SRI LANKA: MAMMALS AND BIRDS

TRIP REPORT

Fishing Cat was seen exceptionally well on our 2024 tour © Mukesh Hirdaramani

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SRI LANKA: MAMMALS AND BIRDS

3-16 March 2024

Leader: Mukesh Hirdaramani

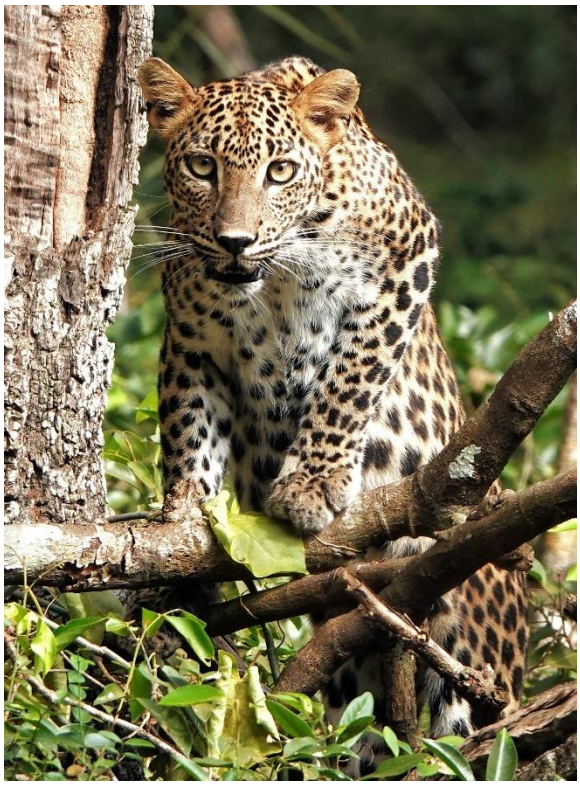
Introduction

We had an immensely successful tour in both the quality and quantity on our sightings of Sri Lanka's rare mammals, with good views of all four species of cat that occur on the island. A total of 39 species of mammals, 144 birds and 20 reptiles and amphibians were recorded on our 14-day journey.

Sri Lanka's rarest cat, the Rusty-spotted Cat, was seen on the doorstep of a house and only after a doubletake did we realise that this was no domestic feline !! A full body view without foliage to obstruct our view in the most unexpected of locations is seldom and sheds light on the behaviour of these special cats and their willingness to prowl urban areas when the night is silent.

Both Red and Grey Loris showed well during our spotlighting sessions and the Giant Flying Squirrel put on a spectacular display as it glided overhead. Despite missing the Stripe-necked Mongoose at the usual location, we were able to find it at a restaurant in Ella and had a bird's eye view of the largest Mongoose in Sri Lanka.

Many species like Northern Palm Civet, Grey and Ruddy Mongooses were encountered during our day and night transfers to the hotels. We explored a few caves for bats and recorded the Schneider's Leaf-nosed Bat, Large Leaf-nosed Bat and Indian Rufous Horseshoe Bat.



Leopard © Judy Parrish

Sri Lanka's largest cat, the Sri Lankan Leopard, was found on both days during our safaris at Wilpattu National Park. A young female was watched on day one for about 20 minutes and on day two, we had a longer sighting of a young male which was no more than five metres away from us eating a Grey Langur which it had killed. We then saw it being chased by Water

Buffalo and finally climbing a tree to relax for the rest of the day. An amazing two hours were spent observing this obliging individual.

On the whale and dolphin watching excursion, we were delighted with close sightings of Short-finned Pilot Whales, Minke Whale and thousands of Spinner Dolphins.

Daily Diary

3 March 2024

Two early morning flights brought the group to Colombo International Airport and after our meet and greet, we left for Kanneliya via the southern expressway with the early morning movement of Indian Flying Foxes back to their roost observed during our drive. A brief stop for some coffee and a bite to eat was enjoyed at a service station and we continued our 2.5-hour journey to our guesthouse.

A quick walk around the gardens before checking in produced sightings of Indian Palm Squirrel, Land Monitor, Indian Peafowl, Indian Swiftlet, Asian Palm Swift, Little Swift, Greater Coucal, Spotted Dove, Asian Emerald Dove, Green Imperial Pigeon and White-breasted Waterhen.

We had our lunch at 12:30pm which was interrupted by a huge Water Monitor which was swimming along the canal behind the hotel. This appeared to be almost six feet long and had a girth of over ten inches. It was soon joined by another smaller individual and a standoff then ensued between the two.

Before long, we were alerted by the crashing of branches and the arrival of Purple-faced Leaf Monkeys. There was a mother with her young clutched against her chest and a male leading the way.

At 4:00pm, we made a walk into a nearby tea plantation and stumbled upon a Ruddy Mongoose which was accompanied by her pup. It didn't take long, however, for our presence to result in them vanishing into the nearby forest.

A thorough scan along the tree lines led to more good views of Purple-faced Leaf Monkeys. Other sightings during the evening included Oriental Garden Lizard, Green Garden Lizard, Little Cormorant, Indian Pond Heron, Eastern Cattle Egret, Spot-billed Pelican, Rufous-bellied Eagle, Crested Honey Buzzard, Crested Serpent Eagle, Black Eagle, Blue-tailed Bee-eater, Alexandrine Parakeet, Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike, Small Minivet, Black-hooded Oriole, White-bellied Drongo, White-browed Fantail, Indian Paradise Flycatcher, Indian Jungle Crow, Red-vented Bulbul, Yellow-billed Babbler, Common Myna, Indian Robin, Oriental Magpie-robin, Purple-rumped Sunbird, Purple Sunbird, Black-headed Cuckooshrike, Brown Shrike and White-rumped Munia.

We had an early dinner at 6:30pm and left for Kanneliya. By 7:45pm, we had started our walk in search of Red Loris and it took about 30 minutes to get our first sighting. We didn't have the best views, so we continued into the forest and before long had found another one which was much closer with unobstructed views. We were back at the hotel by 11:00pm and returned to our rooms for a well-deserved sleep.

Red Loris © Mukesh Hirdaramani, March 2024

4 March 2024

We had breakfast at 8:30am and checked out of the hotel by 9:00am and proceeded to Kanneliya Rainforest. Our objective for the morning was to search for bats and we found several Schneider's Leaf-nosed Bats at a cave.

Once again, we had sightings of Purple-faced Leaf Monkey and were able to observe their various behaviours. Sri Lanka Kangaroo Lizard, Sri Lanka Hump-nosed Lizard, Green Vine Snake, Common Skink, Giant Wood Spider, Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill, White-throated Kingfisher, Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot, Brown-breasted Flycatcher, Yellow-browed Bulbul and Sri Lanka Drongo were also found during the walk.

Green Vine Snake © Mukesh Hirdaramani, March 2024

On our way to Kataragama, we stopped for lunch in the coastal town of Galle. During our journey, we encountered Toque Macaque, Tufted Grey Langur and Grey Mongoose, along with Grey-headed Swamphen, Red-wattled Lapwing, Asian Openbill, Woolly-necked Stork, Black-headed Ibis, Purple Heron, Brahminy Kite and House Crow.

Upon reaching the hotel, we relaxed and met for the evening checklist and dinner at 7:00pm and at 9:30pm left for our first night drive. We had a beautiful sighting of two Northern Palm Civets climbing a tree and spent several minutes watching them. A calling Indian Scops Owl immediately gave its location up, with an Indian Thick-knee flying out of the way as our jeep

navigated the small roads alongside the paddy fields. Indian Hares were plentiful and we also found a lone Black-crowned Night Heron fishing in a small water hole.

As the night progressed, we locked on to distant eyeshine and waited till we came face-to-face with a Golden Jackal, which didn't hesitate when crossing the road a mere ten feet from our jeep giving us fantastic views. Many Jerdon's Nightjars were also spotted during the excursion.

We returned to the hotel at around 3:00am and retired to our rooms.

5 March 2024

Tikiri Keelback © Mukesh Hirdaramani, March 2024

After a leisurely morning, we met for lunch at 12:30pm and then set off for our safari to the Lunugamwehera National Park. We were greeted by Asian Elephants, Chital, Wild Boar, Ruddy Mongoose, Golden Jackal, Asian Buffalo, Sri Lanka Soft-shelled Turtle and Mugger Crocodile, along with Sri Lanka Junglefowl, Grey-bellied Cuckoo, Orange-breasted Green Pigeon, Black-winged Stilt, Whiskered Tern, Oriental Darter, Medium Egret (now split from Intermediate Egret), Changeable Hawk Eagle, White-bellied Sea Eagle, Grey-headed Fish Eagle, Malabar Pied Hornbill, Indian Roller, Asian Green Bee-eater, Coppersmith Barbet, Red-backed Flameback, Marshall's Iora, Jerdon's Bushlark, Sri Lanka Swallow, Plain Prinia, White-rumped Shama, Tricolored Munia, Forest Wagtail and Grey-breasted Prinia.

On our return to the hotel, we had very close encounters with some Asian Elephants which are often seen on the main road begging from passing vehicles.

At 7:30pm, we met for the checklist and dinner and then left for our night drive at 9:30pm. Tikiri Keelback Snake, Indian Gerbil, Jungle Cat and Small Indian Civet were our new additions on the night drive.

6 March 2024

Once again, we met at 12:30pm for lunch after a leisurely morning and set off to Lunugamwehera National Park for another safari. Despite hearing several alarm calls, the Leopards kept on eluding us. We saw many of the mammals that had been seen the previous day but our new sighting for the day included a White-spotted Chevrotain which dashed across the road. Birds for the day included Lesser Whistling Duck, Blue-faced Malkoha, Pheasant-tailed Jacana, Painted Stork, Eurasian Spoonbill, Little Egret, Pied Kingfisher and Brown-headed Barbet.

We had dinner at 7:00pm and left the hotel at 8.30pm for our night drive. We had a very good sighting of a Common Wolf Snake and more Indian Hares.

The night was rather quiet, so we decided to head to a nearby farming village. Whilst driving along some small roads with houses alongside, we glimpsed a cat on a doorstep which looked wrong for a domestic cat, so we quickly reversed to take another look. To our considerable surprise, we had a Rusty-spotted Cat in full view sniffing around the area !!

Blue-faced Malkoha © Mukesh Hirdaramani, March 2024

As soon as it sensed our presence, it dived into a nearby bush that connected to a forest patch. Despite been able to see the reflection of its eyes from our lights, we were unable to get closer, as we didn't want to trespass on a private property at midnight……

Excited and very pleased with our sighting, we returned to the hotel at 12:30am and retired for the night.

7 March 2024

Taking a picnic breakfast with us, we headed for the Lunugamwehera National Park for our last visit and were soon hot on the trail of a Leopard that had been seen in the early hours of the morning by the park rangers.

Despite searching, we were unable to find it, so continued our quest for Stripe-necked Mongoose and other species. Our day continued with sightings of Green Pond Frog, Crested Treeswift, Asian Emerald Dove, Barred Buttonquail, Great Egret, Stork-billed Kingfisher, Chestnut-headed Bee-eater, Dark-fronted Babbler and Besra.

We were back at the hotel by 11:30am and after lunch, we checked out.

Since we had missed the Stripe-necked Mongoose, we devised a plan to search for it in a small town called Ella and stopped at a restaurant where it has been

Malabar Pied Hornbill © Mukesh Hirdaramani, Marh 2024

seen previously. After a quick scan, this was soon found and we had very good views, along with Crimson-fronted Barbet in the grounds of the restaurant.

As we continued our drive to Nuwara Eliya, an unusually coloured animal very close to the road attracted our attention and upon further inspection, we realised we were looking at a Red Muntjac.

The excitement continued as we searched for Brown Mongoose which is usually found on the roadside of the area we were passing through. Stopping at a plant nursery, I asked the owner for permission to visit and as I returned to fetch the group, a mongoose darted from the neatly arranged plants and disappeared into a thick bush. We spent around 15 minutes searching for it, but it was not to be seen again. Despite this, we found an Indian Pitta which was deep in a bush and had good views of this before losing daylight.

We reached the Heaven Seven hotel by 6:30pm and met for the checklist and dinner at 7:30pm and then called it a night.

8 March 2024

We had breakfast at 8:00am and an hour later set off for the Hakgala Botanical Gardens. We had fantastic views of the highland race of Purple-faced Leaf Monkey, which is also known as the Bear Monkey, along with the montane race of Torque Macaque.

We searched high and low for the Brown Mongoose and Dusky Striped Squirrel but had no luck. Although dead species do not count, a dead Asian Highland Shrew caught our attention and we spent a few minutes looking at this rather elusive mammal that we hardly ever come across. Cinereous Tit, Square-tailed Bulbul, Yellow-eared Bulbul, Common Tailorbird, Sri Lanka White-eye and Dull-blue Flycatcher were new birds found here.

Brown Wood Owl © Mukesh Hirdaramani, March 2024

We returned to the hotel for lunch and checked out at 1:30pm. We saw a huge colony of Indian Flying Foxes near the Mahaweli River which is very close to the hotel in Kandy.

By 5:00pm we had arrived at our hotel and met up in the gardens a little later to search for Giant Flying Squirrel. As we waited, we were drawn to the call of a

Brown Wood Owl and after a few minutes of searching had a fantastic view of it.

We continued our quest for the Flying Squirrel amidst the distant clasp of thunder. We spread out across the garden in the areas where the squirrel usually makes its appearance and waited as the rains gently came down.

To my delight, I spotted a Golden Palm Civet climbing a tree and ran back to get the group, however, on our return it had disappeared. Nevertheless, a few feet further on we came across the Giant Flying Squirrel and had good views of it.

As the rains intensified, we rushed to the restaurant getting there just in time. We had our dinner and made plans for another walk in the garden.

After we had eaten, there was another excursion in search for the other target species we could find here. A Yellow-striped Chevrotain greeted us in full view on the middle of the road and further down the path we came face-to-face with two Indian Crested Porcupines.

As we continued our search, we found another Giant Flying Squirrel and this time it climbed right up to the canopy before gliding well over 30 metres. It was an absolute delight to see this.

Giant Flying Squirrel © Mukesh Hirdaramani, March 2024

9 March 2024

We had breakfast at 8:00am and before leaving for our next destination had a short walk in the hotel gardens finding Sri Lanka Green Pigeon, Yellow-fronted Barbet, Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, Large-billed Leaf Warbler and Oriental White-eye.

By 1:30pm, we had reached our hotel in Sigiriya and after relaxing for a bit, we set off to explore the Sigiriya Sanctuary. Two Grizzled Giant Squirrels feeding on young leaves were a welcome sight. We also had good views of Shikra and many other mammals and birds which we had seen before, along with Tree Skink and Bark Gecko.

Rufous Horseshoe Bat © Mukesh Hirdaramani, March 2024

We did our checklist at 7:00pm, followed by dinner and then at 10:00pm set off for our first night drive in Sigiriya and it was not long before we found two Asian Elephants feeding in a paddy field. Indian Hare was ever present, as well as Chital, Golden Jackal and we also had a brief sighting of Red Muntjac.

Haly's Tree Skink © Mukesh Hirdaramani, March 2024

We were exploring a paddy field adjoining a reservoir when suddenly the distinct eyeshine of a cat in the middle of the field caught our attention. The farmers were up and about chasing Elephants and Wild Boar and amidst all this commotion, we had still managed to find a Fishing Cat patiently waiting by a water channel !!

We had a couple of brief sightings of the cat from the jeep before deciding to walk the field to try and get a better look. Despite our best efforts, the cat decided to lie low in a nearby bush and we decided to leave and let it go about its business.

Another reflection from a tree gave away the location of a Grey Loris and we managed to get very close to observe it climb along branches and occasionally hide from our gaze.

We were back in the hotel at 3:00am after a very successful night out.

10 March 2024

Just as we finished our lunch at around 1:00pm, one of the group spotted a large bird flying into a tree and we all rushed over to find a Brown Fish Owl staring back at us. It had an injured left eye that was completely black which made it look like the avian equivalent of a pirate.

A Sri Lanka Woodshrike was also the area and we enjoyed watching this before setting off for our afternoon safari to the Minneriya National Park. Here, we had very good views of an Asian Elephant taking a dip in a lake, whilst Ruddy Mongoose, Wild Boar, Water Buffalo, Toque Macaque, Grey Langur, Indian Hare, Grizzled Giant Squirrel, Chital, Indian Grey Mongoose, Golden Jackal and Asian Buffalo all graced us with their presence. Gull-billed Tern, Indian Cormorant, Brown-capped Babbler and Paddyfield Pipit were also seen here.

After dinner, we had a rather quite night drive and didn't see any new species or any cats and called it a night at 3:00am.

11 March 2024

After lunch, we visited the Pidurangale Rock Temple where we found Schneider's Leaf-nosed Bat, Large Leaf-nosed Bat and Indian Rufous Horseshoe Bat. We did a bit of birding around the Sigiriya Sanctuary and then returned to the hotel at 6:15pm.

At 7:00pm we did the checklist, had our dinner and at 9:30pm left for our night drive. As the previous night had been rather quiet, we drove to the next village and to our delight almost immediately found a Jungle Cat which was lying on a haystack in the middle of a rice field. We spent about 20 minutes with this, and a little later spotted another distant cat and decided to explore the rice field by foot so we could have a closer look and identify it.

We managed to get closer to the cat before a distant explosion of a firecracker (used to chase away Elephants by the farmers) made it bolt. We had a very good view as it took off and were able to confirm it was a Fishing Cat. Back on the jeep, we drove another 10 minutes and on a well-lit road found the biggest Fishing Cat so far which was almost the size of a domestic dog.

It tried to hide in a scrawny bush, but the cover was not enough, so it came back onto the road and then hastily withdrew but only after giving us the best views so far.

Less than ten minutes later, we come across another Fishing Cat which was about 4 metres away from us on a small creek. It didn't seem afraid and walked towards us before turning back and disappearing into the forest behind. We stayed a while hoping it would reemerge and to our delight there was another Fishing Cat that had joined it and together, we watched them licking the leaves of a water plant that was now exposed by the low water level. It seemed that they were probably feasting on fish eggs or tadpoles stuck on the leaves.

We spent a good 30 minutes observing the interaction between the pair which looked very much like a male and female owing to the size difference. We could not believe our luck as it is a very rare sight to see two cats together feeding or hunting and in total we had seen four individuals in one night which was a truly exceptional total.

After what was undoubtedly a highly successful night drive, we returned to the hotel with big smiles and called it a night.

Jungle Cat © Mukesh Hirdaramani, March 2024

12 March 2024

After a leisurely morning, we once again met for lunch at 12:30pm and checked out of the hotel an hour later. Whilst having our lunch we were greeted by a Peregrine Falcon which circled a couple of times before disappearing into the distance.

We reached our next hotel at 4:00pm and went for a short bird walk around the hotel gardens.

After dinner, we set off for our night drive at 10:00pm and immediately came upon a Brown Fish Owl that was perched on the hotel name board. This was followed by very good sightings of Jungle Cat, Small Indian Civet and Chital. Whilst looking at the Jungle Cat, we noticed Eurasian Otter running across the rice fields.

We were back at the hotel by 3:00am and called it a night.

13 March 2024

Our afternoon safari to Wilpattu National Park started at 1:30pm and we encountered many of the birds seen previously. As we were coming up to a small water hole, the driver and I observed a Sloth Bear dash across the road in a matter seconds and completely vanish into the surrounding forest before the group managed to see it.

An hour and half into the safari, we came across a female Leopard which briefly gave us good views as she crossed the road ahead of us. Returning to the same spot 30 minutes later, we managed to see her again as she walked along a small corridor inside the forest before climbing up a tree and settling there.

We returned to the hotel at 6:00pm and continued our ritual of checklist and dinner before once again setting off for a night drive but this time a bit earlier than usual as we had a morning safari the next day. We had good sightings of Indian Hare, Indian Gerbil, Jungle Cat and Small Indian Civet along with a very clear and prolonged view of a White-spotted Chevrotain. An Indian Scops Owl was also sighted.

We returned to the hotel at 11:30pm and called it a night.

Day 12: 14 March 2024

Taking a packed breakfast, we set off for our last safari in Wilpattu National Park and before long we were watching a male Leopard which had come down from tree to continue eating its Grey Langur kill. After finishing its meal, we watched it relax on a termite mound before being chased by a herd of Asian Buffalo. We sat here and enjoyed our packed breakfast with the best views of the show.

Leopard with Grey Langur kill © Mukesh Hirdaramani, March 2024

Leopard © Judy Parrish, March 2024

A Star Tortoise showed very close to our jeep and we then went for quick drive finding a smaller male Leopard which was seen scenting the area before vanishing into the forest.

Indian Star Tortoise © Mukesh Hirdaramani, March 2024

We returned to the area where we had seen the first Leopard and once again saw it resting on the termite mound. Happy with our sightings we returned to the hotel at 11:00am, checked out, had our lunch, and proceeded to Kalpitiya.

We reached our hotel at 4:30pm and met for the checklist and dinner at 7.00pm.

15 March 2024

At 7:15am and taking a picnic breakfast, we set off for our whale watching excursion. We had good sightings of White-winged, Bridled, Lesser Crested and Greater Crested Terns, Brown Noddy, Pomarine Skua and Brown-headed Gull. About an hour and half into our journey, we came across two Short-finned Pilot Whales and stayed with them for about 30 minutes as we watched them swim very close to the boat.

We returned to the hotel at 11:00am and had our lunch at 1:00pm. At 4:15pm we went on a bird walk and saw a Grey Mongoose, Spotted Redshank, Common Redshank, Sanderling, Whimbrel, Marsh Sandpiper, Pacific Golden Plover, Kentish Plover, Tibetan Sand Plover, Little Stint, Wood Sandpiper and Asian Koel.

We met for dinner and the checklist at 7.00pm and then retired for the night.

16 March 2024

We left the hotel with our picnic breakfast at 6:45am and as soon as we were on our boat, we headed directly towards a pod of around 100 Spinner Dolphins. Gradually, we made our way to a larger pod numbering over a thousand individuals and were surrounded by them, watching them spin out of the water and ride the bow waves.

We also saw a school of Yellow-finned Tuna in a feeding frenzy. The ocean was alive with fishing boats, fish and dolphins.

Just as we were returning to shore, we were found a Minke Whale that surfaced very close to our boat showing almost all of itself before diving into the deep.

After checking out of the hotel, we had lunch and headed for the Tamarind Tree Garden Resort near the airport where the group were staying until their early morning flights.