disrupted the first few days of the tour and we were often forced to search for animals between downpours. Of course some animals were easier to find than others and within about half an hour of arriving at our first lodge I was photographing two of Sri Lanka's five primates, toque macaque, the Donald Trump of monkeys for one rather obvious reason, and tufted grey langur, both of which would be routinely observed throughout our stay. Monitor lizards were just as common and over the next few days we would also encounter ruddy and grey mongooses, giant squirrels and a host of common palm squirrels, all without having to leave the extensive grounds of the lodge. One female palm squirrel was particularly reliable, certainly at meal times, as she would hang from the ceiling whenever food appeared and eagerly wait for either waiters or guests to feed her bread or papadams. We were even more successful further afield and eventually departed Sigiriya having encountered a staggering 35 mammal species in less than four full days, including thirteen different bats. As anyone who reads my trip reports will know, although I like finding and photographing them, I do not generally record bats on these tours, as I find them exceedingly difficult to identify, particularly in flight. However, given my guide's knowledge and ability to separate the various types, I made an exception on this occasion and in all we were able to observe and record nineteen distinct bat species. The five primates are split into two groups, three monkeys, which were always going to be easy to find, and two slender lorises, which would probably not be. Having already seen two of the monkeys, we completed the set by the end of our first full day when we encountered a small troop of purple-faced langurs or purple-faced leaf monkeys as I have always known them. It was not a great view in truth and the light was poor after more rain, but in all there are four subspecies of leaf monkey in Sri Lanka, as well as three macaque subspecies, and I made a point of finding and photographing all seven over the course of the tour. Whilst monkeys were the main focus of attention during the day at Sigiriya, the vast majority of our success came at night and we enjoyed several truly spectacular night drives, primarily as a result of our guide's more or less inexhaustible enthusiasm, which I quickly discovered easily matched my own. Our first night drive began just after

9pm and I only realised just how focused our guide was when I noticed that it was 3am and there was no sign of us stopping. Indeed, on the three nights that we managed to get out, one night had to be abandoned because of torrential rain, we never returned before 5am and on one occasion went straight through until almost 8am. It was fairly strange to still be looking for animals while everyone else was beginning their day but, after so many frustrating experiences with various guides over the years, I was absolutely thrilled to be working with someone who knew exactly what was required in order to find the more elusive nocturnal species. In addition to having seen more mammals than anyone else in Sri Lanka, our guide is a passionate birder and also holds the record for bird sightings in the country, having personally observed 393 of the 420 or so birds recorded on the small island. I should therefore have known just how dedicated he was going to be, as you are not able to accumulate the number one bird list in any country unless you are truly

passionate about what you do and totally single minded. What was more surprising was just how supremely committed he was to helping us find the animals that we were looking for in order to put future tours together for my guests. The pace was obviously intense and at times we were surviving on barely three or four hours sleep each day, but the results were remarkable and it was only towards the very end of the tour, when most of our objectives had already been achieved, that we began to flag slightly. At this early stage things were far too exciting to even notice the lack of sleep and on those first three spotlighting drives, one of which was severely hampered by rain, we encountered several golden palm and common palm civets, small Indian civets and two white-spotted chevrotains, a type of small and highly furtive mouse deer that I had not been certain we would find. Other notable sightings included numerous Indian hares, two large brown flying squirrels, a couple of golden jackals, a small herd of wild boar, several Indian gerbils, which scuttled across the road comically at breakneck speed, and a handful of Asiatic long-tailed climbing mice, which were far more obliging and often perched motionless at the very end of the tall grass. I spotted the first of two grey slender lorises, which again I had not been that confident we would see, and although they quickly disappeared into the dense vegetation and I was unable to take a decent photograph of either, my next sighting more than compensated for any disappointment, as I noticed a small cat to the left of the vehicle and just had time to take two rapid photographs before it also vanished. To our immense delight it was a rusty-spotted cat and we had almost immediately found one of the main target species for the entire trip. Sigiriya had more than justified its renowned reputation, as had our guide, as spotlighting is prohibited in all of the reserves and national parks in Sri Lanka and all of these animals were found in areas personally researched and recommended by him. After just four days we already knew that the tour was going to be a success and it was at this point that we began discussing the very real possibility of encountering every carnivore in the country and perhaps every single large mammal species, which I have



never previously achieved on any single trip. Whilst we were aware that this would still be difficult, due to the size of the country and the relatively low number of large terrestrial mammals, it was certainly feasible and it was probably this thought that encouraged our efforts over the coming weeks, as we now had a target, albeit an unspoken one, and an opportunity to do something that we did not think had been accomplished before. In addition to the safety and comfort of my guests and the quality of my guides, my main priority on these research trips is to ascertain exactly what wildlife is likely to be encountered and how easily, as I run both general wildlife tours and dedicated mammal expeditions and it is therefore important that I establish just how much effort might be required to find each specific animal. Of course there are no guarantees that just because I have found an animal everyone else will, but I can generally determine what is probable and this is obviously essential when planning a tour dedicated to finding a single species. Sri Lanka is not really that type of destination, as the real beauty of the country, the stunning locations and welcoming people apart, is the ease with which a wide spectrum of wildlife can be viewed, including a huge variety of birds, reptiles and amphibians. Our time at Sigiriya amply demonstrated this, as we savoured an abundance of stunning wildlife, including a baby cobra, which for me was one of the highlights of the entire trip. We actually discovered the small snake in the grounds of our lodge and although the staff there are very animal friendly and take time to point out various birds and monkeys, we reasoned that they would probably prefer not to eventually have a full size cobra around the guests and that it may be safer for the snake if we captured it and moved it to a nearby reserve. In doing so we took the almost unique opportunity to photograph the fairly irate reptile in traditional pose, with its hood up and its distinctive markings clearly showing. It was a great privilege to be able to view such an iconic and magnificent snake swaying and striking at close quarters and we were delighted to repay its patience by transferring it to a protected area and watching it slither off happily. It was the type of unexpected event that can make a trip so memorable and we were fortunate



to enjoy several such unforgettable moments throughout the course of the tour. We could have easily added another species at Sigiriya, as there are many wild elephants in the area and we came across one concealed in thick vegetation on a night drive. Our lights were clearly irritating the animal, which immediately began issuing the low rumbling warning noise that far too many people either fail to recognise or ignore and we decided not to disturb it further and left before it emerged. There are actually not meant to be

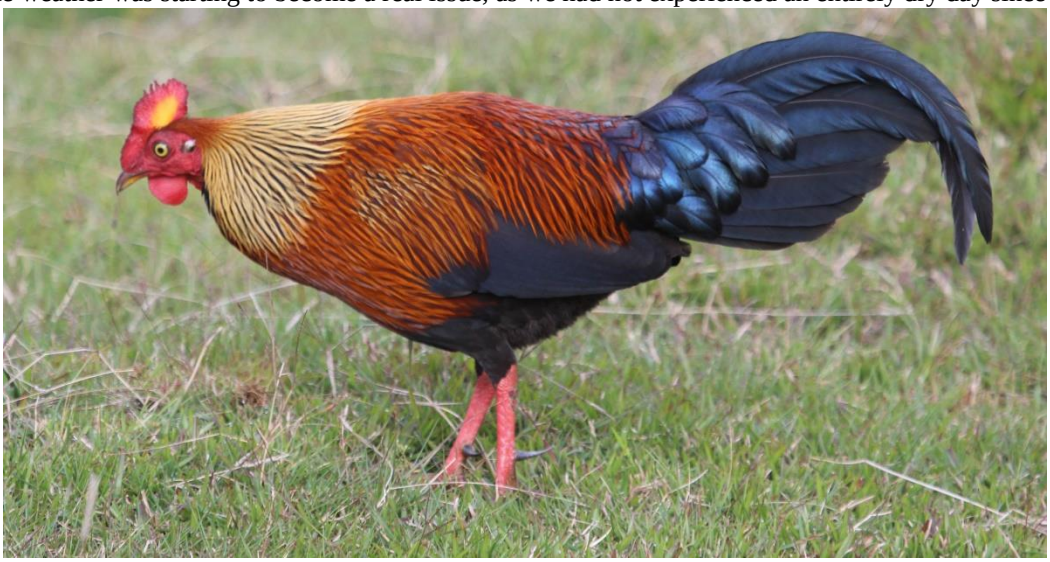
elephants in large sections of the region, as much of the land is now agricultural and a series of mildly electrified fences are supposed to restrict the elephants to the remaining wild areas. Unfortunately, they do not always work, as some of the matriarchs have learnt to push young males directly through the wire and others simply pick up huge tree trunks and throw them across the fences to create a path. This of course produces the usual tension and conflict with the local farmers, as elephants can destroy an entire annual crop in just a few hours and largely subsistence farmers cannot afford to have their livelihood devastated in this way. To help rectify the problem, instead of killing the elephants as they do in other countries, many of the farmers have constructed makeshift wooden structures in their fields and take turns sleeping in these at night in case elephants appear. If they do, a series of firecrackers are released in order to scare the elephants away and hopefully discourage them from returning, at least in the short term. Unfortunately we disturbed a couple of these nocturnal vigils with our spotlights and although these human/elephant conflicts remain a depressing reality in so many areas of both Asia and Africa, it was heartening to see the lengths that Sri Lankans will go to in order to avoid harming these majestic creatures. Even the street dogs, which are another hugely depressing feature of so many countries across the globe, are in better condition in Sri Lanka and in general you notice a genuine respect for wildlife across most of the country. Whilst I would much prefer them not to exist and am constantly sickened by the appalling way in which they are treated, I am an absolute sucker for dogs and spend much of my time feeding and playing with them wherever I travel. The vast majority are as sweet and as gentle as most well cared for dogs and their usually friendly nature always amazes me when you consider the way in which they are so casually abused and the disgusting condition that I find so many of them in. At least in Sri Lanka the majority had owners and were not starving and I only saw one dead by the side of the road, which of course is still not great, but is again better than many other countries that I visit. The feral cats appear to be far more of a problem, as there is a massive amount of interbreeding between the innumerable domestic cats that are allowed to roam and breed unchecked and the three wild felid species. Given the amount of hybrids encountered at various destinations, the jungle cat in particular seems to be suffering as a result, although we also came across hybrid fishing and rusty-spotted cats and our guide mentioned that this was a severe issue for every species. In much the same way that the Scottish wild cat has been almost eradicated in the United Kingdom, eventually the crossbreeding will degenerate the gene pool to such an extent that it will be impossible to recognise pure wild species without genetic testing and ultimately the original animals will be lost forever. It is a grave concern that certainly needs to be urgently addressed and although we encountered several jungle cats that were clearly genetically pure, we also observed far too many very obvious hybrids. Despite the regularity with which they were spotted, jungle cats actually proved to be a problem on this trip, as they were all seen at night and none lingered long enough for me to take a decent photograph. The one relaxed individual, that barely gave us a second glance as it continued to hunt, was lost in yet another deluge and although I was not initially that concerned, as historically I have always been able to find these animals during the day, that just did not occur and I eventually had to accept a few distant and relatively poor quality shots. I had far more success with most other animals and further highlights at Sigiriya included great views of several brown fish owls, the rather gruesome spectacle of a white-breasted kingfisher mangling a frog against a branch until it was pliable enough to swallow and an extended encounter with a giant squirrel, which vary massively in colour from region to region.

Whilst many of the sites visited around Sigiriya and elsewhere are known only to my guide, and he has specifically asked that I do not elaborate regarding them or reveal their locations, the Popham Arboretum near Dambulla is already fairly well known and has a reputation, albeit a misguided one, for being a good spot to search for Indian pangolin. I was already aware that the pangolin was likely to be the most difficult of all the mammals to find, as the poaching of these creatures for the traditional Chinese medicine industry has reached critical levels in recent years and the Indian variety is also widely hunted for its meat. Although officially protected in Sri Lanka, our guide confirmed that pangolins are still viewed as a delicacy in many areas and that they are becoming increasingly difficult to observe in the wild. Indeed, although he has encountered several whilst working on the many conservation projects that he is involved with, he has only ever seen one with guests and that was at the Popham Arboretum. We therefore tried our

luck, but with more hope than expectation, as there have only been two or three confirmed sightings at the arboretum during the previous decade. Unsurprisingly, we did not improve on that record and there were no signs of any pangolin activity. None of the termite mounds had been touched and there were no fresh diggings, but we did hear two grey lorises and were able to get fairly close to one, before it too slipped away unseen. No matter, as a white-spotted chevrotain and another new bat species ensured that we did not have an entirely fruitless evening and Sigiriya had already provided more highlights than we could possibly have hoped for. The next three destinations, the first in the central highlands followed by two in the rainforest, had all been selected to enable us to search for a few specific species, including a number of squirrels, a different type of chevrotain and the red slender loris, traditionally the more elusive of the two loris species. To reach the first we had to drive up through the huge tea plantations that Sri Lanka is famed for until we reached Nuwara Eliya, the gateway to Horton Plains National Park. Apart from a brief walk in Victoria Park, that produced three black rats but not the dusky-striped squirrels we were looking for, we did very little when we arrived at Nuwara Eliya, as we had

planned to depart at 2.30 the next morning in order to spotlight on the road to Horton Plains, initially in our vehicle and then on foot. The hope was that we would encounter our first Indian water buffalos of the trip, which are a separate species to the feral domestic water buffalos that we would soon observe in large numbers at Udawalawe and Yala national parks, and possibly one or two shrew species. The water buffalos were easy enough, as we quickly spotted one lone animal and then a herd of around 40. The shrews, however, were a different matter entirely, as we heard several, but they proved impossible to even glimpse in the thick undergrowth and we eventually had to abandon our vigil in order to watch the sun rise across the misty plains at the top of the plateau. A mixture of montane grasslands and forest, rising to a height of around 2,300 metres, Horton Plains is an extremely scenic reserve and looks particularly stunning in the early morning. The vast majority of visitors take the hike to World's End, a cliff with a sheer drop of almost 1,000 metres and/or Bakers Falls, a small but impressive waterfall named after the British hunter Samuel Baker, who butchered his way across much of the known world in Victorian times. We did neither, as I wanted to explore the park quietly and knew that we had very little chance of enjoying any wildlife if we joined the crowds on the main tourist circuits. As it was, we had our first encounter before we even entered the park, when a stripe-necked mongoose ran across the road a few metres beyond the entry gate as we waited to proceed. I was thrilled to see this particular mongoose, as it was far from guaranteed and, with a rufous almost rusty coloured coat, is one of the most distinctive of the 34 mongoose species found globally. My only disappointment was that I did not have time to get a picture and although we searched the area for almost half an hour, we did so rather forlornly, as the animal was long gone and we were not to see another during the entire trip. Photographs were not a problem with the sambar deer at least, as Horton Plains is home to a large population of these imposing animals, many of which are comfortable around people and entirely used to having a lens thrust towards them. In addition to the cooperative sambar deer, our

main targets for the day were dusky-striped squirrel, which we missed at Victoria Park, Indian brown mongoose, which our guide had seen here on a number of occasions, and another subspecies of the purple-faced langur. We saw the squirrel at one of the ranger stations, before the ranger scared it away in his haste to show it to us, and the monkeys were also observed fairly easily before we turned our full attention to the mongoose, the last of the four mongooses found in Sri Lanka. Our guide actually spotted one while James and I were searching in a different area, but we missed it and shortly after the heavens opened yet again and the rain continued for most of the afternoon. By now the weather was starting to become a real issue, as we had not experienced an entirely dry day since the second day of the trip and only had this one opportunity to explore Horton Plains. The rain itself is not really the problem of course, as I do not mind getting wet, particularly in a warm climate, but looking for the majority of mammals in heavy rain is an almost impossible task and sure enough, there was no sign of the mongoose while the rain continued to fall. Instead we fed a hungry and utterly endearing female dog cream crackers, as the Sri Lankans appear to have a fixation for these biscuits, perhaps a throwback to colonial days, and there was very little else in the rather sparse café that we could buy her. Another window to colonial times was rather less amusing, as I discovered, whilst idling away a few minutes in the small park museum, that Horton Plains used to be home to a healthy elephant population until the British wiped them out. The soldier and local judge Major Thomas William Rogers was personally responsible for killing over 1,400 elephants and although there can be no happy ending to such an abhorrent tale, the one consolation was that Major Rogers suffered his own bolt out of the blue and was prematurely killed by lightning at the age of 41. Legend has it that his military riding spurs attracted the fatal strike and his tombstone, which now lies abandoned and neglected in a forgotten cemetery at Nuwara Eliya, was also struck



by lightning and split in two, as if the initial retribution for his horrendous crimes were not sufficient. Fortunately, before I could discover any further atrocities committed by my compatriots, the weather cleared towards the end of the day and we were able to resume our search, finding several hares and colourful jungle fowl in the process, as well as the diggings of a large number of wild boar. We had more or less given up on the mongoose and were completing one final sweep of the park in our van, when the day turned full circle and another mongoose ran across the road directly in front of our vehicle. This time it was the Indian brown

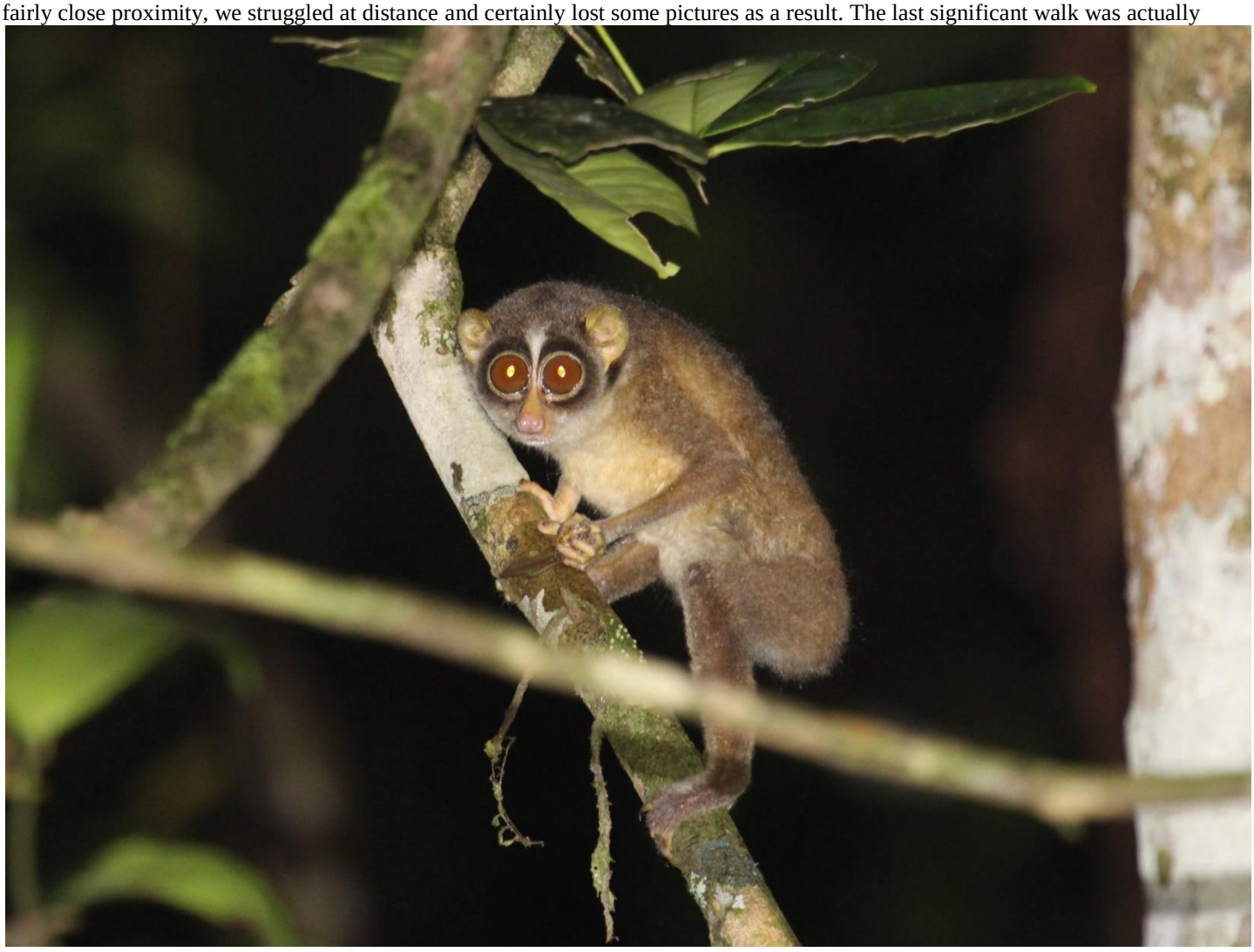
mongoose that we had been looking for and although I was again unable to take a picture, we would see plenty more of these animals later in the trip. The inclement and frustrating weather aside, it had been another superb day in an incredibly beautiful environment and I would have ideally loved a second day to explore further or at least the opportunity to stay beyond the 6pm exit time. Leopards would have been a real possibility towards dusk, as well as all of the smaller cats, but they are very strict at this reserve, which was certainly not the case elsewhere, and it was stressed that we needed to be out by six. It was probably just as well, as we did not get back to our base at Nuwara Eliya until almost 8pm, by which stage we had been either actively looking for animals or travelling for over seventeen hours and we had to move on again early the next morning. Our next destination would be the rainforest at Kitulgala,

but before we departed we paid a brief visit to the Hakgala Botanical Garden and Nature Reserve and were rewarded with the best views to date of purple-faced langurs and an equally good sighting of a small troop of toque macaques, many of which had young. We also had our first indication of Eurasian otters, when we discovered their scat around several pools and our guide stumbled across a southern red muntjak whilst looking for a rhino-horned lizard, although James and I were again searching elsewhere and missed it. At least we eventually found the lizard, which is endemic to Sri Lanka and relatively uncommon. The town of Kitulgala is probably more famous as a white-water rafting destination than a wildlife haven, as much of the area is devoted to agriculture and the remaining rainforest, although now protected, is largely secondary forest. Despite this, or perhaps even as a result of it, Kitulgala has been attracting serious birders for a number of years due to the numerous endemic jungle species found here, as many animals, and this applies to mammals as well as birds, can be far easier to observe in degraded, less dense forest. The town's other claim to fame is that The Bridge on the River Kwai was filmed nearby on the Kelani River and we would be staying at the same hotel used by the cast of the iconic 1957 film, including the actors Alec Guinness, William Holden and Jack Hawkins and the director David Lean, who is rightly regarded as one of the greatest British film directors of all time. The epic movies Brief Encounter, Doctor Zhivago, Ryan's Daughter and Lawrence of Arabia were all directed by Lean and his final film, A Passage to India, is based on the E.M.Forster novel that James is currently studying as part of his A level syllabus. As with Zulu and a handful of other stirring military classics, The Bridge on the River Kwai is revered in the United Kingdom and is based on the construction of the Burma Railway during the Second

World War, when over one hundred thousand Allied prisoners of war and Asian civilians, or ‘coolies’ as they were then known, were killed in the building of the 258 mile railway that linked Thailand and Burma. Although the film portrays some of the extreme brutality of the Japanese and Korean guards, the reality was far more severe and the construction of the bridge is now regarded as a war crime. Many books have been published on the subject, including The Railway Man by Eric Lomax, which was recently adapted as a film starring Colin Firth and Nicole Kidman, but in my opinion the very first remains the best. Railroad of Death, by the junior British officer or subaltern John Coast, is a dramatic and unsettling account of the Fall of Singapore and life within the infamous Japanese labour camps, where so many young men perished. Originally published in 1946, Railroad of Death was reissued in 2014 and the updated edition includes a transcript of an interview with Pierre Boulle, the French novelist who wrote both The Bridge over the River Kwai and Planet of the Apes. In truth the hotel has seen better days and has the same slightly faded appearance as many of the production and cast photographs displayed proudly along the corridors. Having first witnessed his genius, he plays eight different members of the D’Ascoyne family, in the magnificent Kind Hearts and Coronets, I tried to picture myself in the same room as Alec Guinness, but my mind kept returning to his immortal ‘What have I done’ final line in The Bridge on the River Kwai, as I have echoed that exact sentiment on so many occasions since I first began searching for the rarest mammals on the planet. Despite its rather tired appearance, our hotel was in the best possible location, overlooking the picturesque Kelani River and within a short ferry ride of the forest reserve that we would spend much of the next two days exploring. Our main targets at Kitulgala would be yellow-striped chevrotain, red slender loris, travancore flying squirrel and layard’s palm squirrel or flame-striped jungle squirrel, as it is locally known. All bar the flying squirrel are endemic to Sri Lanka and they all occur in rainforest, which meant that we were unlikely to find them unless we did so at either Kitulgala or Sinharaja, which we would be visiting next. We were also now in prime pangolin territory and our chances of encountering this elusive creature were further enhanced by a dramatic change in the weather, as we arrived in Kitulgala in torrential rain, but the sky cleared almost immediately and we spent the rest of the trip more or less constantly bathed in glorious sunshine. Given that most of our efforts here would be centred around long nocturnal walks, James and I took the opportunity to assess the white-water rafting during a rare break in our demanding schedule. The launch site was just a few kilometres upstream from our hotel and although our guide willingly joined us, we did not have a great deal of weight or strength in a boat designed for up to eight guests and our two additional river guides. We negotiated the initial rapids fairly comfortably, but we went into the first severe one at an awkward angle and did not have sufficient power to correct our error. As anyone who has tackled serious rapids can testify, the raging, foaming waters can be brutally unforgiving when you make a mistake and we got absolutely wiped out. Unfortunately for everyone except our own guide, who somehow managed to remain in the boat, we lost control at the very start of the rapid and consequently had to endure a rather bumpy ride as the turbulent waves tossed us about like corks for some distance, before finally spitting us out into the calmer water beyond. I had not done any serious rafting for a few years, but you never forget the feeling of insignificance in the face of such awesome power and it is always a great deal more fun when you are thrown out and are able to experience the thrill of being swept downstream at such force. I was particularly happy to share the moment with my son and although we did not have any further mishaps, we did abandon the boat for a few of the less ferocious rapids and enjoyed long periods just letting the current carry us along in the refreshing water. We also passed the concrete foundations of the replica bridge

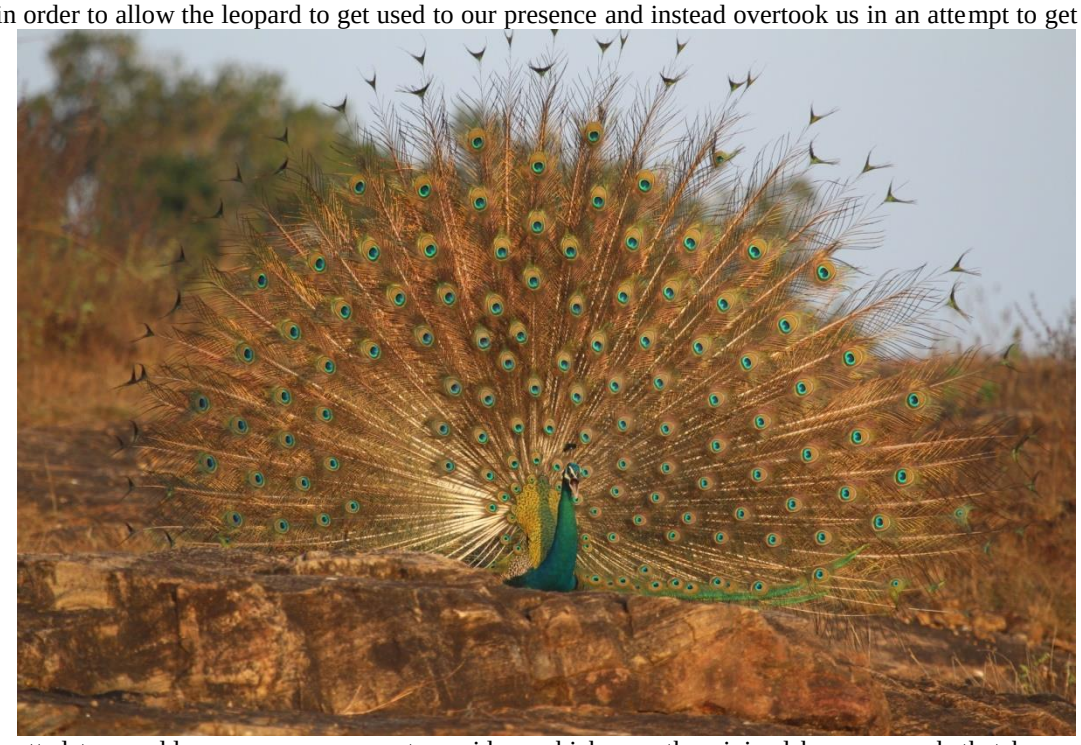
built for The Bridge on the River Kwai, which are all that remain of the spectacular set that was created for the film. When we turned our attention back to wildlife, we had good and prolonged views of a layard's palm squirrel in a small vegetable garden just before the main reserve and on the same afternoon walk discovered four very cute greater short-nosed fruit bats, which were roosting within the small tent they had created by chewing and folding the large palm fronds. On our two extended night walks, both of which finished well after 2am, we had brief glimpses of all three remaining target species, although none were particularly good sightings and the view of the yellow-striped chevrotain did not amount to much more than eye shine and shadowy silhouette. I could only really tell that it was the chevrotain from its highly distinctive movement and the main problem was that our guide preferred to use a red light when searching for animals on foot. Although I have used red filters previously, mainly for certain sensitive mammals that are likely to be disturbed by a bright light, I always find it more difficult to locate animals using only a red light and I really struggled at Kitulgala. The problem was not with our guide of course, as he is an expert with the dull red light and mainly uses it because he often has to show every member of a large group each animal, which can be incredibly challenging at night. Showing one person some of these nervous creatures can be difficult enough and he finds that many nocturnal mammals tend to linger slightly longer with the red light and that this additional time greatly increases his chances of being able to provide every guest with a decent view and not just the first one or two immediately behind him. The logic is sound and it undoubtedly works for him, but the rather obvious downside is that if the animal does not tarry, as was the case with the chevrotain, then the initial sighting is certainly inferior with a red light. In my own experience, most animals are no more or less likely to flee with a bright light and at least with a normal spotlight you usually observe an animal reasonably well even if it does depart quickly. The views of the red slender loris and travancore flying squirrel were at least slightly better, but our walks at Kitulgala were not overly rewarding and were really salvaged by a couple of unexpected encounters. The first was with a Sri Lanka bicoloured rat, another rare endemic now known as the ohiya rat, and the next was a real bonus, as I was desperately hoping to see an Indian crested porcupine and was thrilled to hear the unmistakable sound of one foraging enthusiastically in the undergrowth. Porcupines are often easier to hear than see and if it sounds as if a leopard or a bear is tearing through the vegetation in order to rip you to pieces, it is almost certainly a porcupine rummaging for a nice plant or root to feed on. Having heard this one, we now had to try to find it and, after quickly checking another adjacent path, James and I doubled back just in time to see it shambling across a paddy field, before disappearing into some bushes and beyond our reach. Fortunately, James was carrying our normal spotlight and although we only saw the porcupine for maybe ten seconds, we had an excellent uninterrupted view of it out in the open. This superb final sighting was certainly the highlight of our stay at Kitulgala and the low point was probably getting back to the hotel and discovering exactly how many leeches had feasted on us during the course of each hike. As our tour had progressed, my guide and I discovered that we had something else in common besides our passion for wildlife, as we were both former cricketers and his father, whom I would later meet, had at one stage been an umpire in England. I was not surprised that he loved cricket, as many Sri Lankans are fanatical cricket fans and this one tiny island has produced some of the world's greatest cricketers in recent years. Kumar Sangakkara is currently the best batsman on the planet in my opinion and the rest of our tour would take place against the backdrop of the Cricket World Cup, which began on our final day at Kitulgala. Sri Lanka and England were both involved in the opening matches against the co hosts New Zealand and Australia respectively and it was not a great start for either of our teams, as Sri Lanka were well beaten by the Kiwis and England were absolutely thrashed by Australia. The cricketing gods would smile on only one of us over the next couple of weeks and our two teams were scheduled to meet on the very day that I would fly home, which was probably just as well given the way in which the tournament, and that match in particular, would unfold. Meanwhile, we moved on to the pristine rainforest of the Sinharaja Forest Reserve, a relatively small reserve, but a hugely important

one that protects a diverse array of species, many of them endemic to Sri Lanka. As we had already observed most of the rainforest mammals that I had been hoping to see, we only had the one afternoon and night at Sinharaja, but our luck continued to hold despite the brevity of our visit and we were able to savour several memorable encounters. Within a few minutes of our arrival, we had seen a dramatic oriental garden lizard, another layard's palm squirrel and two giant squirrels, which are strikingly different in colour and appearance to the dry zone variety observed previously at Sigiriya. We were sharing the forest rest camp with several birding groups and they were particularly delighted to find a nesting Sri Lanka frogmouth, a very peculiar looking bird related to the nightjar, which is rarely seen during the day. We did not stay long with this fascinating bird, as it already had enough admirers and I did not want to disturb it further, but I did get some nice pictures before we turned our attention back to the giant squirrels, as well as additional macaque and purple langur subspecies. Everything was in fact going perfectly, until the forest guide that we had been forced to accept when we entered the reserve, decided that he would pick up our spotlight, which my guide was kindly making a minor repair to, and promptly dropped the glass lens, which smashed directly in front of me. To say that I was angry was without doubt an understatement, as I was conscious that we were still due to visit several major wildlife destinations and that the success of the trip, or otherwise, would ultimately depend on finding certain animals, including the nocturnal fishing cat. The only good news, although it did not feel like it at the time, was that we only had one major night walk remaining and that our guide had decent vehicle spotlights. However, they were not quite as powerful as ours and while we improvised with various lights throughout the remainder of the tour, and were generally able to generate enough light to identify and photograph animals within fairly close proximity, we struggled at distance and certainly lost some pictures as a result. The last significant walk was actually



scheduled for that evening, but spotlighting is not permitted within the reserve and we therefore had to visit a nearby site that only my guide is familiar with. I am not sure how far we walked exactly or for how long, but this one activity perfectly encapsulated the bizarre and often completely random nature of searching for rare animals, as we saw absolutely nothing during the entire evening and then encountered four red slender lorises within one 40 metre section of forest. This was remarkable enough, but the really extraordinary part was that three of the lorises were completely exposed at the edge of the forest and made no attempt to leave as we all took photographs at close range. Instead, we left each of them in turn, as I never disturb nocturnal creatures for too long and it would have been almost impossible to improve on the sightings in any case. Just to further illustrate the arbitrary nature of wildlife viewing, I spotted a golden palm civet scampering nonchalantly along some telephone wires just as our walk was coming to an end and settled myself to take a definitive shot. It was clearly heading directly towards me and was evidently undisturbed by my presence. However, in the moment that I slowly raised my camera, it instantly turned and ran in the opposite direction. As is so often the case, I ended up with a photograph of a disappearing tail and just had to shrug and smile at the absurdity of what I do. Despite that slight setback and the less than perfect encounters at Kitulgala, the rainforest section of the trip had been an unqualified success, as we had been fortunate enough to find all of the target species that occur in that particular habitat, with the exception of a pangolin, which can be found almost anywhere. Apart from a short break on the south coast to hopefully photograph blue whales and other marine mammals, the rest of the trip would be spent in the environments that I prefer to explore, as the remaining national parks would provide a mixture of open grassland, dry and deciduous forest, rocky outcrops, meandering rivers, sprawling wetlands and attractive lakes. We would also have the opportunity to search for a set of largely new animals, including elephants, leopards, sloth bears, wild boar and a variety of deer species. I was therefore very excited to be moving on to the first of these destinations, Udawalawe National Park and on the way we passed a reasonably large Indian flying fox colony and the first wild Asian elephant of the trip, a grand old male that had lost his last set of teeth and was eating the soft vegetation at the edge of the Udawalawe reservoir. It later transpired that the elephant, which goes by the name of Rambo, is a bit of a local celebrity and that people have taken to feeding him along the banks of the reservoir that he visits on a daily basis. It was not exactly how or where I expected to see our first elephant, but it was still wonderful and over the next two weeks we would spend plenty of time with these beautiful animals. Meanwhile, we moved on to our lodge for the next two nights, which happens to be owned by the former Sri Lanka cricketer Romesh Kaluwitharana or Little Kalu as he was known. Whilst not a huge international star like some of their other players, the wicketkeeper batsman Kaluwitharana played an integral role in the Sri Lankan team that won the 1996 World Cup and forever changed the way that one-day international cricket was played. Kalu opened the batting in partnership with Sanath Jayasuriya and instead of accumulating runs at the top of the order, as had usually been the case in one-day cricket, the two attacked from the very first ball and established an approach that has been imitated ever since. Not only did Kalu therefore help shape the face of modern cricket, but he also provided us with the finest accommodation of the tour, as his beautifully decorated lodge overlooked gorgeous grounds, a glorious and deeply inviting infinity pool and an equally stunning section of river. Thankfully, given the pace of the tour to date, we had a few hours spare to relax and enjoy the facilities and after availing myself of the pool in the scorching afternoon sun, I was soon photographing egrets, herons, rollers, bee-eaters, peacocks, monitor lizards and skinks around the expansive gardens. It was the type of idyllic setting that you could easily spend a few days at, particularly with an excellent national park more or less on the doorstep and various nocturnal options within the vicinity. We headed for one of these on our first evening, a nearby cave that is home to an estimated quarter of a million short-nosed fruit bats. We arrived just as the first bats were leaving and over the next hour were treated to the incredible spectacle of tens of thousands of bats pouring out into the night. Their two main exit holes were relatively small, so they burst through in an almost constant pulsating torrent, filling the sky with their beating wings before making way for the

next dramatic surge. It was quite a display and the bats were still spilling out when we departed to begin spotlighting. Although it was a fairly quiet evening by our exceptional standards, even our less productive walks were filled with fascinating creatures and on this occasion we encountered a couple of blanford's rats, one of which tarried long enough for some photographs, another golden palm civet, which sadly did not, a highly attractive green vine snake and several lizards and frogs. When we returned to the lodge, James and I sat quietly down by the river and while we did not see anything, it was wonderful to enjoy the peace and solitude of such a magical setting. The next day was one of the most productive and exciting of the trip, as we got up early to ensure that we were the first vehicle to enter the national park and were almost immediately rewarded by a leopard lying sprawled across the road. It is always special to see these magnificent cats, but this sighting was ruined by the over eager driver of the vehicle behind us, who ignored the fact that we had already stopped in order to allow the leopard to get used to our presence and instead overtook us in an attempt to get his guests closer. All he actually did was scare the leopard into the undergrowth and his lack of patience and understanding cost all of us the chance to savour a better view of the number one predator in the country. Although it is always frustrating when this occurs, and it occurs a great deal all over the world, I was not that disappointed in truth, as we had now seen three of the country's four cat species and I was confident that we would encounter plenty of leopards when we moved on to Yala National Park. As other vehicles arrived and started searching back and forth for the cat, which did reappear on at least two occasions throughout the day, we left to explore on our own. After stopping to savour a gorgeous sunrise, we spotted two ruddy mongooses on a stone ridge, which was then joined by a peacock that began displaying in the first rays of the morning sun. The peacock was not actually in the best position, as it was partially obscured by a section of rock, but it still looked extraordinarily beautiful in the early morning light and at one stage the two mongooses were scurrying around in the foreground, while the peacock strutted majestically in the background. My camera kept moving between the two subjects and although I spent some time attempting to take one great shot of both species, they would not entirely cooperate and I

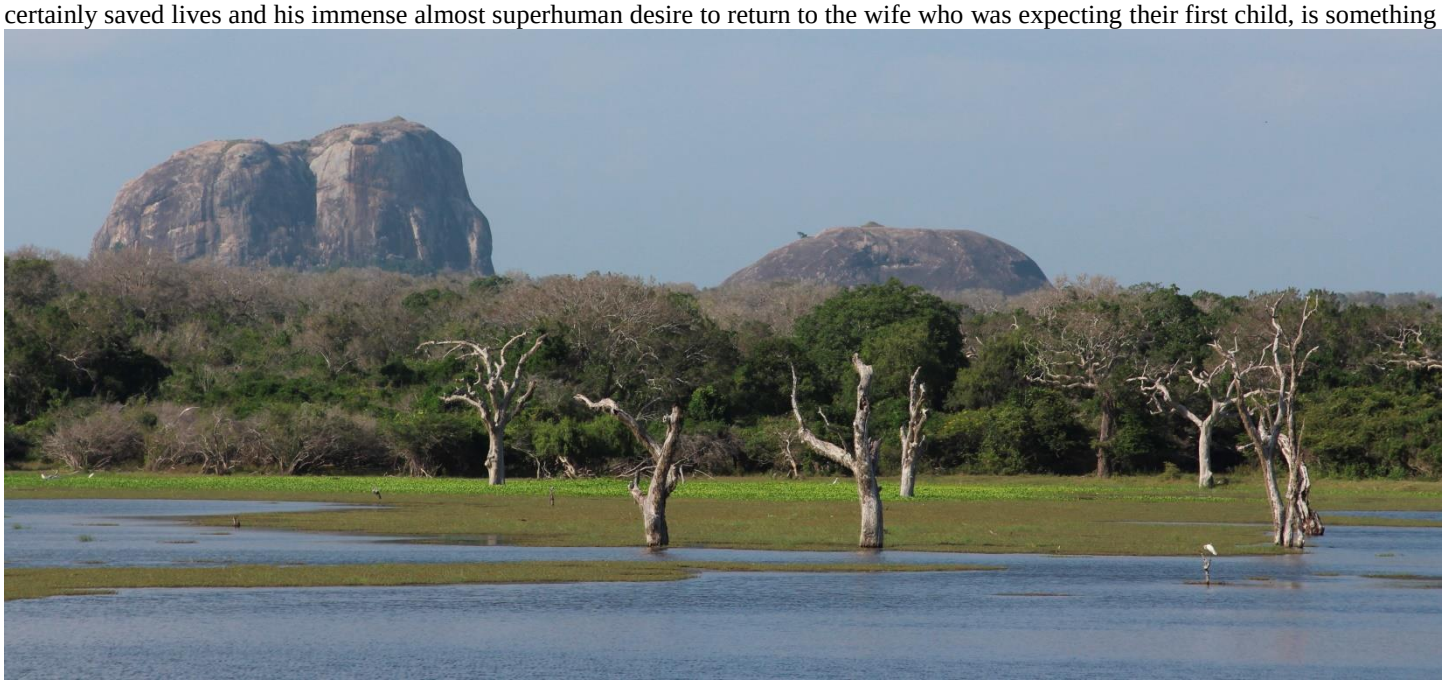


could not quite make it work to my satisfaction. After the constraints of the rainforest, it was an absolute joy to be exploring the wide open spaces of Udawalawe and to be encountering plains animals again, including elephants, spotted deer and both species of buffalo,

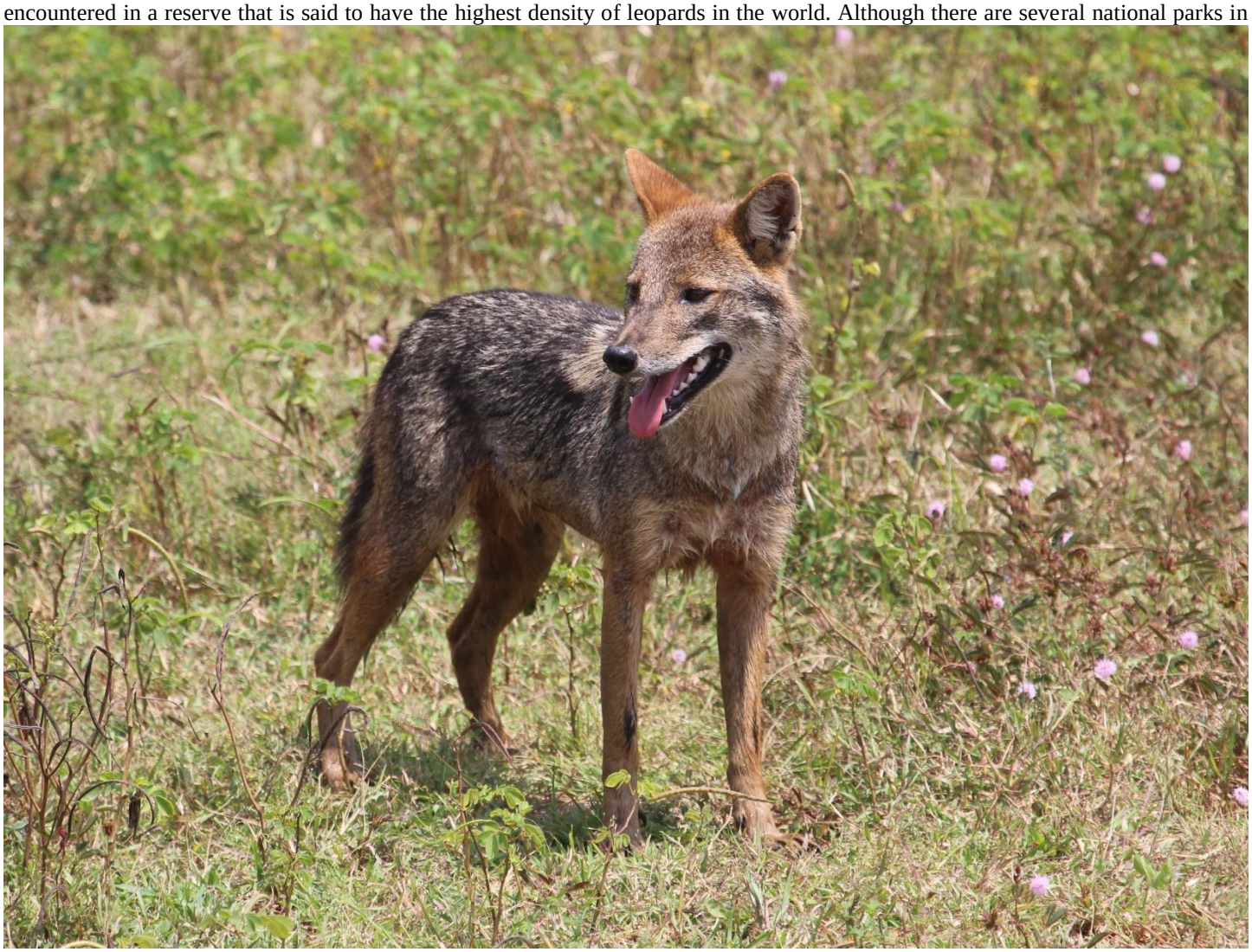
Indian water buffalo, that we had seen previously on the drive to Horton Plains, and feral water buffalo, which are a wild version of the domestic Asian water buffalo. These domestic buffalos have lived free in parts of Sri Lanka for centuries and you can generally determine the difference between the two species by the shape of their horns, as the horns of the domestic variety curve significantly around the back of the animal's head, while the horns of the wild version grow up and to the side, as per the picture on this page. The national park was originally created in order to protect the wildlife displaced by the construction of the local reservoir and is home to a large number of elephants, many of which we encountered as the heat of the day intensified and the elephants began taking advantage of the various water sources throughout the reserve. We watched several small herds drinking and bathing in different areas, including a mother and calf that were completely submerged at one stage, with just their trunks showing above the water. Watching elephants frolicking in the water is one of the great wildlife spectacles and the weather was so hot that James and I also took the opportunity to cool down when we stopped at a river to give our driver a break at the height of the midday sun. That particular stretch of river was a popular spot to have lunch and while our driver slept, a giant squirrel mugged us, running off with a banana before returning to beg for more. From the size of it and the fact that it could barely climb a tree, this was not an isolated occurrence and as other vehicles arrived, the squirrel departed to try its luck elsewhere. While we relaxed, our guide mentioned that many years ago, he had been sitting in exactly the same spot on his own, when a pangolin walked out of the forest and ambled across the clearing directly in front of him. He walked next to this rare animal for several metres in broad daylight, but did not even have a camera to hand and has not seen a pangolin at Udawalawe since. It was yet another reminder of the often surreal nature of wildlife travel, but it further fuelled my desire to find this elusive creature, as I have only ever encountered two of the eight pangolin species that occur worldwide, one in Borneo and the other in Tanzania. In addition to a large variety of birds, particularly water birds and bee-eaters, Udawalawe provided us with our best views of crocodiles to date, we had previously seen a few in the distance at Sigiriya, and our first daylight encounters with golden jackals, which were at distance and would be improved on at both

Yala and Wilpattu. As with all of the national parks in Sri Lanka, no spotlighting is allowed at Udawalawe and we therefore again headed to one of the local areas known to our guide. I must admit that I had pangolins on my mind after the earlier conversation and was not really expecting to see the cat that I spotted sitting on an old iron bridge over a small canal. The cat made no attempt to move and we were close enough to clearly see that it was a fishing cat. We could not really believe our good fortune, as we had encountered two new cats in a single day and had now seen all four cat species in Sri Lanka, which was one of my main hopes for the tour. We would have been delighted enough with that, but then my guide spotted a second cat and we spent about thirty minutes watching the two animals before driving on a few metres and instantly finding a third. At this stage we realised that we had chanced upon a mother with young and were in the priviledged position of being able to watch a family unit interact. A few Indian gerbils and a snake aside, we did not see a great deal else during the course of the drive, but when we returned all three cats were still on the bank and we settled down to watch them again. As we were about to depart, our guide shouted 'otter' and we looked down to see the head of a Eurasian otter peering out of what presumably was its holt at the edge of the water. The otter initially disappeared, but then climbed out onto the bank to scent mark its territory, an act that it repeated on several occasions in slightly different areas. The cats were extremely interested in the new arrival and our guide did speculate that they might even be hunting it, but the otter did not appear to be overly concerned by their presence, although it was certainly aware of them, and continued to move in and out of the water as if the cats were not there. We eventually decided to leave in case our spotlights were endangering the otter by illuminating it, but I do not think that was the case, as it appeared that both species had made their homes here and probably encountered each other on a more or less nightly basis. As we discussed a remarkable day on the drive back to the lodge, I mentioned to our guide that I was now convinced we would observe every carnivore in the country, as we had started the day still needing to find four species, but were finishing it only needing to find a sloth bear to complete a fairly unique set. There was now even the possibility that we would encounter every large mammal in Sri Lanka, or at least those that occur in the areas that we would be visiting, as hog deer can only be found in one or two isolated areas and these were not on our itinerary. The only two major species outstanding, excluding the sloth bear, were the inordinately elusive pangolin and the southern red muntjak, which I was fairly confident we would come across at one or both of our two remaining destinations. Whether we succeded or not would almost certainly rest on the pangolin, but we had already enjoyed astonishing success across a superb trip and our short stay at Udawalawe had definitely ensured that we would return home happy. We had one final game drive at the national park the next morning and although we did find yet another new mammal species, our 59th of the tour, it was not a pangolin or even a sloth bear. Instead James spotted an Indian bush rat scurrying through the undergrowth and I managed to take a couple of pictures before it disappeared. Despite our great success to date and the obvious anticipation that you always sense when moving to an exciting new area, it was almost with mixed feelings that I travelled to our next destination, Yala National Park, as it suddenly dawned on me that I had not visited the region since before the 2004 tsunami struck and over 230,000 people were killed in a matter of minutes. If I am honest, although it had flitted across my mind on a few occasions during the tour, I

had not given that tragic day a great deal of thought until I began to partially recognise certain areas and realised how close we were to a region devastated by that catastrophic event over a decade before. I was actually in India when the tsunami hit, safely tucked away in Jaisalmer, as I had taken James to see his first tiger at the age of five and can vividly recall standing in the hotel lobby waiting to visit the nearby desert, while the entire building shook around us. I will equally never forget the expression of both amazement and excitement on James' face when I explained that we had just experienced a minor earthquake and although we spent the rest of the morning searching for wildlife together, our conversation, as well as his many animated questions, never strayed far from the momentous natural phenomenon that he had been part of for the first time. It was only as events unfolded and the scale of the disaster became apparent, that we realised the tremor we had experienced was little more than an aftershock and had been insignificant in comparison to the gigantic earthquake that had ruptured the seafloor and forced a colossal wall of water across the Indian Ocean. Indonesia bore the brunt of the ensuing devastation with almost 170,000 deaths, but over 35,000 Sri Lankans were also killed, as well as 20,000 Indians. It was a natural disaster on an almost unprecedented scale and whilst the simple statistics, as horrifying as they are, record exactly how many people were killed or displaced, they do not even begin to do justice to the individual stories of suffering and courage within a tragedy that destroyed, or at least changed forever, the lives of literally millions of people. One of those remarkable stories was told by our guide, who was at Yala when the tsunami struck. Although it is not my place to fully relay his extraordinary tale in this format, I can say that his gripping account had a profound effect on me. His instincts and swift reactions certainly saved lives and his immense almost superhuman desire to return to the wife who was expecting their first child, is something



that I will never forget. To call it a tale of courage and survival would be too simple in many ways, as it was more an account of one individuals sheer will and determination not to be separated from his cherished wife and family. We would have three and a half days to explore Yala, which is probably Sri Lanka's most famous national park, principally due to the ease with which leopards can be encountered in a reserve that is said to have the highest density of leopards in the world. Although there are several national parks in



Africa where these cats are also routinely observed, certainly none that I have visited could rival the twenty five different leopards that my guide has seen at Yala in a single day and eventually we had to instruct our driver to ignore the leopard sightings that the other drivers reported to him, just so that we could concentrate on the many other species that occur here and are also seen fairly easily. Whilst most people visit just for a single day, generally with the sole intention of finding a leopard, Yala is a beautiful and highly diverse reserve, particularly when you begin taking note of the numerous bird and reptile species, and in all we saw 24 different mammals during our stay, excluding bats, which was one more than we had even been able to achieve across the various distinct habitats explored at Sigiriya. Sadly, the leopard fixation, whilst certainly understandable, can lead to a huge number of vehicles crowded around a single animal and my guide mentioned that it is not unusual to have up to 200 jeeps in the vicinity of one leopard. The situation is not being helped by the way in which the park is currently being managed, as Yala is split into blocks, several of which cannot be visited. This in itself is fine, as it provides undisturbed areas where the wildlife can exist naturally without constantly being pressurised by human activity. However, the main problem is that the roads are not being properly maintained in the accessible blocks and on at least four occasions we were not able to proceed along major circuits that we should have been able to utilise. All of

the game viewing is consequently being squeezed into relatively small sections, which is resulting in terrible congestion when animals are spotted and far too many vehicles constantly traversing the same tiny areas, which in turn is destroying the roads in those areas. Something needs to be done to alleviate the problem and if the authorities do not want to open up the inaccessible regions, then they

need to repair the roads in the other sections and to limit the number of vehicles that are allowed into the park on a daily basis, as some of the congestion that we observed was truly horrendous for a national park and there are simply too many vehicles being allowed to search too small an area. On several occasions we left leopards simply to avoid the crowds, as I would rather sit quietly watching a mongoose on my own than attempt a brief glimpse of a leopard among a throng of 100 jeeps all jostling for position. Our other problem at Yala was that we were staying too far away from the park, as the drive took almost an hour to reach the entrance gate from our hotel, which would have been fine if we had not been spotlighting near the park each evening. As it was, we had to return to the hotel for dinner after each day in the park and then drive back yet again later that night. This basically added more or less four hours driving time every day, which was fairly significant when you consider that we were spotlighting until around 2am and then getting up at 4.30am to ensure that we were in the park early each morning. I will arrange for us to be much closer when I next visit and that certainly applies to any guests that I organise trips for, as most general tourists will not be able to cope with that schedule and the four hours spent driving each day would have been far better utilised either looking for animals or catching up on some much

needed sleep. Another issue, although it was not one that we could have done a great deal about and will fortunately not arise in future, was that the road my guide generally uses to spotlight along was being upgraded and we therefore had to try a slightly different area at night. We were still very successful and saw a great deal, but the alternate road was busier and the vegetation was set further back, which made photographs more difficult, particularly without our powerful spotlight. Despite these few issues, we had an

outstanding time at Yala and thoroughly enjoyed exploring an exceptionally scenic and productive park. The ease with which we could find and spend time with so many magnificent animals was one of the highlights of the tour and we had our best views of several species here, including crocodile, wild boar, golden jackal, spotted deer, ruddy mongoose and small Indian civet, one of which was observed in daylight for the only time on the trip. Our visit could not actually have started in more auspicious fashion, for while everyone else was tearing around looking for leopards, we found the one animal that I was desperate to see at Yala, a sloth bear. I was

more excited by this sighting than probably any other of the trip, not so much because we had now seen the full set of Sri Lankan carnivores, although that was great, but more because I simply love bears and spend as much time as possible savouring their engaging antics and fascinating behaviour whenever I get the opportunity. In the previous eighteen months alone I had encountered six of the world's eight bear species and I would have happily spent the rest of the afternoon with this one if another vehicle had not arrived and scared it off, just as it had been about to leave the vegetation that had largely obscured it for the previous twenty minutes. We had still enjoyed a fairly decent view and it was wonderful to hear the bear digging and literally sucking up termites, but it would have been far more satisfying to see the animal out in the open and to have been able to take a decent photograph. As it was, I was left with partially concealed shots of its face and a sadly unfulfilled desire to throttle the idiot who simply did not have the patience to wait for the bear to emerge, despite us clearly informing him that it was about to. Never mind, it had still been an exhilarating and unforgettable experience and it very much set the tone for one of the most enjoyable sections of the

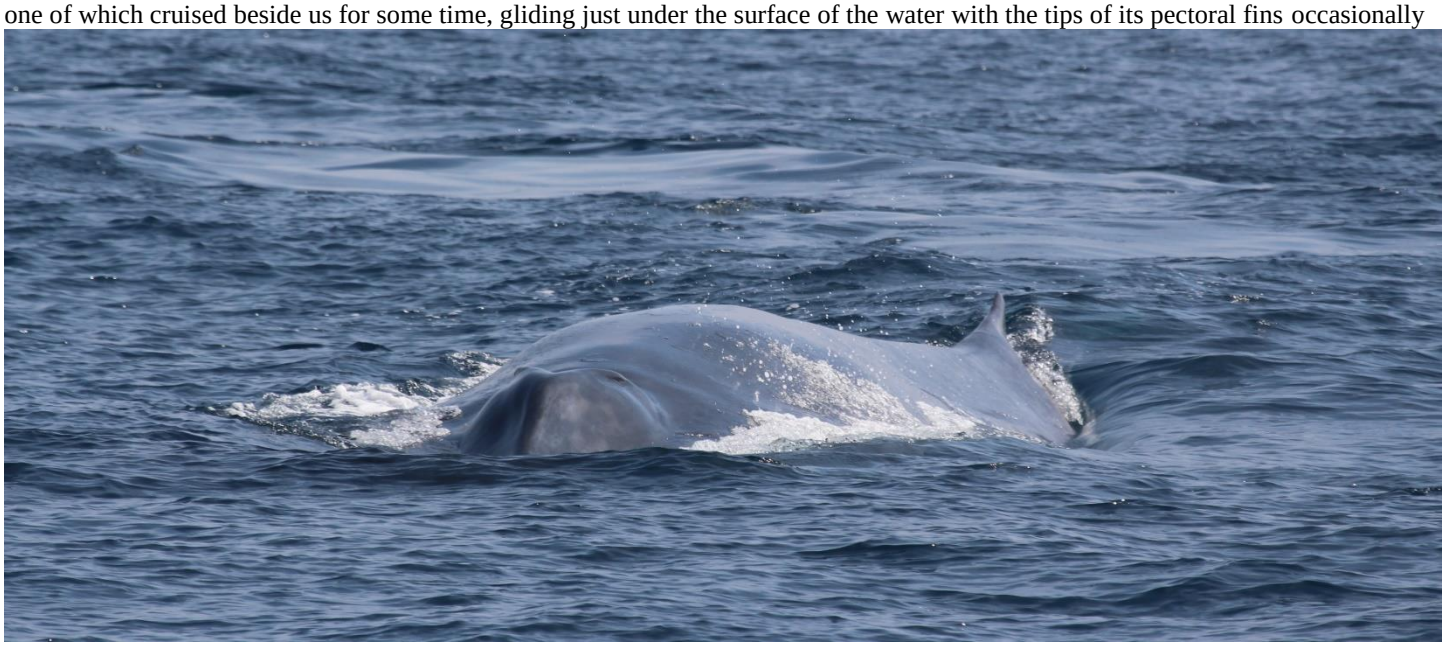
tour. Leopards of course played an enormous role in this enjoyment, for while I was not generally prepared to battle with dozens of other vehicles to see them, we still spent a long time searching for these graceful cats and were rewarded with several excellent sightings. In all we were to see nine different leopards at Yala, including a couple within a few metres of our jeep, and that number would have been significantly higher if we had investigated every report that our driver received, as many of the guides and drivers cooperate within the park and use their mobile phones to alert each other when these and other animals are spotted. It is a good system in many ways, as tourists are understandably desperate to see such iconic creatures, but it also contributes to the ensuing chaos as soon as an animal breaks cover and by far our best leopard encounters would take place towards the end of the trip at Wilpattu National Park, which receives far fewer visitors than Yala. Rather than constantly chasing leopards, we instead attempted to escape the crowds and to concentrate our efforts on the rest of the marvellous wildlife that adorns the park, but is so often overlooked. As such we were able to observe elephants drinking peacefully at secluded waterholes, buffalos likewise wallowing contentedly in muddy pools and wild boar grazing in the short grass, as their tiny piglets huddled in the protective shadows of their mothers. Eye-catching sambar and spotted deer watchfully suckled their young, while ornate bee-eaters swooped colourfully on unsuspecting insects and macaques and langurs moved raucously from tree to tree in search of food. The evocative calls of peafowl filled the air and all of these and many other wonders played out against a spectacular sun-drenched backdrop of enchanting forests, verdant plains and enticing blue lakes. In short, it was the very best of times, and although we maintained the intense schedule in terms of how long we spent in and around the park, we had already seen more than we

could possibly have wished for and consequently adopted a fairly relaxed approach during each drive, taking time to appreciate all of the wildlife on view in a truly splendid setting. In Sri Lanka you are not allowed to leave the national parks unless you pay again to return, but in any case, our hotel was so far away that it did not make sense for us to do so at lunchtime, as we would have lost almost four hours just to take a two hour break. Instead we took our rest along a beautiful stretch of shallow river and as our driver enjoyed a well deserved sleep, we took inspiration from the elephants and headed straight to the refreshing water. Everything was fairly relaxed at Yala and although the exit gates were meant to close at six, the leopards were of course more active then and most vehicles did not actually depart until dusk. Our nights were busier, partly because we had the two hours additional driving, but also due to the fact that we were so successful that none of us really wanted to stop. Several jungle cat sightings and a brief glimpse of only the second rusty-spotted cat of the trip, meant that we had now seen three cats at one location for the first time and we also encountered numerous small Indian civets, as well as both golden and common palm civet. Indian gerbils and hares were routinely observed and we also had a couple of excellent views of white-spotted chevrotains, although I did not enjoy a great deal of luck with this species in terms of photographs and was again unable to take even a reasonable shot. The pangolin still refused to make an appearance despite our best efforts, but we did find another new rodent in the form of a soft-furred metad, which was the 61st different mammal species of the trip and equalled our guide's previous record for a single tour. The only element of our adventure that was not going so well, at least for me, was the cricket, as the World Cup was now in full swing and England had been humiliated again, this time by New Zealand. Sri Lanka were due to play Afghanistan the very next day, by which time we would be on the south coast in Mirissa, anticipating an encounter with the largest animal that has ever lived. The next day was actually the easiest of the trip, as it was just a travelling day and we then had the entire afternoon and evening free to relax before we took the first of two boat trips

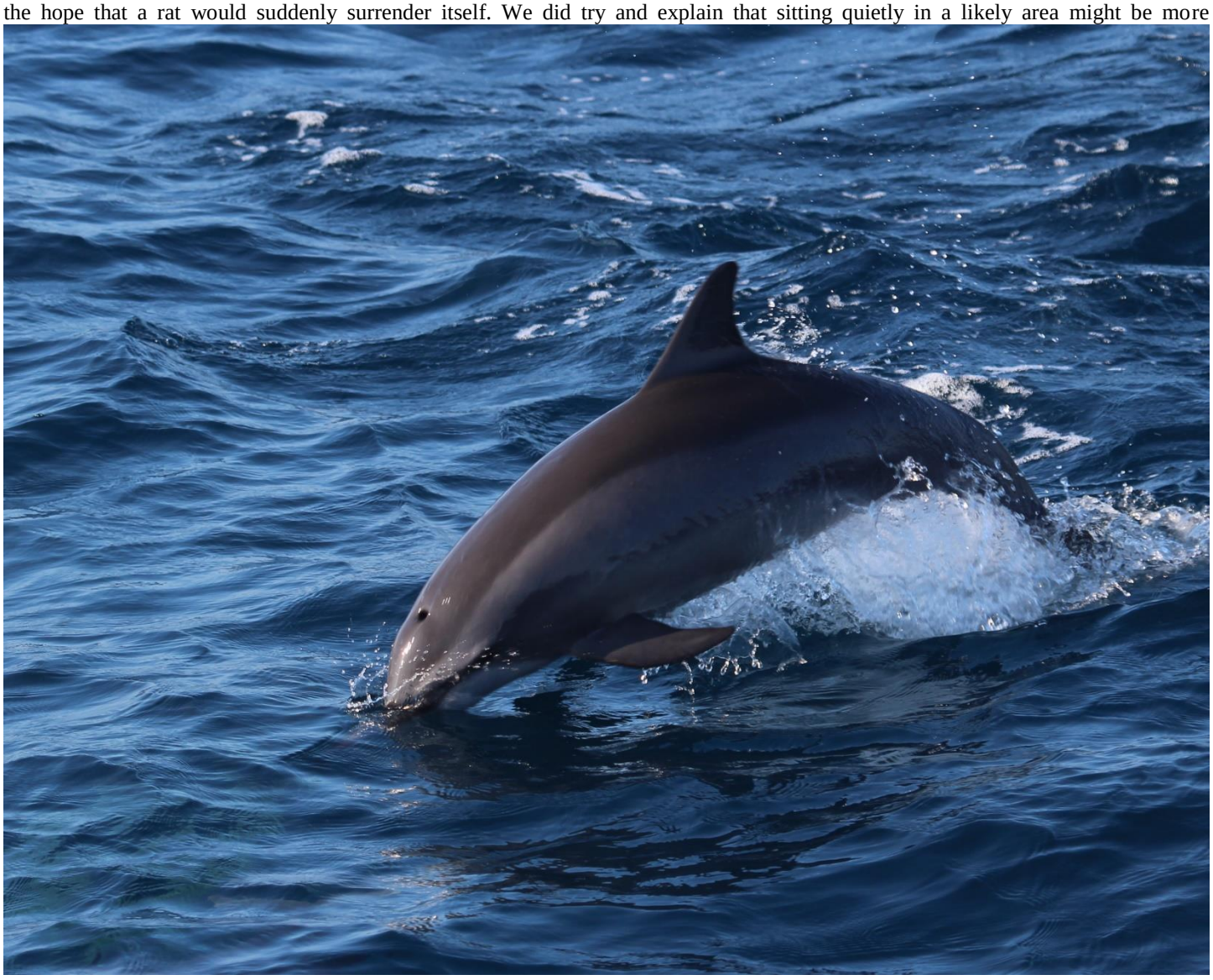
the following morning. Fortunately, the grounds of the hotel were visited by both purple-faced langurs and Indian brown mongooses and I was therefore able to spend much of my spare time observing and photographing these. The mongooses were particularly entertaining, as they were often in pairs and would creep furtively from cover to cover before instantly freezing whenever someone walked by or approached. I was actually delighted to see them so well, as we had observed all four mongoose species previously, but had really only enjoyed good views of ruddy mongoose and it was gratifying to be able to photograph a different species at last. We

also photographed a hybrid fishing cat in the hotel garden, which possibly explains why the mongooses were so cautious, and visited another flying fox colony next door. However, as pleasing as these additional and unexpected encounters undoubtedly were, we were all aware that we were visiting Mirissa for one reason and one reason only, to see blue whales. We had two boat trips planned, on successive days, but of course we were hoping that we would be successful on the first, just to take the pressure off. In reality, the chances of seeing blue whales here are very high, as it has been established in the last few years that a large number of whales are resident in these waters and do not migrate. Our guide estimated that the boat company we were using had a 95% success rate and fortunately we did not reduce that percentage, as we saw our first whale within an hour or so of sailing and were able to watch several

of these majestic creatures over the next three hours. However many times you see these animals, you are never really prepared for just how vast and imposing they are and when they swim past your boat, which suddenly seems very small and insignificant, it is usually just a case of standing there in awe and reverence, generally with your mouth open in astonishment. Photographs of course are fairly difficult, as you can only see a small part of each whale and they very rarely breach, but it does not overly matter and on several occasions I discarded my camera in order to simply savour the magnificence before me. I did get some pictures of a few whales fluking, but none of them do justice to the incredible power and grace of these animals and I have only included these shots to give people a rough idea of the views that they can expect in this part of the world. Sadly some of the boats chased the whales and got far too close, which is totally inappropriate and actually unnecessary, as the whales will often come to you and on our second trip we had one huge specimen dive within maybe ten metres of the side of our boat. It was so close that I could not have used my camera even if I had wanted to, which I did not, as I made no attempt to even lift it and just watched spellbound as this humbling animal raised itself in the water before plummeting to the depths a few metres from me. Absolutely breathtaking and one of the highlights of this or any other trip that I have been involved with. Although it was not great to see the whales pursued, the reactions of the passengers on many of the boats was lovely to observe, as there were audible screams of delight whenever a whale appeared and even more cries of amazement and admiration when one dived or fluked. I am used to being quiet around wildlife, even when it is not strictly necessary, but I could certainly understand their communal response and it was heartening to watch an animal evoke such a spontaneous reaction in so many people. In addition to the whales, we also encountered small pods of spinner dolphins each day, as well as two manta rays, one of which cruised beside us for some time, gliding just under the surface of the water with the tips of its pectoral fins occasionally



exposed. We did not spend as much time with the dolphins as I would have hoped, but the whales were understandably the crew's main priority and at least we got fairly close to one pod and were able to watch a couple of them bow riding. We did also have a chance of encountering a few other marine mammals and I was hoping that we might find a sperm whale, as they are observed reasonably regularly in these waters. However, as much as I would have liked to find one or two additional species, it would be slightly churlish to complain about our luck, not having spent several hours in the presence of arguably the most impressive creature on the planet. Our last wildlife activity at Mirissa was in complete contrast, as my guide and I had both been hoping to see either a lesser or greater bandicoot rat throughout the trip and we decided that a visit to the local rubbish tip might be worthwhile. What followed was one of the most surreal wildlife experiences I have ever known, and believe me, I have known a few, as we firstly had to bribe the workers to let us into their precious dump and then we were forced to follow a team of men banging and moving rubbish in the hope that a rat would suddenly surrender itself. We did try and explain that sitting quietly in a likely area might be more



productive, but they insisted on ‘helping’ and were genuinely surprised when the usually abundant rat population failed to materialise. The men were making so much commotion that when we reached a few storage sheds, I began checking the ceiling beams for fleeing rats and this at least worked. Sadly, the rodent that my spotlight picked out was a brown rat and not one of the two bandicoot species. Eventually we gave up and having watched blue whales earlier in the day, I think that the saying ‘from the sublime to the ridiculous’ may have been invented for moments like this. We spent a long time laughing about it in any case, although why I was laughing I have no idea, as that may be the most expensive brown rat sighting of all time. The next day we were due to travel back towards Colombo, as our guide had to attend a meeting before we then continued to our final destination, Wilpattu National Park. The journey was not a long one, but our guide suggested that we take a detour on the way, as he knew of a secret reserve where a hog deer breeding programme had been established. Although I am unable to reveal the location of the reserve and cannot take guests there in the foreseeable future, it was an unexpected opportunity that I was delighted to accept, particularly as these animals are endangered and are struggling across every area in which they are known to occur. They are not actually native to Sri Lanka, but were introduced several centuries ago and have suffered a serious population decline in the last two decades. In fact, they now exist in only a few tiny isolated areas of the country and are very difficult to find. We were only allowed into the reserve for an hour and only then because of what I do and the conservation work that I am involved with. The reserve is not currently large, but is in the process of being expanded and in all we saw about ten animals, which are living and breeding in a totally wild environment. I was not initially sure whether to include these animals as wild on my mammal list for the trip, but there are far bigger issues at stake than that and I ultimately only decided to when I saw a fawn that I was informed was eighteen days old. Only the one ranger had ever seen this animal before and if they are breeding successfully and naturally, then they are probably no different than the many other animals that live on protected reserves across the globe, including rhinos and tigers. More importantly, something is being done about their plight and eventually the animals bred here will be moved to larger reserves around the country. The entire experience was an encouraging one and I intend to stay in touch with the dedicated individuals involved and hopefully will eventually be able to take guests to see the

important conservation work that is taking place here. As an added bonus, we also encountered a yellow-striped chevrotain, although this certainly was a semi-habituated individual and even then I was not able to take an adequate photograph. After the marine mammals and rather expensive brown rat, the hog deer was the 65th mammal of the trip and we now only needed to find a muntjac and a pangolin in order to have seen every single large land mammal in Sri Lanka. Our final opportunity for both would be at

Wilpattu, but before then our guide had kindly invited us to his home and we had the great pleasure of meeting his lovely wife, two fine boys and his mother and father, who told me about his umpiring days in England, strangely, he had lived within a few miles of me, and commiserated with James and I regarding the woeful state of English cricket. The only good news on that front, was that England did now have a victory in the World Cup, having overcome the minnows Scotland. We had three full days at Wilpattu, although the last two would be without our guide, as this national park had not been included on the original programme and by the time that it was added, he was already committed to another tour. He would though be available for two night drives, the first of which produced a 66th mammal species, a tickell's bat. Both night drives were in fact productive, with grey loris sightings on each, as well as common palm civets, small Indian civets and two white-spotted chevrotains, the second of which I managed to photograph in an overgrown cemetery. Although the final reserve visited on a long tour can occasionally be an anti-climax, principally because you have already experienced the excitement of having seen most of the wildlife elsewhere, this did not occur at Wilpattu, as we had some superb encounters and the park is so picturesque that even when you are not seeing animals, which was rare in itself, you are enjoying a wide array of beautiful and diverse habitats. In fact, this final national park was probably my favourite in Sri Lanka, as it was home to all of the animals of the dry zone parks, but had none of their issues. There were relatively few visitors, which meant that most of the sightings could be experienced alone or with one or two other vehicles at worst and it is a large reserve with an extensive network of roads, which again enables you to drive for long periods without encountering anyone else. The park was closed for a number of years during the civil war, as the Tamil Tigers murdered eighteen villagers within the forest reserve area in May 1985, a few hours after they had massacred 146 Sinhalese civilians at the Buddhist

shrine in Anuradhapura. Although there were many, this was one of the worst atrocities of the conflict, as entirely innocent men, women and children, including nuns and monks, were mercilessly slaughtered whilst at prayer. This outrage, and the fact that the park was closed for so many years for security reasons, no doubt explains why it is less visited than some of the other reserves across the country, although this is now changing and it was encouraging to see several school and college groups enjoying the park while we were there. The name Wilpattu translates roughly as the Land of Lakes and the large number of natural shallow lakes, known as 'Willus' or 'Villus' in some sources, produce a unique appearance and, in many ways, an equally distinct atmosphere. Whilst there are extensive forest sections and areas of savannah, the numerous attractive lakes, many of which have their own sand beaches, transform several of the game driving circuits and provide an almost incomparable setting for much of the wildlife viewing. As we had only one day remaining with our guide, and three in total, we were hoping that this setting would produce an appropriately strong finish to what

had already been a very special adventure. A southern red muntjac and a pangolin were obviously now the main targets and we encountered the first of the two within thirty minutes of our early morning arrival. We had now seen 67 different mammal species, an incredible number for Sri Lanka, but as always, the individual animal was far more important than any record and we spent a long

time with these delicate creatures over the course of all three days, partly in an attempt to take a reasonable photograph through the maddening vegetation and partly because I had somehow managed to miss both muntjac species in Borneo the previous year and was therefore simply relieved to finally find them. The Borneo trip had been 32 days in length and it was day 21 when we spotted the muntjac in Sri Lanka, so I had spent 53 days searching for a deer that I could see within about six hours back in the United Kingdom. Of course they are different species, but it is still ironic how often you find the supposedly impossible animals fairly easily and the so called common ones prove to be implausibly difficult. At least on this trip, we were ultimately denied by something truly rare, as the elusive Indian pangolin more than lived up to its reputation and was the one mammal that we were not destined to see. I always knew that it was going to take a great deal of good fortune to find a pangolin and we searched as hard as I believe it is possible to search in order to try to make it happen, but sadly it was simply not to be. Our final total of 67 species was still a considerable improvement on our guide's previous record of 61 and if you add the two possible golden palm civet subspecies and the five confirmed primate subspecies, then we achieved a remarkable total of 74 singular species and all viewed without the aid of a single trap or net. My only slight frustration was that we could not spotlight in any of the national parks, particularly Wilpattu, as we observed several extremely fresh pangolin diggings at this last reserve and knew that we would have an excellent chance of finding the creature had we been permitted to enter at night. No matter, as we have two long and exciting expeditions to India in 2016 and will again turn our attention to the mysterious pangolin, hopefully with better luck. My guide is also considering the possibility of creating a pangolin sanctuary, as he is already involved in a number of conservation projects and owns some land that has been purchased in order to help protect vulnerable ecosystems. I will see how this develops over time and would love to become involved if at all possible, either personally or through Wild Globe. Although we were not successful in terms of our one final target, Wilpattu still very much delivered the strong finish that I was anticipating and we enjoyed some splendid views of most of the plains animals encountered previously at Udawalawe and Yala, including a huge male elephant drinking and eating happily in one of the pretty lakes. We spent a long time with this imposing, but gentle elephant and even longer with the two leopards that we had the great pleasure of finding entirely on our own. We watched the first, a reasonably large female, walking and stalking deer for the best part of two hours and we followed the second, a very large male, quietly and unobtrusively, for around four.

Away from the clamour of the crowds and the chaos of crazy or desperate drivers, leopards are amazing animals to observe and the second in particular was as relaxed as you would expect given that he is the apex predator in these lands and lord of all he surveys. He spent the majority of his time either marking his territory or asleep in the middle of the road, generally upside down with his legs dangling in the air. At one stage he walked past our open jeep, stopping less than a metre away and looking directly up at me. I had already abandoned my camera, it was useless with him at this distance, and as our eyes met, my only thoughts were how much I love doing this. It was one of those reaffirming moments that makes everything ok, even dozens of sleepless nights and hundreds of hours spent searching for a pangolin in vain.

The female was far less calm, but principally because she was hunting, and not the half-hearted efforts that you sometimes see, but full on crawling along on her stomach hunting. She was actually fairly comical, as she was stalking from the road looking into the forest and we did not have a great view of her intended prey. It therefore appeared as if she was performing an elaborate mime, purely for our benefit. One moment she would either pad or run towards a certain point, before stopping dead and dropping to her stomach to begin edging forward gradually. This stealthy approach would continue for some time and then she would suddenly spring to her feet and run further along the road. She was clearly attempting to intercept a deer making its way across the forest floor and must have been fairly experienced, for as soon as one of her intended targets made its traditional alarm call, she instantly stood, looked round slightly sheepishly and walked off. No matter how many times you witness this type of natural behaviour, it remains fascinating and even after all these years, I still feel privileged to be able to experience these intimate and precious moments. As is often the case on long trips, I spent much of the last few days attempting to improve my collection of photographs and was able to get some nice shots of spotted deer, golden jackal and wild boar, as well as several exotic birds. We also enjoyed our best grey mongoose sighting at Wilpattu, which meant that I had eventually been able to photograph three of the four mongoose species, which at one stage did not appear likely. We were less fortunate with jungle cats, at least in daylight, as we never did encounter any during the day and missed one at Wilpattu by apparently no more than thirty seconds, at least according to the driver of one of the few vehicles we stopped next to, who took great delight in telling us that it had just been sitting on a fallen tree within three metres of the road. We were not that disappointed, as we had our own unforgettable moment at this last reserve and thankfully it happened on the first day, when our guide

was still with us. I generally try to be philosophical when searching for wildlife, as I have experienced my share of triumphs and disasters over the years and am all too aware that nothing is guaranteed where wild animals are concerned. However, I find it far more difficult to maintain this tolerant attitude when someone has done something inordinately stupid, particularly if their actions have genuinely frightened a creature or severely impacted other people, including my guests. Although such incidents were rare on this trip, the one animal that I would have really loved a better view of was a sloth bear, as we should have seen one extremely well at Yala and only failed to because one driver was too impatient to wait for the bear to emerge and consequently drove so close that he scared it

away. That happens from time to time of course, but the really frustrating part was that we had informed both the driver and his guests that this would occur and he simply ignored us. There is not a great deal that you can do in those situations and fortunately James and I have seen many sloth bears previously, but we were still disappointed and, a pangolin aside, the one animal that I really wanted to see at Wilpattu was a sloth bear. The fact that we eventually saw two, was entirely due to our guide, as he spotted a black shape in the distance and instantly instructed our driver to slow down and then stop. The bear was initially obscured in the vegetation, but it was clearly a sloth bear and it was now either going to cross the road or disappear back into the forest and wait for us to pass before crossing. The tension during those twenty or so seconds while it decided was palpable, but to our great relief, it chose to cross and, to our even greater delight, it was followed by a small cub. Our guide had judged it perfectly, as the mother was fairly nervous with her cub and if we had driven maybe even another ten metres, she could have easily decided not to risk her young and to wait for another opportunity. As it was, the mother crossed with the cub in tow and both animals stopped in the middle of the road and looked directly at us. It was not the end of the trip exactly, but it was the end of our time with our guide and was the perfect way to finish one of the best tours that I have ever been involved with. Our guide had been absolutely brilliant and he offered the bears as his final gift to us, although in truth he owed us absolutely nothing and had performed above and beyond any reasonable expectation. His dedication and enthusiasm were unparalleled in my experience, as was his knowledge and it was a total joy to spend more than three weeks exploring his beautiful homeland with him. James was also exceptional and I was extremely proud that he had played such an important part in an often extremely testing schedule. My son was growing up in front of my eyes and it would not have been possible to maintain such an

intense pace without his constant support. Between the three of us, we compiled a sightings record that included almost every major land mammal in the country, but the list was only a small part of the story, as the unforgettable memories of so many majestic animals will linger long after the list is forgotten. Sri Lanka may only be a small island, but it has a big heart and its people have an indomitable spirit that has allowed them to overcome a turbulent recent history. Their hospitality is legendary and it would be difficult to think of a more ideal destination for a family holiday. The wildlife is diverse and relatively easy to see, the scenery is as breathtaking as the wildlife and the weather is generally as superb as both. Most of the major destinations are within undemanding drives and a great deal of the accommodation is first class. We made friends wherever we travelled and I will never forget the many small acts of kindness that so many people showed us, from pointing out an area where they had once seen a mongoose to inviting us into their home to shelter from the rain. The hospitality even extended to our farewell at the airport, as I sat watching Sri Lanka humiliate England by nine wickets in the cricket World Cup and the many Sri Lankans present did their best to suppress their jubilation in front of me. A few even put an arm around my shoulder and offered a few words of consolation. They obviously thought that I looked depressed, but if I did, it had nothing to do with the cricket and everything to do with the fact that I had to return home. I was actually more than pleased to see so many of them enjoying themselves, as I could not think of a people who deserved it more.

For the purposes of this report, all variations of the golden palm civet are recorded as one species and I have only included the first destination that each bat species was encountered at.

No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Leopard	Panthera pardus	One at Udawalawe, nine at Yala, two at Wilpattu.
2	Jungle Cat	Felis chaus	Around ten at Sigiriya and Yala.
3	Rusty-spotted Cat	Prionailurus rubiginosus	One next to our vehicle on a night drive at Sigiriya and a distant sighting of one at night near Yala.
4	Fishing Cat	Prionailurus viverrinus	Family of three on a night drive near Udawalawe.
5	Golden Jackal	Canis aureus	Occasional sightings at Sigiriya, Udawalawe, Yala and Wilpattu.
6	Sloth Bear	Melursus ursinus	One at Yala and a mother and cub at Wilpattu.
7	Eurasian Otter	Lutra lutra	One animal with the fishing cats at Udawalawe.
8	Small Indian Civet	Viverricula indica	Relatively common at Sigiriya, Kitulgala, Yala and Wilpattu.
9	Common Palm Civet	Paradoxurus hermaphroditus	Commonly encountered at Sigiriya, Yala and Wilpattu.
10	Golden Palm Civet	Paradoxurus zeylonensis	Two on our first night and several further sightings at Sigiriya, Sinharaja, Udawalawe and Yala.
11	Indian Grey Mongoose	Herpestes edwardsii	Two within the grounds of the hotel at Sigiriya, one at Yala and one at Wilpattu.
12	Indian Brown Mongoose	Herpestes fuscus	One running across the road at Horton Plains and several within the grounds of the hotel at Mirissa.
13	Ruddy Mongoose	Herpestes smithii	The most commonly observed mongoose species, seen at Sigiriya, Udawalawe, Yala and Wilpattu.
14	Stripe-necked Mongoose	Herpestes vitticollis	One in the very early morning running across the road as we entered Horton Plains.
15	Sambar Deer	Rusa unicolor	Abundant at Horton Plains and also observed in lower numbers at Yala and Wilpattu.
16	Spotted Deer	Axis axis	A handful at night at Sigiriya and larger herds at Udawalawe, Yala and Wilpattu.
17	Hog Deer	Axis porcinus	Around ten at one protected reserve.

18	Southern Red Muntjak	Muntiacus muntjak	Around twenty individuals at Wilpattu.
19	Yellow-striped Chevrotain	Moschiola kathygre	One briefly at Kitulgala and a semi-habituated individual at the hog deer reserve.
20	White-spotted Chevrotain	Moschiola meminna	A few individuals observed at Sigiriya, Yala and Wilpattu.
21	Indian Water Buffalo	Bubalus arnee	Herds and individuals at Horton Plains, Udawalawe and Yala.
22	Feral Water Buffalo	Bubalus bubalis	Common at Udawalawe and Yala.
23	Wild Boar	Sus scrofa	One herd each at Sigiriya and Udawalawe, common at Yala and Wilpattu.
24	Asian Elephant	Elephas maximus	Large numbers at Udawalawe and Yala. One animal twice at Wilpattu.
25	Tufted Grey Langur	Semnopithecus priam	Common at Sigiriya, Udawalawe, Yala and Wilpattu.
26	Purple-faced Langur	Trachypithecus vetulus	All four subspecies at Sigiriya, Horton Plains, Kitulgala, Sinharaja and Mirissa.
27	Toque Macaque	Macaca sinica	Three subspecies at Sigiriya, Nuwara Eliya, Sinharaja, Yala and Wilpattu.
28	Grey Slender Loris	Loris lydekkerianus	Two sightings at Sigiriya and three at Wilpattu.
29	Red Slender Loris	Loris tardigradus	One at distance at Kitulgala and four at Sinharaja.
30	Indian Hare	Lepus nigricollis	Common at several locations.
31	Indian Crested Porcupine	Hystrix indica	One briefly at Kitulgala.
32	Sri Lankan Giant Squirrel	Ratufa macroura	Several sightings at various destinations.
33	Layard's Palm Squirrel	Funambulus layardi	One at both Kitulgala and Sinharaja.
34	Common Palm Squirrel	Funambulus palmarum	Routinely observed at every location.
35	Dusky-striped Squirrel	Funambulus sublineatus	Brief sighting of one animal at Horton Plains.
36	Travancore Flying Squirrel	Petinomys fuscocapillus	Brief and distance view at Kitulgala.
37	Large Brown Flying Squirrel	Petaurista philippensis	Sightings of initially one and then two animals at Sigiriya.
38	Black Rat	Rattus rattus	Three by the river at Victoria Park.
39	Brown Rat	Rattus norvegicus	One at a rubbish tip at Weligama.
40	Indian Gerbil	Tatera indica	Several at night at Sigiriya, Yala and Wilpattu.
41	Little Indian Field Mouse	Mus booduga	Solitary individual at Sigiriya.
42	Asiatic Long-tailed Climbing Mouse	Vandeleuria oleracea	Occasional sightings on night drives at Sigiriya and Wilpattu.
43	Ohiya Rat	Srilankamys ohiensis	One on a night walk at Kitulgala.
44	Indian Bush Rat	Golunda ellioti	One in the undergrowth at Udawalawe and a baby at Yala.
45	Soft-furred Metad	Millardia meltada	Single animal running across the road as we left Yala one evening.
46	Blanford's Rat	Madromys blanfordi	Two individuals on a night walk near Udawalawe.
47	Indian Flying Fox	Pteropus giganteus	Large colony on the drive to Udawalawe.
48	Greater Short-nosed Fruit Bat	Cynopterus sphinx	Walk at Kitulgala.
49	Short-nosed Fruit Bat	Cynopterus brachyotis	Cave near Udawalawe.
50	Leschenault's Rousette	Rousettus leschenaulti	Night activities at Sigiriya.
51	Black-bearded Tomb Bat	Taphozous melanopogon	Second temple complex at Sigiriya.
52	Long-winged Tomb Bat	Taphozous longimanus	First temple complex at Sigiriya.
53	Dusky Leaf-nosed Bat	Hipposideros ater	First temple complex at Sigiriya.
54	Cantor's Leaf-nosed Bat	Hipposideros galeritus	First temple complex at Sigiriya.
55	Indian Leaf-nosed Bat	Hipposideros lankadiva	Second temple complex at Sigiriya.
56	Lesser False Vampire Bat	Megaderma spasma	Night walk at the Popham Arboretum.
57	Beddome's Horseshoe Bat	Rhinolophus beddomei	Village near Sigiriya.
58	Rufous Horseshoe Bat	Rhinolophus rouxii	Village near Sigiriya.

59	Lesser Large-footed Myotis	Myotis hasseltii	Night activities at Sigiriya.
60	Kelaart's Pipistrelle	Pipistrellus ceylonicus	Early morning walk to Horton Plains.
61	Indian Pipistrelle	Pipistrellus coromandra	Night activities at Sigiriya.
62	Least Pipistrelle	Pipistrellus tenuis	Night activities at Sigiriya.
63	Greater Asiatic Yellow House Bat	Scotophilus heathii	Night drive near Yala.
64	Lesser Asiatic Yellow House Bat	Scotophilus kuhlii	Night activities at Sigiriya.
65	Tickell's Bat	Hesperoptenus tickelli	Night drive near Wilpattu.
66	Blue Whale	Balaenoptera musculus	Around eight different animals on the two trips at Mirissa.
67	Spinner Dolphin	Stenella longirostris	One pod each day at Mirissa.

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