

TRIP REPORT

By Chris Holtby & Dave Thrussell, UK.

Camera Equipment –
DT: Canon 40D with a 100-400mm lens.
CH: Canon 40D with a 300mm F4 lens, a 1.4x converter, and a Speedlite 430EX
Guided by Amila Salgado (http://gallicissa.blogspot.com , www.birdwingnature.com)

Having previously birded such top destinations as Texas, The Gambia, Kenya, Israel and Costa Rica independently, our decision for 2010 was to break a stubborn habit, arrange for a professional guide and to tie ourselves to a proven itinerary. Researching the web and studying reports produced Amila Salgado.

He was selected due to his deep knowledge as a passionate and enthusiastic naturalist, and in spite of his ignorance of bees (local joke).

One of Amila's many irresistible qualities was his avowed intent to go for the Sri Lankan endemics (all 33 of them, as per Rasmussen [2005]). He offers an intensive birding experience (and it is, we can assure you) which he calls his 'Absolute Birding' tour.

We booked our flights with Sri Lanka Airlines through http://www.holidaygenie.com and left the rest to Amila.

Our itinerary.

Day 01 (14 Mar.) Arrive in Sri Lanka and transfer to Kithulgala for two nights.
Day 02 (15 Mar.) Explore patches in Kithulgala including the Kithulgala rain forest.
Day 03 (16 Mar.) Drive to Sinharaja Rainforest for three nights. P.m. Explore Sinharaja.
Day 04 (17 Mar.) Full day birding in Sinharaja for lowland endemics/mixed species bird flocks.
Day 05 (18 Mar.) Full day birding in Sinharaja & peripheral patches for remaining targets.
Day 06 (19 Mar.) Drive to Udawalawe for dry zone specialties. One night at Udawalawe.
Day 07 (20 Mar.) Drive to Tissa for 3 nights. Explore wetlands and local patches at Tissa.
Day 08 (21 Mar.) Bundala National Park for shorebird & Yala National Park for birds and big game.
Day 09 (22 Mar.) Morning optional visit to Yala National Park. Afternoon local birding.
Day 10 (23 Mar.) Local birding. Drive to Nuwara Eliya for two nights. Many birding stops en route.
Day 11 (24 Mar.) Explore a combination of patches including Victoria Park.
Day 12 (25 Mar.) Drive down to Kandy for one night. Owling at Kandy.
Day 13 (26 Mar.) Royal Botanical Gardens. Drive to Katunayake for final night.
Day 14 (27 Mar.) Departure.

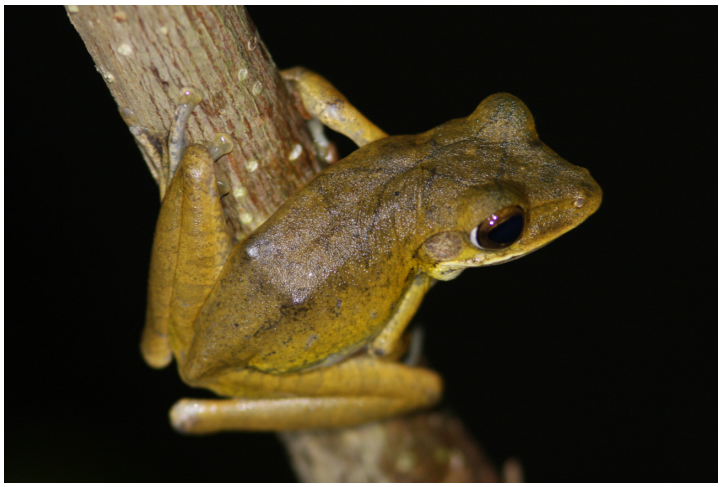


Day 01–02 (14-15 March, 2010) Kithulgala.

Landing at Katunayake Airport 20 miles north of Colombo at 02.30 a.m. we were met by Amila and his driver at the terminal door. The theme was set immediately. We went birding…

After a short 5-minute drive from the airport we stopped in a private garden for a pair of Indian Scops-Owls but, not unreasonably, it was pitch black and our brain receptors had been left on the plane. We managed to fail to impress our guide by almost completely missing the owls and failing to get any meaningful photos. CH managed a nice shot of an overhead lamp and its accompaniment of moths with his untried Speedlite flashgun, but no Indian Scops Owls. Amila must have feared the worst…

En route we stopped at Amila's residence, had our first taste of superlative Sri Lankan tea, courtesy of his gracious mother's hospitality at 3 in the morning, and picked up the considerable amount of equipment he required for our journey around Central/South Sri Lanka. We had a quick tour of Amila's garden and pond, (CH got his flashgun in sync):



Sri Lanka Hourglass Tree Frog *Polypedates cruciger*

Undaunted, Amila pointed out a Spot-billed Pelican roost at the top of a tree which we also struggled to see. Amila is blessed apparently with full night vision in both eyes…he decided we should drive till dawn and have a go at seeing some birds in daylight. What followed was literally a revelation.

We arrived at our lodge at Kithulgala, situated bordering the Kelani River, to be welcomed by a dawn chorus and birds popping all around us. It was one of those rare sensory-overload experiences, a never-to-be-forgotten dawn with nearly every bird a lifer. We woke up…

The early morning list read Orange-billed Babbler, Yellow-billed Babbler, White-bellied Drongo, Red-vented Bulbul, Common Tailorbird, Brown-headed Barbet, Black-rumped Flameback, Long-billed Sunbird, Bright-green Warbler, Green Imperial Pigeon, Indian Pond Heron, Spot-winged Thrush, Sri Lanka Swallow, Layard's Parakeet, Black-hooded Oriole, Jungle Crow, Sri Lanka Hanging-Parrot, White-throated Kingfisher, Spotted Dove, Oriental Magpie-Robin, Golden-fronted Leafbird, Green-billed Coucal, Indian Swiftlet, Lesser Yellownape, Black Bulbul, Eastern Cattle Egret, Common Myna, Black-capped Bulbul, Little Cormorant, Oriental Honey Buzzard, White-backed Munia, Chestnut-headed Bee-eater, Orange Minivet, Emerald Dove, Brown-breasted Flycatcher, and Stork-billed Kingfisher.

During our 2 night stay here we were to see 78 species, 69 of these were well-photographed, including a whopping 20 of the 33 target endemics.

The highlight had to be the recently discovered (first heard in 1995, first seen in 2001, and formally described in 2004) Serendib Scops Owl. Crossing the sacred Kelani river in a dug-out canoe without getting the optics wet is a fun challenge but the hillside climb for this bird in the darkness should not be attempted unguided. Amila's expertise in locating this owl was simply amazing! Unsurprisingly, of all the endemics, this takes pride of place at the top of the tree…



Serendib Scops-Owl *Otus thilohoffmanni*

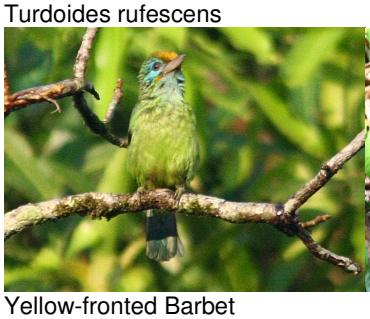
The same area also holds Sri Lanka Frogmouth (a near endemic), Crested Serpent Eagle (easily looked for from the Kithulgala Rest House Hotel boasting pictures of the famous *Bridge On The River Kwai* (1957), which was filmed here), Black-naped Monarch, Tickell's Blue-Flycatcher, Purple-rumped Sunbird, Brown Hawk-Owl (expert knowledge required to locate the day roost site), Stork-billed Kingfisher, Common Iora, Dark-fronted Babbler, Pale-billed Flowerpecker and Blue-tailed Bee-eater among many others.

Endemics seen well and photographed* in the Kithulgala area:
Orange-billed Babbler *Turdoides rufescens*
Spot-winged Thrush *Zoothera spiloptera*
Sri Lanka Swallow *Hirundo hyperythra*
Layard's Parakeet *Psittacula calthropae*
Sri Lanka Hanging-Parrot *Loriculus beryllinus*
Green-billed Coucal *Centropus chlororhynchus*
Black-capped Bulbul *Pycnonotus melanicterus*
Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill *Ocyceros gingalensis*
Yellow-fronted Barbet *Megalaima flavifrons*
Sri Lanka Green-Pigeon *Treron pompadora*
Sri Lanka Junglefowl *Gallus lafayetii*
Chestnut-backed Owlet *Glaucidium castanonotum*
Brown-capped Babbler *Pellorneum fuscocapillum*
Sri Lanka Spurfowl *Galloperdix bicalcarata*
Sri Lanka Myna *Gracula ptilogenys*
Sri Lanka Blue Magpie *Urocissa ornate** (stupidly, neither of us captured this most enigmatic endemic)
Sri Lanka Crested Drongo *Dicrurus lophorinus*
Sri Lanka Scimitar-Babbler *Pomatorhinus melanurus*
Serendib Scops-Owl *Otus thilohoffmanni*
Legge's Flowerpecker *Dicaeum vincens* (20)


Orange-billed Babbler
Turdoides rufescens


Spot-winged Thrush
Zoothera spiloptera


Sri Lanka Swallow
Hirundo hyperythra


Yellow-fronted Barbet
Megalaima flavifrons


Sri Lanka Junglefowl
Gallus lafayetii


Chestnut-backed Owlet
Glaucidium castanonotum


Sri Lanka Green-Pigeon
Treron pompadora pompadora


Sri Lanka Scimitar-Babbler
Pomatorhinus melanurus


Sri Lanka Myna
Gracula ptilogenys


Green-billed Coucal
Centropus chlororhynchus


Sri Lanka Hanging-Parrot
Loriculus beryllinus


Layard's Parakeet
Psittacula calthropae

Our lodge also hosted several non-endemic target birds, including the Indian Pitta, which showed incredibly well in the gloomy morning light, down to a few feet. With patience and much adjustment of settings on the 40D, we managed to capture some good images of the only Oriental Dwarf (Black-backed) Kingfisher of the trip. Several endemics were within a short walk from the hotel including the Sri Lanka Crested Drongo.



Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher *Ceyx erithacus erithacus*



Sri Lanka Crested Drongo *Dicrurus lophorinus*

And the lizards were quite colourful too:



Hump-nosed Lizard *Lyriocephalus scutatus*



Green Forest Lizard *Calotes calote*

Day 03–05: (16-18, March, 2010)- Sinharaja.

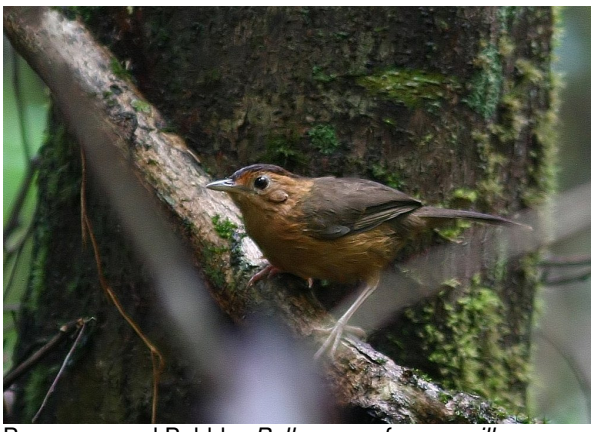
Sinharaja 'world heritage' rain forest is Sri Lanka's last remaining viable area of primary rainforest containing a substantial number of the country's endemic trees, plants, insects, reptiles and birds. Thus, birding in the totally different terrain here reverts to that in a classic jungle environment, requiring patience, stealth and tracking skills. A trained pair of ears is essential equipment too.

The dark, impenetrable forest made not only the locating of species difficult, but also obtaining worthwhile images a real challenge.

Amila expressed surprise at our willingness and enthusiasm for shooting avian gems through the gloomy light conditions of the forest depths. Being a 'good light photographer', he admitted that he rarely bothered to attempt bird photography in the low light conditions in the forest. When he followed suit with his own Canon 40D coupled with 100-400 zoom lens, he was somewhat surprised at what may be achieved albeit with fairly extreme settings. The real shock was probably that neither of us bother with a tripod, preferring to shoot and move wherever the birds may take us. Without this positive attitude, a number of forest dwellers and skulkers would have remained uncaptured, including the endemic and enigmatic Ashy-headed Laughingthrush and Brown-capped Babbler.



Ashy-headed Laughingthrush *Garrulax cinereifrons*



Brown-capped Babbler *Pellorneum fuscocapillum*



Red-faced Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus pyrrhocephalus*



Sri Lanka Frogmouth *Batrachostomus moniliger*

At Sinharaja, Amila's skills came to the fore again. His knowledge of calls, (even at ridiculously far distances), enabled us to see a further 8 endemics in around the forest reserve. Even so, many of the new species here are available at the edge of the reserve.

However, the best site for one of the real stars—Sri Lanka Scaly Thrush—was to be found deep in the primary forest, near one of its many streams. Even Amila made use of a local tracker for finding it. This supreme skulker is rarely seen well, let alone photographed. And its high-pitched calls were completely off our hearing range! The tracker, (whose equipment amounted to an umbrella stuck in the ground to mark the pathway into the undergrowth and no optics whatsoever), found one, and led us to it in complete silence. There was only room for one camera at a time and we were terrified of the shutter noise, but the thrush obliged down to 15 feet, as it foraged in the leaf litter.



Sri Lanka Scaly Thrush *Zoothera imbricata*

The endemic target list had been reduced to 6 of 33 after 5 days at 2 sites. Endemics seen well and photographed at and around Sinharaja:

Ashy-headed Laughingthrush *Garrulax cinereifrons*
Sri Lanka Wood Pigeon *Columba torringtoni*
Red-faced Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus pyrrhocephalus*
White-faced Starling *Sturnus senex*
Sri Lanka White-eye *Zosterops ceylonensis*
Sri Lanka Scaly Thrush *Zoothera imbricate*
Sri Lanka Small Barbet *Megalaima rubricapilla* (27)



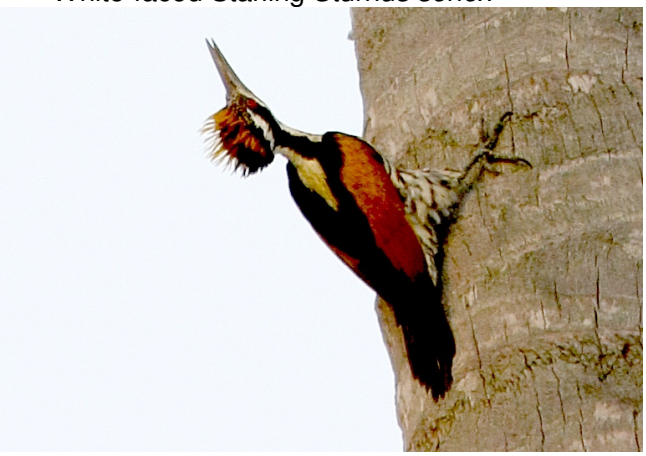
Sri Lanka Wood Pigeon *Columba torringtoni*



White-faced Starling *Sturnus senex*



Black-capped Bulbul *Pycnonotus melanicterus*



White-naped Woodpecker *Chrysocolaptes festivus*



Legge's Flowerpecker *Dicaeum vincens*

Our base was situated in very close proximity to the forest. It was extremely well-placed to walk to the reserve and bird the edges. It also offered good food and exceptional views from the verandah which was another good spot for Indian Pitta and raptors.

The dreaded leeches at Sinharaja are a problem and full length trousers and leech socks are a must. Mosquitoes were much less bothersome. Snakes are present and wellies are the footwear of preference, especially if venturing off-track in the forests. We saw none on the whole trip (and we had ignored Amila's advice to bring wellies). This lack of proper footwear did cost us the chance of seeing Indian Jungle Nightjar (Grey Nightjar)—which would have been night bird no.13. It was heard quite well, but Amila refused to take us to it off the beaten track through untamed wilderness.

Amila's Absolute Birding tour is not for the frail of mind or body. But If you are willing to work hard and immerse yourself in the unique delights of the primary rainforest, you may be rewarded with the once-in-a-lifetime experience of seeing and/or photographing a Sri Lanka Spurfowl.



Sri Lanka Spurfowl *Galloperdix bicalcarata* female

Day 06 (19–20 March) Udawalawe

Udawalawe was our first introduction to dry zone birdlife, which included Barred Buttonquail Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark, Little Green Bee-eater, Jerdon's Bush Lark and Orange-breasted Green Pigeon, all of which may be well-photographed here. You must hire a local guide/driver, and the park is accessed by means of 'open-topped' Land Rovers. The local guides vary in terms of knowledge and flexibility. Amila barked a few orders at ours and he stopped when told (which was very often!).

The Udawalawe area, and the site that followed, Tissa, had many wetland areas, which are very well-worth exploring to increase the trip list. Birds seen here included Black-headed Ibis, Pheasant-tailed Jacana, Lesser Whistling Duck, Yellow Bittern, Black Bittern, Cotton Pygmy Goose, Purple Heron, Oriental Darter and Grey-headed Fish-Eagle. The light here was excellent and some difficult species quite obliging. The grounds of the hotel held Grey-breasted Prinia and Jerdon's Leafbird, which were not commonly seen elsewhere.



Little Green Bee-eater *Merops orientalis orientalis*



Yellow Bittern *Ixobrychus sinensis*



Grey-breasted Prinia *Prinia hodgsonii*



Jerdon's Leafbird *Chloropsis jerdoni*



Jerdon's Bush Lark *Mirafra affinis*



Sri Lanka Woodshrike *Tephrodornis affinis*

Single endemic seen and photographed

Sri Lanka Woodshrike *Tephrodornis affinis* (28)

Other forest/grassland birds found at Udawalawe NP and vicinity included Scaly-breasted Munia, Sirkeer Malkoha, Grey-bellied Cuckoo (the only one of the tour), Pied Cuckoo (ditto), Alexandrine Parakeet, Asian Paradise Flycatcher, Black-shouldered Kite, Painted Stork, White-browed Fantail, Red-wattled Lapwing, Jungle Prinia (the only one of the tour), Indian Peafowl (only common here and Yala), Indian Robin, Indian Roller, Malabar Pied Hornbill (very scarce elsewhere), Crested Hawk Eagle, White-browed Bulbul, White-naped Woodpecker, Plum-headed Parakeet (not seen elsewhere – get it here), Thick-billed Flowerpecker (the only one of the tour), Coppersmith Barbet, Indian Nightjar, Oriental Skylark, Baya Weaver, and Tricoloured Munia.

Watercock is found at Tissa, but you'll need a guide with expert local knowledge as to its exact wetland location and the precise times it shows, miss its short flights and you won't see it, let alone photograph it. With Amila's guidance we did both. On the other hand Amila's scouts were unable to phone with positive news of the Brown Fish Owl's day roost site (he is well-connected).

One of Amila's unannounced treats took the form of unscheduled visits to a 'hidden' wilderness area close to Tissa, where he claimed, without going into specifics (something he was very proficient at—in case he failed to deliver!) he would invariably see something new and unexpected on each visit. At midday, it was extremely hot in more ways than one, and it was here we experienced one of those magical birding moments when a Sirkeer Malkoha crept, mouse-like from behind a mound of dry earth, pausing and panting, towards three completely static and silent photographers, whilst being hit with a blizzard of shutter activations from three Canon 40D's—all in burst mode!



Sirkeer Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus leschenaultia*

Amila's 'patch' also produced some birds which were not only unexpected but also difficult to find, like a day-roosting Jungle Owlet and the distinctive Great Tit *P. m. mahrattarum*. Also found here were Black-headed Cuckooshrike, Purple Sunbird, Bar-winged Flycatcher-Shrike and exceptionally close views of Plain Prinia. A calling White-rumped Shama was located by Amila but views were difficult and, probably to his frustration, neither of us could photograph it, so it was treated somewhat casually, especially by CH.

Day 07–09 (21–23 March) Tissamaharama, Bundala National Park, Yala National Park and many 'patches'.

Bundala NP and saltpans offered the most magically perfect photographic light conditions of anywhere on the tour. This is where all those missing waders are to be listed and captured. Again a site guide is mandatory, and the park is accessed by means of an open-backed safari vehicle. By 9.00 a.m. the sun's intensity overhead was increased by its reflection off the salt below. Sun cream and a brimmed hat is the order of the day here.

The somewhat enigmatic Yellow-wattled Lapwing is fairly easy here along with Indian Thick-knee, Pintail Snipe, Great-Thick-knee, Blue-faced Malkoha, the only Brown-headed Gull of the trip, Indian Cormorant, Indian (Clamorous) Reed Warbler (very tricky to see elsewhere), and Paddyfield Pipit.



Yellow-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus malabaricus*



Indian Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus s. meridionalis*

But the abiding memory for us all will be that of a pair of Small Pratincole *Glareola lactea* which alighted, circled and returned to within meters of the vehicle on the track between the salt pans. The distraction display to our car, feigning injury, meant chicks nearby and we held back – with camera shutters chattering. A notebook went overboard in the excitement and was thought lost by a mortified CH, as it contained all his field notes of the trip. The others seemed unconcerned as there were some distant ducks to be scoped and identified. (It was refound on the track).



Small Pratincole *Glareola lactea*

Bundala added 29 species to the trip list (including several waders, notably, 'Eastern' Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa melanuroides* and Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva*). Amila made a phone call and soon we arrived at the private house of another graciously polite friend of his who was also playing host to a pair of day-roosting Indian Scops-Owls. He was happy for us to snap away on his rear verandah.



Indian Scops-Owl *Otus bakkamoena*

Spending a day in the back of a Land Rover in searing heat makes the refuge offered by an afternoon return to our cosy hotel a very attractive prospect, especially since it has a swimming pool and an equally enticing natural pond for dragonflies. The variety and scintillating beauty of Sri Lanka's *Odonata* insects are not to be underestimated.


Dawn Dropwing


Asian Pintail


Asian Groundling


Yellow Waxtail


Shining Gossamerwing


Sapphire Flutterer


Aggressive Riverhawk


Black-tipped Flashwing


Blue Percher

The Hotel grounds also held the most confiding early morning Indian Pitta of the trip. It was foraging as usual in the front garden, but when it became conscious of our presence, it flew to the lower branches of a tree directly above CH's lens! It appeared uninterested, tame almost, and posed proudly, imperiously almost, for the camera, a bit like an impatient film star trying get rid of a nuisance paparazzo. This has to be the most obliging of all the world's Pitta species (at the least, we need to find out if that's true!).


Indian Pitta *Pitta brachyura*

Yala NP is one of the National Parks in Sri Lanka and its most popular with tourists but none of the huge fleet of 4x4's touring round the tracks seemed to be birding. And they weren't. Leopard is the draw for this mass scramble and radio messages between drivers ensure the queues to see one 'siesta-ing' in a tree resembled a sort of manic motorised cat twitch – with hired drivers jostling for position and converting best vantage points straight into cash.

If traffic jams and bullying your way into parking spaces is your bag, Yala is for you. The leopard we saw was apparently completely unconcerned; it alone maintained its dignity whilst all around were losing theirs. A later sighting of another leopard walking down the track in front of us alone was much more natural and appealing, but it still lacked feathers and wings. (NFF, sorry Amila!)

Yala did hold avian highlights for us:
100+ Garganey, Brahminy Kite, Barred Buttonquail, White-browed Fantail, Yellow-eyed Babbler, Jerdon's Bushlark, Malabar Pied Hornbill, Jerdon's and Little Indian Nightjar among others.



Brahminy Kite
Haliastur indus indus



Barred Buttonquail
Turnix suscitator leggei



White-browed Fantail
Rhipidura aureola compressirostris

Day 10–11 (23–24 March) Nuwara Eliya, Victoria Park and Hakgala Botanical Gardens.

Next morning, with a scheduled return visit to Yala NP unanimously not taken up, we were able to revisit Amila's local patch with a view to improving our photo ticks.

So, en route to the cooler hills of Nuwara-Eliya, we paused at the magical site of the Sirkeer Malkoha once again. While the White-rumped Shama was performing slightly better in terms of viewing, the Jungle Owlet confirmed by its presence again that this was a day roost site. Yellow-billed Babbler, 'Southern' Coucal, Indian Blue Robin, Jerdon's Leafbird and White-naped Woodpecker—a new site tick for Amila—were also seen well. But it was time to move on.

A lunch stop on the long journey at Ella, overlooking a steep sided valley at 1042m above sea level was good for hirundines: Little Swift, Barn Swallow, Indian Swiftlet and Hill Swallow. However, to photograph the latter, a visit to the upper floor of the local tea factory was required on the way to Kandy.

Just outside Hakgala, there is a roadside market at a bus stop in the form of a couple of ramshackle huts selling confectionary and sundries. You'd never suspect the steep path behind them leads down to a rocky mountain stream to which one of Sri Lanka's most difficult-to -see endemics descends each evening. The female did the scouting work and called to the male to join her, as if to say the coast is clear. When we arrived, it wasn't.

Unhesitatingly, and with complete inevitability of total obedience in his master's voice, Amila invited the local villager lady to do her washing some other time. She obliged and after a short wait we were treated to very brief, very gloomy views of a female Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush. CH will photograph anything in any light but even his best efforts were unusable.

Little did we know Amila had an alternative site up his sleeve for dawn. One of our guide's less-endearing traits in our view was to keep all his gems hidden under layers of secrecy and to exhibit a stonewall obstinacy to communicate ahead of time. This occasionally led to interesting discussions about, and creeping doubts over his tactical awareness. We shouldn't have bothered with any of this, he was proved right every step of the way.

Climbing the steep forested valley sides above the town of Nuwara-Eliya next morning scored Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, Sri Lanka White-eye, Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher, Blyth's Reed Warbler and photographs of 2 of the missing endemics (29). The pair of Sri Lanka Whistling Thrushes calling to each other as they descended by a fast flowing stream, posing just long enough to be photographed, will live long in the memory – a truly scintillating species.



Sri Lanka Whistling *Thrush Myophonus blighi*



Sri Lanka Bush-Warbler *Bradypterus palliseri*

Moving down into town and a visit to the busy suburban Victoria Park was rewarded with another non-endemic target bird—Pied Thrush, a pair feeding at the edge of the rubbish-strewn stream along with Common Sandpiper, Forest and Grey Wagtail.



Pied Thrush *Zoothera wardii*

Soon after this, we drove north from Nuwara picking up Pied Bushchat on a wire over the road. This was a prelude to the discovery of endemic No. 31, Yellow-eared Bulbul. And driving through Sri Lanka's highest and most extensive grasslands in Ambewala, we were rewarded with the trip's only Black-throated Munia in a mixed flock that contained Tricoloured and Scaly-bellied Munias. Our only Indian Blackbird *Turdus simillimus kinnisii* was noted here, a split from Eurasian Blackbird. Pied Bushchat and preening Paddyfield Pipit on roadside posts offered an excellent photographic opportunity from the car.



Pied Bushchat *Saxicola caprata atrata*



Paddyfield Pipit *Anthus rufulus malayensis*

Worryingly, we had failed to connect anywhere with Crimson-backed (Greater) Flameback, an endemic we should have seen at Kithulgala or Sinharaja. Amila had a small diversion in mind.

An unscheduled visit to an upper montane forest yielded Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, Sri Lanka White-eye, Yellow-eared Bulbul, Orange Minivet, Bright-green Warbler and endemic no. 32, Dull-blue Flycatcher—which presented stunning views at eye-level.



Yellow-eared Bulbul *Pycnonotus penicillatus*



Dull-blue Flycatcher *Eumyias sordida*

A session of intensive listening by Amila as we walked and drove the mountain road finally ended in a shout of excitement as a female Crimson-backed Flameback (33) flew onto a tall tree next to the road. A male joined her and the set was complete…we had seen all of the endemic bird species of Sri Lanka in just over 10 days and photographed all but one of them.



Crimson-backed Flameback *Chrysocolaptes stricklandi* ♂ & ♀

Day 12–13 (25–26 March) Hakgala Botanical Gardens, Udawattekele Forest Reserve.

Dawn saw us in Hakgala Botanical Gardens which proved to be highly productive. The target bird was Kashmir Flycatcher and much fun was had following a stunning male from tree to tree trying to photograph it. Here, we also had Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher, Dull-Blue Flycatcher, Brown-breasted Flycatcher, Oriental Magpie Robin, Sri Lanka White-eye.



Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher *Culicicapa ceylonensis*



Kashmir Flycatcher *Ficedula subrubra*



Sri Lanka White-eye *Zosterops ceylonensis*



Brown-breasted Flycatcher *Muscicapa muttui*



Dull-Blue Flycatcher *Eumyias sordida*



Oriental Magpie Robin *Copsychus saularis ceylonensis*

March is a peak month for observing butterflies in Sri Lanka, and proved pleasant distractions during our birding walks. Like her dragonflies, many of Sri Lanka's *Lepidoptera* are stunning and a selection is attached here including the largest*:


Common Bluebottle


Common Tiger


Blue Tiger


White Four-Ring


Common Jezebel


Metallic Cerulean


Red Helen


Common Leopard


Sri Lanka Birdwing*

Arriving in Kandy in mid-afternoon, we enjoyed a splendid curry and rice lunch at an excellent restaurant overlooking the city while watching White-bellied Sea-Eagles soar over the lake. Later, we had close views of Little Cormorants too.


White-bellied Sea-Eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster*

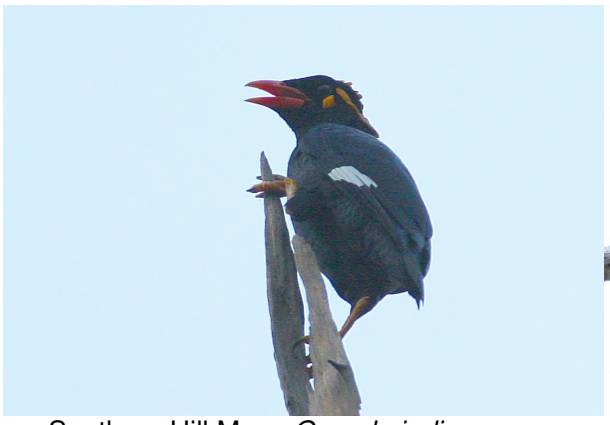

Little Cormorant *Phalacrocorax niger*

An unscheduled visit to the Udawattekele Royal Forest yielded 2 more stunning night birds—Brown Wood Owl and Spot-bellied Eagle Owl, both of which provided amazing views, and record shots.

Other noteworthy specials here included Southern Hill Myna, Asian Paradise Flycatcher (♂ & ♀), Crimson-backed Flameback (♂ & ♀) again, Black Bulbul, Alexandrine Parakeet and White-rumped Shama (this time CH was extremely interested, even climbing (slithering) down a steep-sided ravine to get a better shot!).



White-rumped Shama Copsychus malabaricus



Southern Hill Myna *Gracula indica*



Alexandrine Parakeet *Psittacula eupatria*



Brown Wood Owl *Strix leptogrammica*



Forest Eagle-Owl *Bubo nipalensis*

Day 13–14 (26–27 March) Royal Botanical Gardens, and Sigiriya.

The following morning found us in the Royal Botanical Gardens at Peradeniya, near Kandy. The park is steeped in history with the Avenue of Palms and a Cannonball Tree planted by King George V and Queen Mary in 1901. Our bird tally here included Purple-rumped Sunbird, Spotted Dove, the endemic Sri Lanka Small Barbet, Alexandrine Parakeet, Yellow-browed Bulbul, Common Myna, Asian Palm Swift, Black-hooded Oriole, Brown-headed Barbet, White-bellied Drongo, Long-billed Sunbird (♂ & ♀), Brahminy Kite, Tickell's Blue-Flycatcher, and Pale-billed Flowerpecker. The Giant Indian Fruit Bat colony was both huge and spectacular.



Sri Lanka Small Barbet *Megalaima rubricapilla*



Black-hooded Oriole *Oriolus xanthornus*



Tickell's Blue-Flycatcher *Cyornis tickelliae*



Pale-billed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum erythrorhynchos*



Long-billed Sunbird *Nectarinia lotenia*

The park grounds and forest surrounding the Sigiriya Rock Palace were our next port of call and it's worth checking upwards to the palace ruins for Shaheen (Peregrine) Falcon *Falco (peregrinus) peregrinator*. Photos are possible but you'll probably need more than the 400mm reach of DT's lens; you could always climb the 1,500 steps to the summit for a better look…

At Sigiriya we scored Crimson-backed Flameback (♂ & ♀), Common Iora (but no Marshall's regrettably), Asian Paradise Flycatcher (both white and rufous morphs). As the evening approached, we placed ourselves in a secluded mid-forest patch strategically close to a series of puddles.
What followed next was truly a memorable experience, as an array of difficult-to-see forest species showed up in clear view, one after the other.

This star-studded drinking party included Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, White-rumped Shama, Dark-fronted Babbler, Brown-capped Babbler, Emerald Dove, Indian Blue Robin (♂ & ♀) and Orange-headed Thrush. The photos are somewhat distant, (the birds were all very sensitive to our intrusion on their late drinking and bathing rituals), and at high ISO settings in the gloom but remain an evocative set for the authors.


Orange-headed Thrush *Zoothera citrina*

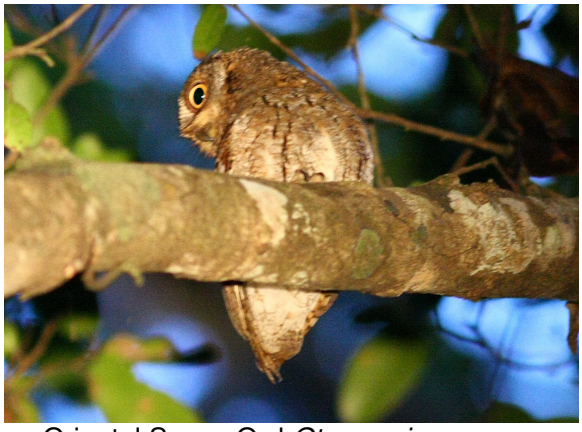

Indian Blue Robin *Luscinia brunnea*


White-rumped Shama *Copsychus malabaricus*


Brown-capped Babbler *Pellorneum fuscocapillum*

Some intensive searching with high-powered torches yielded two more owl species here, Oriental Scops-Owl *Otus sunia leggei*—a rare gem, and Brown Fish-Owl *Ketupa zeylonensis zeylonensis,* the latter CH somehow contrived to miss despite an obvious fly past caught in Amila's flashlight.

Next morning at the well-located accommodation at Sigiriya, Sri Lanka Green Pigeon and Sri Lanka Grey Hornbills were showing well in a tree in the car park.


Oriental Scops-Owl *Otus sunia*


Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill *Ocyceros gingalensis*

One particular target bird which had eluded Amila's best efforts to locate at its main site at the botanical gardens at Kandy and elsewhere was Common Hawk Cuckoo. On the route from Sigiriya to the Airport near Galewala we caught up with one by the roadside, confirming once and for all Amila's impression that we were blessed with an amazing degree of serendipity.

33 endemics in the first 10 days and 12 of the available 15 night birds on the tour, 230 species seen with 180 photographed set new records for Amila's Absolute Birding Tour.

One final highlight remained to stamp a suitably stunning seal on our Sri Lanka adventure in the shape of a ridiculously confiding adult male Black-rumped Flameback, as it foraged on termites on the tree trunks lining the entrance road to a hotel at Katunayake – our final stop.



Black-rumped Flameback *Dinopium benghalense psarodes* ad. ♂

Date	Night	English Name	Latin Name
14.3.10	Night	Indian Scops-Owl	Otus bakkamoena bakkamoena
14.3.10		Spot-bellied Pelican	Pelecanus philippensis
14.3.10		Yellow-billed Babbler	Turdoides affinis taprobanus
14.3.10		Orange-billed Babbler	Turdoides rufescens
14.3.10		White-bellied Drongo	Dicrurus caerulescens leucopygialis
14.3.10		Red-vented Bulbul	Pycnonotus cafer cafer
14.3.10		Common Tailorbird	Orthotomus sutorius sutorius
14.3.10		Brown-headed Barbet	Megalaima zeylanica zeylanica
14.3.10		Red-Backed Woodpecker	Dinopium benghalense psarodes
14.3.10		Long-billed Sunbird	Nectarinia lotenia lotenia
14.3.10		Bright-green Warbler	Phylloscopus nitidus
14.3.10		Sri Lanka Green Imperial-Pigeon	Ducula aenea pusilla
14.3.10		Indian Pond Heron	Ardeola grayii
14.3.10		Spot-winged Thrush	Zoothera spiloptera
14.3.10		Sri Lanka Swallow	Hirundo hyperythra
14.3.10		Layard's Parakeet	Psittacula calthropae

14.3.10		Black-hooded Oriole	Oriolus xanthornus ceylonensis
14.3.10		Jungle Crow	Corvus macrorhynchos culminatus
14.3.10		Sri Lanka Hanging-Parrot	Loriculus beryllinus
14.3.10		*White-throated Kingfisher*	*Halcyon smyrnensis fusca*
14.3.10		Spotted Dove	Streptopelia chinensis ceylonensis
14.3.10		Sri Lanka Magpie-Robin	Copsychus saularis ceylonensis
14.3.10		Golden-fronted Leafbird	Chloropsis aurifrons insularis
14.3.10		Green-billed Coucal	Centropus chlororhynchus
14.3.10		Indian Swiftlet	Collocalia unicolor
14.3.10		Lesser Yellownape	Picus chlorolophus wellsi
14.3.10		Sri Lanka Black Bulbul	Hypsipetes leucocephalus humii
14.3.10		Eastern Cattle Egret	Bubulcus coromandus
14.3.10		Common Myna	Acridotheres tristis melanosturnus
14.3.10		Black-capped Bulbul	Pycnonotus melanicterus melanicterus
14.3.10		Little Cormorant	Phalacrocorax niger
14.3.10		Oriental Honey-Buzzard	Pernis ptilorhynchus ruficollis
14.3.10		White-rumped Munia	Lonchura striata striata
14.3.10		Chestnut-headed Bee-eater	Merops leschenaulti
14.3.10		Orange Minivet	Pericrocotus flammeus flammeus
14.3.10		Emerald Dove	Chalcophaps indica robinsoni
14.3.10		Brown-breasted Flycatcher	Muscicapa muttui
14.3.10		Stork-billed Kingfisher	Pelargopsis capensis capensis
14.3.10		*Little Egret*	*Egretta garzetta*
14.3.10		Indian Blue Robin	Luscinia brunnea brunnea
14.3.10		Blue-tailed Bee-eater	Merops philippinus javanicus
14.3.10		*Brown Shrike*	*Lanius cristatus*
14.3.10		*Grey Wagtail*	*Motacilla cinerea*
14.3.10		Black-naped Monarch	Hypothymis azurea ceylonensis
14.3.10		Dark-fronted Babbler	Rhopocichla atriceps nigrifrons
14.3.10		Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher	Ceyx erithacus erithacus
14.3.10		Tickell's Blue Flycatcher	Cyornis tickelliae jerdoni
14.3.10		Purple-rumped Sunbird	Nectarinia zeylonica zeylonica
14.3.10		White-bellied Sea-Eagle	Haliaeetus leucogaster
14.3.10		*Striated Heron*	*Butorides striatus chloriceps*
14.3.10		Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill	Ocyceros gingalensis
14.3.10		Indian Pitta	Pitta brachyura
14.3.10		Tawny-bellied Babbler	Dumetia hyperythra philipsi
14.3.10		Southern Hill Myna	Gracula indica
14.3.10		Yellow-fronted Barbet	Megalaima flavifrons
14.3.10		Sri Lanka Green-Pigeon	Treron pompadora pompadora
14.3.10		Sri Lanka Junglefowl	Gallus lafayetii
14.3.10		Small Minivet	Pericrocotus cinnamomeus cinnamomeus
14.3.10	Night	Chestnut-backed Owlet	Glaucidium castanonotum
15.3.10		*White-breasted Waterhen*	*Amaurornis phoenicurus phoenicurus*
15.3.10		Indian Besra	Accipiter virgatus besra
15.3.10		Brahminy Kite	Haliastur indus indus
15.3.10		Yellow-browed Bulbul	Iole indica guglielmi
15.3.10		Crested Serpent-Eagle	Spilornis cheela spilogaster
15.3.10		Brown-capped Babbler	Pellorneum fuscocapillum
15.3.10		Sri Lanka Spurfowl	Galloperdix bicalcarata
15.3.10		Sri Lanka Myna	Gracula ptilogenys
15.3.10	Night	Brown Hawk-Owl	Ninox scutulata hirsuta
15.3.10		Sri Lanka Blue Magpie	Urocissa ornata
15.3.10		Sri Lanka Crested Drongo	Dicrurus lophorinus
15.3.10		Sri Lanka Scimitar-Babbler	Pomatorhinus melanurus
15.3.10		Asian Palm-Swift	Cypsiurus balasiensis batasiensis
15.3.10		*Common Kingfisher*	*Alcedo atthis taprobana*

15.3.10		Pale-billed Flowerpecker	Dicaeum erythrorhynchos ceylonense
15.3.10		Common Iora	Aegithina tiphia multicolor
15.3.10	Night	Sri Lanka Frogmouth	Batrachostomus moniliger
15.3.10	Night	Serendib Scops-Owl	Otus thilohoffmanni
16.3.10		*Rose-ringed Parakeet*	Psittacula krameri manillensis
16.3.10		Forest Wagtail	Dendronanthus indicus
16.3.10		Oriental White-eye	Zosterops palpebrosus palpebrosus
16.3.10		Legge's Flowerpecker	Dicaeum vincens
16.3.10		Greater Coucal	Centropus sinensis parroti
16.3.10		Asian Brown Flycatcher	Muscicapa dauurica dauurica
16.3.10		*House Crow*	Corvus splendens protegatus
16.3.10		Black-headed Cuckoo-Shrike	Coracina melanoptera sykesi
16.3.10		Ashy-headed Laughingthrush	Garrulax cinereifrons
16.3.10		Sri Lanka Wood Pigeon	Columba torringtoni
16.3.10		Red-faced Malkoha	Phaenicophaeus pyrrhocephalus
17.3.10		White-faced Starling	Sturnus senex
17.3.10		Sri Lanka White-eye	Zosterops ceylonensis
17.3.10		Asian Paradise-Flycatcher	Terpsiphone paradisi ceylonensis
17.3.10		Brown-backed Needletail	Hirundapus giganteus indicus
17.3.10		Malabar Trogon	Harpactes fasciatus
17.3.10		Sri Lanka Scaly Thrush	Zoothera imbricata
17.3.10		Black Eagle	Ictinaetus malayensis perniger
17.3.10		*Alpine Swift*	*Tachymarptis melba bakeri*
18.3.10		Large-billed Leaf Warbler	Phylloscopus magnirostris
18.3.10		Crested Treeswift	Hemiprocne coronata
18.3.10		Rufous-bellied Eagle	Hieraaetus kienerii kienerii
18.3.10		Asian Koel	Eudynamys scolopacea scolopacea
18.3.10		Sri Lanka Small Barbet	Megalaima rubricapilla
19.3.10		Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike	Hemipus picatus leggei
19.3.10		Asian Open-bill Stork	Anastomus oscitans
19.3.10		*House Sparrow*	*Passer domesticus indicus*
19.3.10		*Rock Dove*	*Columba livia intermedia*
19.3.10		Crested Hawk-Eagle	Spizaetus cirrhatus ceylanensis
19.3.10		Scaly-breasted Munia	Lonchura punctulata punctulata
19.3.10		Grey-breasted Prinia	Prinia hodgsonii leggei
19.3.10		Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark	Eremopterix grisea
19.3.10		*Little Ringed Plover*	*Charadrius dubius jerdoni*
19.3.10		Paddyfield Pipit	Anthus rufulus
19.3.10		Common Peafowl	Pavo cristatus
19.3.10		*Grey Heron*	*Ardea cinerea cinerea*
19.3.10		Red-wattled Lapwing	Vanellus indicus indicus
19.3.10		Ashy Prinia	Prinia socialis brevicauda
19.3.10		Barred Buttonquail	Turnix suscitator leggei
19.3.10		Blyth's Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus dumetorum
19.3.10		Plain Prinia	Prinia inornata
19.3.10		*Black-shouldered Kite*	*Elanus caeruleus*
19.3.10		*Little Green Bee-eater*	*Merops orientalis orientalis*
19.3.10		*Zitting Cisticola*	*Cisticola juncidis omalura*
19.3.10		Painted Stork	Mycteria leucocephala
19.3.10		Alexandrine Parakeet	Psittacula eupatria eupatria
19.3.10		*Barn Swallow*	*Hirundo rustica gutteralis*
19.3.10		*Common Kestrel*	*Falco tinnunculus*
19.3.10		Jungle Prinia	Prinia sylvatica valida
19.3.10		*Great Cormorant*	*Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis*
19.3.10		*Black-winged Stilt*	*Himantopus himantopus ceylonensis*
19.3.10		*Whiskered Tern*	*Chlidonias hybridus javanica*
19.3.10		*Intermediate Egret*	*Mesophoyx intermedia intermedia*

19.3.10		*Wood Sandpiper*	*Tringa glareola*
19.3.10		Orange-breasted Green-Pigeon	Treron bicincta leggei
19.3.10		Malabar Pied Hornbill	Anthracoceros coronatus
19.3.10		Black-backed Robin	Saxicoloides fulicata leucoptera
19.3.10		Oriental Darter	Anhinga melanogaster
19.3.10		Sirkeer Malkoha	Phaenicophaeus leschenaultii leschenaultii
19.3.10		Jerdon's Bush Lark	Mirafra affinis
19.3.10		Grey-bellied Cuckoo	Cacomantis passerinus
19.3.10		Indian Roller	Coracias benghalensis indica
19.3.10		White-browed Bulbul	Pycnonotus luteolus insulae
19.3.10		White-naped Woodpecker	Chrysocolaptes festivus tantus
19.3.10		*Pied Cuckoo*	*Oxylophus jacobinus jacobinus*
19.3.10		Plum-headed Parakeet	Psittacula cyanocephala
19.3.10		Thick-billed Flowerpecker	Dicaeum agile zeylonicum
19.3.10		*Sri Lanka Hoopoe*	*Upupa epops ceylonensis*
19.3.10		*Black-crowned Night Heron*	*Nycticorax nycticorax*
19.3.10	Night	Indian Nightjar	Caprimulgus asiaticus eidos
19.3.10		*Purple Heron*	*Ardea purpurea*
19.3.10		Coppersmith Barbet	Megalaima haemacephala indica
20.3.10		*Great White Egret*	*Egretta alba modesta*
20.3.10		Jerdon's Leafbird	Chloropsis jerdoni
20.3.10		*Little Swift*	*Apus affinis affinis*
20.3.10		White-browed Fantail	Rhipidura aureola compressirostris
20.3.10		Black-headed Ibis	Threskiornis melanocephalus
20.3.10		Pheasant-tailed Jacana	Hydrophasianus chirurgus
20.3.10		*Little Grebe*	*Tachybaptus ruficollis*
20.3.10		*Grey-headed Wagtail*	*Motacilla flava thunbergi*
20.3.10		Sri Lanka Woodshrike	Tephrodornis affinis
20.3.10		Purple Sunbird	Nectarinia asiatica asiatica
20.3.10	Night	Jungle Owlet	Glaucidium radiatum radiatum
20.3.10		*Common Sandpiper*	*Actitis hypoleucos*
20.3.10		*Common Redshank*	*Tringa totanus*
20.3.10		*Purple Swamphen*	*Porphyrio porphyrio*
20.3.10		*Little Tern*	*Sterna albifrons*
20.3.10		*Gull-billed Tern*	*Sterna nilotica*
20.3.10		*Ringed Plover*	*Charadrius hiaticula*
20.3.10		*Lesser Sand Plover*	*Charadrius mongolus*
20.3.10		Lesser Whistling Duck	Dendrocygna javanica
20.3.10		*Little Stint*	Calidris minuta
20.3.10		Oriental Skylark	Alauda gulgula australis
20.3.10		Cotton Pygmy Goose	Nettapus coromandelianus coromandelianus
20.3.10		Grey-headed Fish-Eagle	Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus
20.3.10		Yellow Bittern	Ixobrychus sinensis
20.3.10		Baya Weaver	Ploceus philippinus philippinus
20.3.10		*Eurasian Spoonbill*	*Platalea leucorodia*
20.3.10		*Common Moorhen*	*Gallinula chloropus*
20.3.10		Tricoloured Munia	Lonchura malacca malacca
20.3.10		Black Bittern	Ixobrychus flavicollis flavicollis
20.3.10		Water Cock	Gallicrex cinerea
21.3.10		Yellow-wattled Lapwing	Vanellus malabaricus
21.3.10		Indian Thick-knee	Burhinus indicus
21.3.10		*White-winged Black Tern*	*Chlidonias leucopterus*
21.3.10		Clamorous Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus stentoreus meridionalis
21.3.10		Pintail Snipe	Gallinago stenura
21.3.10		*Greenshank*	Tringa nebularia
21.3.10		*Eurasian Curlew*	Numenius arquata
21.3.10		*Eastern Black-tailed Godwit*	*Limosa limosa melanuroides*

21.3.10		*Pacific Golden Plover*	*Pluvialis fulva*
21.3.10		*Marsh Sandpiper*	*Tringa stagnatilis*
21.3.10		*Pied Kingfisher*	*Ceryle rudis*
21.3.10		Great Thick-knee	Burhinus recurvirostris
21.3.10		Blue-faced Malkoha	Phaenicophaeus viridirostris
21.3.10		*Shikra*	*Accipiter badius badius*
21.3.10		Brown-headed Gull	Larus brunnicephalus
21.3.10		Indian Cormorant	Phalacrocorax fuscicollis
21.3.10		*Crested Tern*	*Sterna bergii velox*
21.3.10		*Lesser Crested Tern*	*Sterna bengalensis*
21.3.10		*Caspian Tern*	*Sterna caspia caspia*
21.3.10		*Ruddy Turnstone*	*Arenaria interpres*
21.3.10		*Grey Plover*	Pluvialis squatarola
21.3.10		Small Pratincole	Glareola lactea
21.3.10		*Curlew Sandpiper*	*Calidris ferruginea*
21.3.10		*Kentish Plover*	*Charadrius alexandrinus seebohmi*
21.3.10		*Garganey*	*Anas querquedula*
21.3.10		Yellow-eyed Babbler	Chrysomma sinense nasale
21.3.10	Night	Jerdon's Nightjar	Caprimulgus atripennis aequabilis
22.3.10		*Great Tit*	*Parus major mahrattarum*
22.3.10		White-rumped Shama	Copsychus malabaricus leggei
22.3.10		Streaked Weaver	Ploceus manyar flaviceps
23.3.10		Hill Swallow	Hirundo domicola
23.3.10		Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher	Culicicapa ceylonensis ceylonensis
23.3.10		Sri Lanka Whistling-Thrush	Myophonus blighi
23.3.10		*Rose-coloured Starling*	*Sturnus roseus*
24.3.10		Velvet-fronted Nuthatch	Sitta frontalis frontalis
24.3.10		Sri Lanka Bush Warbler	Bradypterus palliseri
24.3.10		Pied Thrush	Zoothera wardii
24.3.10		Pied Bushchat	Saxicola caprata atrata
24.3.10		Yellow-eared Bulbul	Pycnonotus penicillatus
24.3.10		Black-throated Munia	Lonchura kelaarti kelaarti
24.3.10		Indian Blackbird	Turdus simillimus kinnisii
24.3.10		Dull Blue Flycatcher	Eumyias sordida
24.3.10		Crimson-backed Flameback	Chrysocolaptes stricklandi
25.3.10		Kashmir Flycatcher	Ficedula subrubra
25.3.10	Night	Brown Wood Owl	Strix leptogrammica ochrogenys
25.3.10	Night	Forest Eagle-Owl	Bubo nipalensis blighi
26.3.10		Shaheen Peregrine	Falco peregrinus peregrinator
26.3.10		Orange-headed Thrush	Zoothera citrina citrina
26.3.10	Night	Brown Fish-Owl	Ketupa zeylonensis zeylonensis
26.3.10	Night	Oriental Scops-Owl	Otus sunia leggei
26.3.10		Common Hawk-Cuckoo	Cuculus varius ciceliae
		Endemics = 33	
		Night = 12	
		Sighted = 230	
		Photographed = 180	
		Life Ticks = 171	

Amila's blog post about our trip can be viewed at:
http://gallicissa.blogspot.com/2010/09/absolute-birdingmarch-2010.html