

Visit to Sri Lanka, Saturday 16th January to Friday 29th January 2010.

Brian & Isabel Eady.

Preamble

If you are a dawn to dusk birder wanting a high count of species, then this report is not for you, however if you want to get away from the atrocious weather at home, need to find some sunshine with a bit of birding included, see 27 of the 33 endemics in two days birding, then please read on.

After a great deal of thought, and numerous hours spent trawling through pages of the Internet, we finally decided to visit a new country, Sri Lanka, for the first time. We have visited quite a few countries during our brief affinity with bird watching including Goa, The Gambia, Morocco, Trinidad & Tobago, Kenya, Lesvos, Majorca, and finally last year Costa Rica. We first became interested at the turn of the millennium, 2000, and since then we have become hooked, not just with birding, but with bird watching. Our previous experiences included doing our own birding, with a few guided trips thrown in, to add to our expertise. Last year we decided to try a fully guided bird watching holiday to Costa Rica with **Birdseekers**, probably a place where most birders yearn to visit at some time during their life. Yes, we saw some fantastic birds, and were expertly guided by Steve Bird and Gina Nichol, but on reflection, we felt that doing our own thing gave us a much clearer understanding of the birds we saw, and honed our own identification skills.

The most disappointing part of our investigations showed that, yes, there are numerous reports on the internet covering birding in Sri Lanka, but every one, without exception, were reports of guided tours, either complete birding, or cultural tours with a bit of birding included. So, this left us with a bit of a dilemma, where do we base ourselves and is it possible to hire a guide for some one to one birding during our holiday. During our previous holidays in Goa, where we had already built up a country list of more than 290 species, much of the holidays were spent birding morning and evening, and relaxing during the heat of the day. Day trips out with a guide who was familiar with sites away from the base, supplemented the remainder of the time.

For all of the countries we have visited, the checklists used have been obtained from **Avibase**, the world bird list database, a free website, which enables the birder to obtain records of their sightings from a common source. We use the Clements list 6th edition, and we found that by comparing the two checklists, one for Goa, and one for Sri Lanka, more than 65 % of the bird species are common to both countries, so having already seen 290 species in Goa, and other species from our travels, our life birds would be limited.

We finally decided to base ourselves in the small village of **Waikkal**, some 30 minutes drive from Colombo airport, in a northerly direction. We looked at various brochures, and found a hotel which suited our needs, and found that the price on the Internet was £628 less than the First Choice brochure price. Needless to say, we asked the Travel shop if they could match the price, and to our amazement, they said they would, so, don't be afraid to haggle if you see a lower price.

The hotel we chose was the **Club Hotel Dolphin**, a fully inclusive two week package costing in the region of £1800 for the two of us, and after a 10 hour flight from Gatwick, we arrived in Sri Lanka to hot and steamy conditions. Luckily we had a 95 mph tail wind on the way over, so the flying time was somewhat reduced. Having just left England where we had had below zero temperatures for more than a month, it was just what the doctor ordered. We soon settled into our accommodation, just a few yards from the gigantic hotel pool, and it was time to have our first exploration of the surrounding area. We were situated on a land spit which was sandwiched between the Indian Ocean and a canal, so without transport to get us away from our base, the birding opportunities would be somewhat limited. Prior to our holiday, we had found a bird guide, **Amila Salgado** who would be prepared to take us on a couple of birding excursions, one for a day trip to **Sigiriya**, and an overnight stay at



the **Sinharaja** rain forest reserve, so we had that to look forward to. We exchanged many E Mails prior to the holiday, and it was quite apparent that Amila was not only a brilliant bird guide, but a very pleasant guy with extensive knowledge of Birds, Insects, Butterflies, and the Flora of Sri Lanka, and also a great sense of humour. Amila's other interests we found out are cricket and scrabble.

Our first sightings were of course the common **House Crows**, which could be seen all over the extensive garden area. **Common Myna** birds were also easy to see in the garden, and were much more accommodating than those we found in Goa.

A walk along the beach area where we observed a number of **Blue-tailed Bee-eaters** on the overhead wires showed us that, although the birding would be somewhat limited in the immediate locality, there would still be plenty to see, and some quite nice walking areas we could visit. There were plenty of locals offering boat trips on the canal to see the birds, but being the first day of our holiday they were politely declined. We were feeling extremely tired after our flight, and after a night without sleep, it was time to relax around the pool in the shade, as the temperatures were very hot, 35 degrees C. We did note quite a few hirundines



in the sky between snoozes, but had no inclination to try to sort them out. Throughout the grounds we could see **Palm Squirrels** scampering about the gardens and snack bar waiting for tit bits. These tiny squirrels could be likened to Chipmunks.



We did very little for the rest of the day and after an early night, and a good sleep, woke to another glorious day. I had my doubts before travelling as to whether we were going to experience sunny weather or some degree of rain. I had looked on the TV weather reports for the previous three weeks for Colombo before the holiday, and read heavy rain for days on end. I could not

bring myself to tell my wife Isabel, as, like me, she was looking forward to the break immensely. Completely refreshed after the sleep and a good breakfast, we explored further where we started yesterday. There were still masses of hirundines and Bee-eaters high in the sky, and out to sea we could see plenty of **Terns** too far out to make any positive identification. A couple of **Indian Rollers** were spotted on a waste area, before we made our way through a run-down hotel complex, onto a track which we hoped would lead us back to the hotel. We noted, and filmed a nice **Purple-rumped Sunbird** in a flowering shrub, and saw a **Greater Coucal** cross the track and disappear into the mangroves by the canal. In the muddy fringes we found a feeding **Curlew** which was up and away as soon as it spotted us. On the way back we came across a laundry and decided to sit on the steps of what turned out to be their loo. There were quite a few birds about, and the tree a few yards from us was fruiting. A **White-browed Bulbul** kept us entertained for a while, and a couple of **Asian Koel** were also feeding on the berries. A couple of the laundry workers were quite enthralled by our interest in the toilet steps, and invited us to have a look at their laundry, which they were quite proud of. They washed in what could be described as an antiquated twin-tub system, hung out the laundry on a clothes line, or when that was full they would spread them on nearby bushes or even on the ground to dry. Their iron was something else. Before they could start they had to fill it up with hot embers from a fire, oh for modern technology. We could see in the distance a dead tree which was a magnet for the **Bee-eaters**, and we could see **Lesser Pied Kingfishers** hovering nearby. In the nearby shrubbery we were quite thrilled to find a very accommodating brown form of the **Asian Paradise Flycatcher**, a female we ascertained. We reached the banks of the canal and could see **Red-wattled Lapwings** on the far bank, and a **Little Cormorant** taking the high position on the top of a telegraph pole. By the canal edge a **White-throated Kingfisher** was perched in a low down tree by the waters edge. Back at the hotel after a couple of hours, we found a shady place by the pool, bins beside us, relaxing in the heat of the day. Sorting out the hirundines was to be the next task. **Asian Palm-swifts** were obvious with their narrow sharply pointed wings and deeply forked tail, as were the **Little Swifts** with their white

throats and rumps. There were also other birds with quite broad wings, relatively dark features, and no white rump or throat, pointed to **Indian Swiftlet**. During the afternoon, the first raptor of the holiday appeared quite low over the hotel garden, and was the one which we expected, the handsome brown and white **Brahminy Kite**. Late afternoon we embarked on a repeat of the walk we did in the morning but this time the other way round. On the way out of our room we noticed a superb **Oriental Magpie Robin** walking about on the grass outside just a few feet away. Strolling by the canal we had two other Kingfishers, the **Common River Kingfisher**, the same as the one we see at home, and the **Stork-billed** beauty. There were plenty of **Cattle Egrets** flying into their night time roost, and a lone **Striated Heron** fishing for his supper under the mangrove fringed edges of the canal. The common **Indian Pond Herons** were also in abundance as the dusk began to fall. We were far from setting any records but were enjoying ourselves in the warm sunshine a complete reverse to the abysmal weather at home.

The next day we had made up our minds to visit **Ranwelli Holiday Village**, a short walk if only the mouth of the canal was not in the way, so it gave us no alternate but to hire a tuk tuk, a small three wheeled vehicle seen everywhere in Sri Lanka. After arriving at Ranwelli, we crossed the canal by a hand propelled ferry, and were soon walking in the heavily wooded grounds. In our exchanged E-Mails with Amila, he suggested that if we visited Ranwelli, look up the resident bird guide named **Mahinda**, with whom he attended the Bird Fair in Taiwan. We eventually found him at the visitors centre, and he showed us around the area. There were not many birds around but when we asked him where we could find the Yellow and Black Bittern, which would be lifers for us, he kindly volunteered to take us back to the hotel by boat.

Whilst at Ranwelli we were interested to see a quite tame **Giant Squirrel**, who eagerly accepted a banana to feed on, just a few feet from us. Some of the few birds we saw in the grounds were a **Long-billed (Loten's) Sunbird**, and a beautiful **Black-hooded Oriole** at the top of a tall tree. Mahinda led us down to the ferry crossing point where we clambered aboard a small boat for our trip back. The boat pilot headed slowly away from the main canal up a small tributary, and we were very soon catching up with the first lifer of our holiday, the **Yellow Bittern**. Just a few minutes later we had our other



target bird the **Black Bittern**. This was brilliant, but of course a guide who knows the area, also knows where to find the various birds. We quickly followed those with **Little Egret**, **Intermediate Egret** and the **Great White Egret**, **Purple Heron**, **Grey Heron**, **Common Sandpiper**,

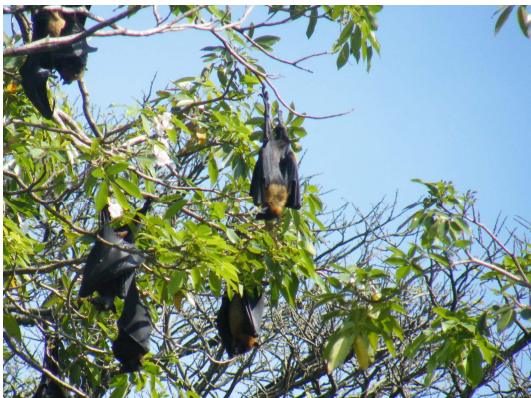


Greenshank, **Redshank**, and the occasional **Barn Swallow** skimming the water for either insects, or for a quick drink; Nothing outstanding, but still additions to the Sri Lanka list. On our return to the hotel Mahinda pointed out **Zitting Cisticola**, **Plain Prinia**, **White-breasted Waterhen**, **Large-billed Crow**, and **Ashy Prinia**. The boat was guided to set of old rusty steps, with half of the rungs missing, and we clambered up the bank to the road. We thanked Mahinda for his help and made our way back to the hotel entrance just a few yards away. Later in the afternoon we walked the beach walk once again, and on reaching the laundry steps we could see birds feeding in the fruiting tree. We picked out **Common Iora**, and noted

White bellied Drongo moving about in some flowering trees by the trackside. The bare tree that we had noticed before was still attracting birds, and amongst the Bee-eaters and Kingfishers we could see a pair of **Red-vented Bulbuls**. For the past few days we had heard the purring of **Spotted Doves**, but could not find them, but this evening we spotted one in a nearby tree. Just wandering around the local area we had seen a total of 45 species but had not really been anywhere yet.

On the second day we were here we arranged for a First Choice trip to Kandy to see the **Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic**. Amila had tried to persuade us to couple the Sigiriya trip and the Kandy trip with him, and spend a night in a hotel to save on the travelling time. But of course we

knew better, so we thought. It was Tuesday, and after a 6:30am pick up we were off. As there were only the two of us, we had been assigned a taxi, so it was up to us to do as we wish for the entire day. Seeing a group of **Asian Openbills** in a nearby wetland area we asked the driver to pull over for a better view. Our first stop was to be Pinnawela Elephant Orphanage. The Pinnawela Elephant Orphanage was started in 1975 by the Department of Wildlife, on a twenty five acre coconut property on the Maha Oya River at Rambukkana. The orphanage was primarily designed to afford care and protection to the many baby elephants found in the jungle without their mothers. In most of these cases the mother had either died or been killed. When they were taken to the river to bathe, we counted about 65 elephants of all sizes. The only birds we noticed were a few **Rose-ringed Parakeets** flashing by. From Pinnawela we continued towards Kandy, and were quite surprised to see villages and towns bedecked in blue streamers, a few green ones, but mainly blue. Apparently the decorations were for the President who was visiting Kandy for an open-air meeting. We stopped off at a Spice Garden, but were quite bored with the spiel we were listening to. If we had purchased all of the various herbal remedies on sale we would undoubtedly live to be 150 years old and never need to shave again. We could hear plenty of birds in this garden, but felt it would be too rude to ignore the guide, and try to find the birds, much as we wanted to. Our next stop was to a tea factory, surprisingly quite interesting, seeing the tea arriving as freshly picked tips, and all of the processes through which it went, before becoming acceptable for sale. We tried some, which was without milk, but surprisingly enough, we would not have known, it was really superb. As we were nearing Kandy, the traffic was piling up, and we were crawling along at a snail's pace. Coaches decorated in blue streamers were the main culprits, obviously full of supporters of the president, and it was then that we wondered if we had picked the wrong day to visit Kandy, however, we did eventually arrive at the restaurant for lunch. After lunch we made our way down towards the Temple which was the main reason for our visit. The Sacred Temple of the Tooth in Kandy Sri Lanka is considered the foremost sacred place of worship in the Buddhist world. Visiting the Temple was an awe-inspiring experience, we had never seen so much gold



silver and ivory, and we were glad that we made the trip. On our way back to the taxi we had pointed out to us, the masses of **Giant Fruit Bats** hanging upside down in the trees by the lake. Our next visit was to be the Botanical Gardens 5 miles from Kandy, but due to the traffic jams in the centre of the city, unfortunately access was impossible. We intended to spend some time there, and hopefully do a bit of birding to catch up with a few new species, but it was not to be. We had to make a diversion away from Kandy to avoid the traffic but we were soon back on the road back to Waikkal. The journey back was horrendous, never before have we seen so many people, so many vehicles, and so much bad driving and so many horns honking at the same time. As dusk fell, we were still making our way back. We were amazed that none of the pedal cyclists had any lights, and were told that it is not necessary in Sri Lanka, amazing. We saw drivers of moped type scooters with the driver supposedly in control of the vehicle, a youngster sitting on the petrol tank in front of him, his wife as the pillion passenger, with another young lad squashed between them both, and believe it or not she was holding a baby in her arms. Five people on one moped, can you imagine this happening in England. Most people drove on the left, but there seemed to be no laws on overtaking or undertaking, or just getting past, however it was achieved. One thing that was very noticeable was there were very few lady drivers, and no school runs thank goodness.

Once again on the Wednesday we continued on our short walks, still taking in the region of two to two and a half hours, and were still finding new birds. As we approached the laundry area we were alerted by a couple of birds on the track in front of us, definitely something we had not come across before in our travels. The birds were a drab grey-brown colour with a pale eye and a yellow bill. We soon identified them as **Yellow-billed Babblers**, a lifer for us. From the laundry steps we had **Sri**

Lanka Woodshrike), and in the nearby bushes alerted by its very loud call, a diminutive **Common Tailorbird**. Over the other side of the canal we could see a pool, where at least a dozen **Black-winged Stilts** could be seen feeding in the muddy fringes. An evening walk up the beach in the opposite direction gave us **Purple Sunbird** feeding on a flowering shrub.

Thursday arrived, the day we were to start our birding excursions with Amila and after an early call at 5:30 am, were met by him in the foyer of the hotel and were away just before six. Amila was a super guy and very much as expected. The long journey up to Sigiriya gave us plenty of time to get to know Amila, who for the entire journey was constantly on the lookout for any birds of note. We



reached an area of wetland and pulled over. One of our desires was to see **Pheasant-tailed Jacanas** in the resplendent breeding plumage, and there they were, right in front of us, superb. Also on the wetland we had **Black headed Ibis**, **Lesser Whistling Ducks**, and obviously some of the Herons and Egrets we had already caught up with. We had a laugh with Amila, saying we were yet to find the Common House Sparrow, despite looking at all of the likely places; where were they? On the way at a stop for a comfort break we added a group of **Alexandrine Parakeets** to our list, and other birds including **White-rumped Munia**, **Scaly-breasted Munia**, and **Black-hooded Oriole**, which we had already recorded. We

eventually reached **Sigiriya Rest House**, situated close to what is considered to be the eighth wonder of the world, **The Sigiriya Rock Fortress**, where we enjoyed our lunch, and it was then that we realised that we definitely should have combined this trip with Kandy. The Sigiriya Rock

fortress is one of the 7 UNESCO World Heritage sites. After lunch we started the birding and were soon racking up numerous species. The first of note was the **Shaheen**, a Sri Lankan race of the Peregrine Falcon, followed by **Black Eagle**. The following birds were all seen around the bird rich Sigiriya sanctuary. **Bar-winged Flycatcher Shrike**, **Coppersmiths Barbet**, **Black-capped Bulbul**

(endemic) - nominate race of Black-crested Bulbul to Clements's **Black-naped Monarch**, **Sri Lanka Small Barbet** (still Crimson-fronted Barbet according to Clements's) an endemic that gave good scope views, **Jerdon's (Blue-winged) Leafbird**, **Bright Green**

Warbler, **Sri Lanka Swallow** (endemic), still Red-rumped Swallow according to Clements's, **Brown-breasted Flycatcher**, **Crested Serpent Eagle**, **Brown-capped Babbler** (endemic) **Crested Treeswift**, **Greater Racket-tailed Drongo** (endemic dry zone race: *ceylonicus*), **Indian Robin**, **Sri Lanka Woodshrike**, (endemic), **Little Green Bee-eater**, **Large-billed Leaf Warbler**, **Oriental (Paddyfield) Pipit**, **Pale-billed Flowerpecker**, **Thick-billed Flowerpecker**, **Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill**, (endemic), **White-rumped Sharma**, and **Small Minivet**. There were numerous

species of butterflies and dragonflies darting about and we also noted the **Toque Macaque**, an endemic Monkey species. We moved over to a wetland area quite close to the Sigiriya Hotel and Amila beckoned us over excitedly pointing to a pair of **House Sparrows**. At last, this is the only bird species that we have recorded in every country we have visited, so we couldn't miss out in Sri Lanka. In the wetland area we added, **Oriental Darter**, and **Purple Swamphen**, and **Jerdon's (Rufous-winged) Bushlark**. Due to lack of time, we did not have a chance to look for any Owl species, or visit areas where we could add more species. Oh how we wished we had taken Amila's advice. Our drive back was as hectic as ever, and to use Amila's phraseology, they need good horns, good brakes, and good luck, and that was quite true. When we arrived back at the hotel at about 7:00pm we reflected on our day and were pleased that we had seen six Sri Lankan endemics - (*Black-capped Bulbul*, *Sri Lanka Small Barbet*, *Brown-capped Babbler*, *Sri Lanka Woodshrike*, *Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill* and *Sri Lanka Swallow*) endemics and also some more lifers, but regretted having so little time for birding. If you look on the Sri Lanka map, places seem no distance at all away from base, but we did not realise that the speed limit in towns and villages is a mere 40 kilometres an hour, and on the open road just 70 KPH. Add to that the number of Tuk Tuks, Bicycles, Mopeds, Cars, Pedestrians and other forms of traffic, then an hours journey in



England would take probably two and a half hours in Sri Lanka, so be warned. A quick appraisal of our bird list showed that we were at 87 species. An early night was called for as we had another early start in the morning for our visit to **Sinharaja** another of the UNESCO World Heritage sites.

Located in south-west Sri Lanka, **Sinharaja** is the country's last viable area of primary tropical rainforest. The reserve is only 21 km from east to west, and a maximum of 7 km from north to south. More than 60% of the trees are endemic and many of them are considered rare. There is much endemic wildlife, especially birds, but the reserve is also home to over 50% of Sri Lanka's endemic species of mammals and butterflies, as well as many kinds of insects, reptiles and rare amphibians.

Knowing that we were going to a rain forest, Isabel had packed a change of clothes, waterproofs, and a couple of umbrellas just in case, and I also made sure we had plastic bags (without holes) for our cameras and bins.

As arranged the previous day, Amila's driver picked us up from the hotel at about 5:30 am, and drove us to the outskirts of Colombo, where we would pick up Amila, who could have a bit of a lay-in. Once again, but even more so, the traffic was extremely heavy, but we eventually arrived at Amila's house where he lived with his parents. He beckoned us to follow him quietly around to the back of his house, and unbelievably there, picking around in his garden was an **Indian Pitta**, no not just a common garden bird, but I repeat, an **Indian Pitta**. We had searched for ages in Goa to find this rare bird, and there was one walking about in his garden. Amila told us that he has quite an interesting count of birds in his garden list. We continued through the hub bub of Colombo, and after an interesting drive, arrived at the entrance to the reserve where Amila picked up our permits. The taxi had to be left at the entrance, and we had to be driven up to **Martin's Simple Lodge** by a 4 wheeled jeep. Talk about a white knuckle drive, the track was just about navigable, but you had to hang on for dear life. You could almost describe it as a brown trouser ride, however we made the lodge without mishap. These drivers know the track, and drive it a number of times each day, but to us it certainly was something else.

After being shown to our accommodation, we met Amila in the restaurant area for lunch. Amila explained over lunch what to expect, and said that he had supplied **Leech Socks** so that we could be free from bites. The bites, we had read from these leeches don't hurt, but are unpleasant, and can make a mess of your clothing due to the blood generated from a bite. Isabel especially was not looking forward to getting bitten, so as advised by Amila, we had taken long trousers to be safe. Amila had also explained to us how the birds feed in the rain forest, and in his words from the trip itinerary *"Highlights of birding in Sinharaja is seeing mixed species bird flocks, which is a unique strategy adopted by birds in the tropics to maximize feeding efficiency, and to reduce the risk of predation. Studied since 1981, Sinharaja's bird flocks are the world's longest studied bird flocks. On average, 12 species are present in the flocks comprising about 42 individuals. Orange-billed Babblers and Sri Lanka Crested Drongos are found in 92% and 89% respectively of the flocks and they jointly form the 'nuclear species' of the flock. The Drongos are the bosses and issue alarm calls to warn the rest of the flock of any trouble that might be evident."*

Following lunch, after donning leech socks, which were worn over socks but inside boots, we made



our first incursion into the forest. We already had seen three of the endemics, and wondered what the Sinharaja experience would provide. Before leaving we spotted a number of **Oriental Honey Buzzards** high in the sky over the forest. We were accompanied by a ranger, provided by the reserve, who would stay with us for the whole extent of the rainforest walks. It was not far into the rainforest when we experienced our first flock, and as suggested we were adding **Sri Lanka Crested Drongo** (Greater Racket-tailed Drongo, lowland wet zone race: *Iophorhinus* according to Clements's), and **Orange-billed Babbler**, both endemics, to our list. I really can't remember what order the birds

came in, but they arrived thick and fast. In that single afternoon, due wholly to the exceptional skills

of Amila, we added . **Ashy-headed Laughingthrush** (endemic), **Asian Brown Flycatcher**, **Black-rumped Flameback**, **Brown Shrike**, **Crimson-backed Flameback** (Greater Flameback's race *stricklandi* according to Clements), **another endemic**, **Dark fronted Babbler**, **Emerald Dove**, **Green Imperial Pigeon**, and alerted by the call, low down on the forest floor, another endemic, the **Green-billed Coucal** a difficult sculker. To continue with our exception afternoon we added, **Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill**, an endemic we had already seen in Sigiriya, **Layard's Parakeet**, **Legge's Flowerpecker** both endemics, **Lesser Yellownape**, one of the woodpecker species, **Orange (Scarlet) Minivet**, the beautiful **Red-faced Malkoha**, **Spot-winged Thrush**, yet two more endemics, and **Square-tailed Black Bulbul**. Something, which was quite amazing was that we were not just getting brief and fleeting views of these birds, but we could study them and see all of the distinguishing features quite clearly, we just could not believe our luck. We then saw another FIVE endemics in next to no time. **Sri Lanka Green Pigeon** (race: *pompadora* of Pompadour Green Pigeon according to Clements), perched **Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot**, **Sri Lanka Scimitar Babbler**, **Sri Lanka Swallow** (our first sighting of Sri Lanka Swallow was at Sigiriya), **Sri Lanka White-eye**, We advanced along the track to an area, where we came across a tree, which was broken off about eight feet from the ground. Amila pointed out to us a male **Sri Lanka Frogmouth** sitting on a youngster due to fledge in just a few days. Obviously we were thrilled with this sighting,



although we had had sightings of this bird in a bamboo thicket at Backwoods Camp in Goa, this must be one of the highlights of the day. We, at this point turned back and headed towards the lodge. We reached a clearing that contained a number of buildings, which was some sort of research station. It was here that we picked up brilliant views of the magnificent **Sri Lanka Blue Magpie**, yet another endemic. On the way back we also picked up a few more species including **Velvet-fronted Nuthatch**, **Yellow-browed Bulbul**, **Sri Lanka Wood Pigeon**, and **Yellow-fronted Barbet**, the latter two both being endemic species. Dusk was starting to close in, but not before we had caught up with yet another beauty,

walking along the track towards us. We could not believe our luck; it was the **Sri Lanka Junglefowl**, the national bird of Sri Lanka yet another endemic. At this point we expected that this was to be the last bird of the day, but we were wrong, in the descending gloom, Amila somehow found a **Chestnut-backed Owlet** calling in a canopy tree - about 35m high, just off the track. You would not have believed it, but it was yet another endemic species. When we arrived back at the lodge it was far less gloomy and there was just time to strip off, lay our clothes out on the concrete to dry and shower before changing into our evening clothes. It had been extremely humid in the forest and our clothes were wringing wet. It was when removing our clothes, I noticed blood on my shirt and trousers. Yes, you are right, I had been bitten by leeches. We had seen them on our clothes whilst we were in the forest, but with all the protection we had, we felt it would be impossible to get leeches. How they got inside my clothing was a mystery, but Amila revealed that as I had zip off trousers they must have gone through very tiny ventilation holes. I found the little blighters on the floor and they were swollen with my blood. These leeches are no more than inch in length, and very thin in girth, but they certainly make a mess when they bite you. We contemplated on a fantastic day and when counting up the endemics we had seen so far, we were amazed that it was an amazing 24 of the 33 species in Sri Lanka.

Now came the important part of our trip, trying to beat Amila at scrabble. Both games started well, but as the board closed up it was the time for Amila to play his nap hand, and his obscure two letter words, quite legal, put paid to our chances as he won both games, but at least we made him fight for his victory. So the moral of this story is, If you meet Amila and he indicates that he will play scrabble with you, learn the obscure two letter words obtainable from the internet, then you will have the same ammunition as Amila. Amila had told us to be up the following day 6:00am just as dawn was breaking. We duly obliged and were amazed when at least 5 beautiful **Sri Lanka Blue**



Magpies joined us and made short work of the moths that had gathered during the night. Evidently, this happened every morning at daybreak. Once they had cleared up the moths, and had their fill, they were off, but what a great experience seeing them so close at hand. Before breakfast was served we moved to an open area a short distance from the lodge, where we were treated to yet another extravaganza of birds. Most of them were ones we had seen before, but the early morning light was advantageous to enable first class views. **Yellow-fronted Barbet**, **Green Imperial Pigeon**, **Sri Lanka Green Pigeon** (Pompadour Green Pigeon), **Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill**, **Golden fronted leafbird**, **Legge's Flowerpecker**, **Orange Minivet**, and **Sri Lanka Junglefowl**, both male and female, all made their presence felt, and it was such a privilege to be able to view these beautifully coloured specimens in the early morning sunlight. It also gave us great photography opportunities, much better than those available to us on the rainforest trails. We did manage to find our 25th endemic when Amila pointed out a couple of perched **Sri Lanka Mynas**. The latter is easily identifiable from the Common Myna by yellow wattles on the nape of the neck, an orange red bill, and a pale eye. We also added **White-faced Starling**, quite a rare species, clearly identifiable by its off white face, dark slaty grey upperparts, and lavender grey below. This starling was once again an endemic species; it was amazing, they still kept coming, but surely this must be the end. After breakfast we went on our final rainforest walk, retracing most of the steps we had taken the previous afternoon, but this time, the number of birds was far fewer, and flocks less conspicuous. Obviously with what we had seen the previous day, the chances of finding more new species was very unlikely, but Amila was not finished yet. High up in the trees on the right of



the track Amila had found a **Malabar Trogon** another addition to our list. We eventually reached what we called the research station and Amila asked if we wanted to revisit the nesting Sri Lanka Frogmouth to see if the youngster had fledged. We declined, so he went off on his own, leaving us with the ranger. On his return, he confirmed that the Frogmouth was still as we saw it the previous day, with the fledging still in the nest. On the return to the lodge, Amila obviously heard a recognisable noise in the thick undergrowth, and locating the source, scoped a very confiding **Sri Lanka Scaly Thrush** a true sculker, and a very difficult bird to find, but Amila had done it, another endemic species,

quite remarkable. We returned to the lodge and packed ready to leave on the bumpy and treacherous journey back to the forest entrance, but not before we had enjoyed lunch. On the way down we had a **Ruddy Mongoose** on the track in front of us. Our journey back to Colombo was uneventful, and after thanking Amila for sharing his remarkable expertise with us, the driver continued the journey with us, back to Waikkal. Amila had obviously made arrangements with the driver as to where we could find **Spot-billed Pelicans**, and he duly obliged, in a town called Hanwella. The Pelicans were perched on the top of a tree right in the middle of the town, and was another lifer for us. We arrived back at the hotel with sufficient time for a shower and change of clothing ready for dinner. Despite expecting some wet weather in the rain forest, it did not materialise, and we stayed dry for the whole visit, and definitely no need for our brollies.

There were still six days left for our Sri Lankan holiday, and after experiencing such a wonderful time in Sinharaja, the next days were undoubtedly going to be somewhat of an anti-climax. We had a short walk in the morning, and spent the remainder of the day filling in all of the details of our three birding days with Amila, into our checklist booklet, which I had prepared before leaving from England. Remarkably we had now reached an overall total of 130 species, which included 27 endemics and a satisfactory number of lifer birds. Over the next two days our time was spent trying to obtain better photography opportunities, and although we did not find new birds we thoroughly enjoyed the photography challenge. On majority of our holidays I use my camcorder to try to produce a DVD including as many of the birds we have seen during that time. So far, wherever we have jungle birding, I have usually failed, and once again this holiday was no exception. Filming in rainforests is extremely difficult. By the time the target has been located, found in the camera viewfinder, the focus adjusted to get a clear picture, the bird has gone, and this happened time and time again; will I never learn?

On the Tuesday we made another trip to Ranwelli, mainly to find the butterfly garden shown to us earlier by Mahinda. There were masses of butterflies on the foliage, and we managed some quite

good shots. There were probably five or six different species, but nothing compared to the number we saw in Sinharaja. We met four birders at Ranwelli, the first ones we had seen during our holiday, and enjoyed chatting and comparing notes on our experiences. They were staying at the same hotel as us and had travelled about in Sri Lanka more than we had, and they told us that they were visiting Sinharaja during the next few days. The following day we decided to try for some



of the Gulls and Terns we had seen constantly passing by off shore. It was extremely difficult, since most of the time they were much too far away for any identification. We had found **Whiskered Tern** perched in a pond area we had found the previous day, but as for the others, no chance. However as we approached a rocky outcrop we noticed a number of house crows attempting to pull something out of the sea, and they were accompanied by four terns very dark in colour, in fact charcoal grey all over. On reflection they could have been **White-cheeked Terns** as they looked larger than the Whiskered Terns we had seen before, and much darker in colour. In the **Harrison's Field Guide to the Birds of Sri Lanka**, the **White-cheeked Tern** is registered as a vagrant, so it was probably unlikely to find them here, however what else could they be. We had a spare afternoon, so decided to take a trip on the canal to see the birds. Unfortunately, although we had agreed that it would be a leisurely two and a half hour ride through the mangroves, we were back in under an hour, the pilot knew nothing about birds, and he drove the boat at incredible speeds, obviously showing off, leaving us no chance of seeing birds, or enjoying the trip. Anyone wishing to take a trip on the canal should ask two simple questions before embarking. 1. How many different Kingfishers are there? 2. How many different species of Egrets should we find? Most of the boat people think there are just Kingfishers, and Egrets, and that's it, so be warned, most of them know nothing about birds.

During the next few days from the beach we had a **White-bellied Sea Eagle** and an **Osprey** (a rare winter visitor to Sri Lanka) pass by, but as far as sea watching went, not much else. The laundry turned up with yet another bird we hadn't seen in Sri Lanka, the **Brown-headed Barbet**, and that proved to be the last one we would see, taking our grand total to 135 species, with 36 life birds. Before departure we had set ourselves a target of 150 species, with about 25 to 30 lifers, to take our life list over the 1300, but although being under our total sightings, we were up on our lifers.

As I said earlier in this report, we have always used the Clements reference guide for recording our records, but in the documentation read before the holiday, it was clearly understood that there are 33 endemics, but Clements have not yet recognised that yet. They are still in the dark ages and indicate there are only 22. The Birds of South Asia. The Ripley Guide by Pamela Rasmussen and John C Anderton (2005) indicate that there are 33 endemics and a further 54 endemic race birds. How should these be dealt with in my life list? Not to worry, they will be recorded as question marks, and splits, and we will only use as and when the full species change is accepted. I am sure other birders have had a similar problem, for example all the different yellow wagtail splits. I am sure it could make quite an interesting point for discussion.

Conclusions

The Hotel. Excellent hotel, good food, well presented and plenty of variety. We stayed clear of the spicy food, but still found no problems finding food to suit us. Would we go again: Yes certainly, but next time we would consider basing ourselves further south, so that we were nearer to Yala, Bundala, and Uda Walawe national parks, where we would have a chance to find different dry zone birds.

Bugs No problems at all. We hardly saw a mosquito. There are small insects that can give you a nip in the evening, but using a roll-on insect repellent kept them away. We always take Boots one a day hayfever tablets whilst away, and this results in the bites disappearing before the following morning. Leeches in the rainforest can be annoying, but cover up and hope for the best.

Weather We had fourteen days of sunshine, what more could we ask for? No rain at all, the temperature was high, as well as the humidity. Much more humid than Goa.

Birding. As I said in the report, not as good as Goa, for the area where we stayed, but plenty to keep us occupied.



The two trips with Amila were incredible, such a great guy, a super birder and has a wide knowledge of so much. He is the only bird guide we have met that can not only readily reel off the taxonomic names of all of the bird species, but butterflies as well. Anyone who wants to try Sri Lanka birding should certainly consider contacting Amila amila@birdwingnature.com No one can guarantee seeing the amount of endemics that we found in such a short time, but with his skills, I am sure no one would be disappointed. We found Amila's Email address in a copy of **Birdwatching** magazine, and also found some of his informative reports in **Birdtours.com**

Endemic species of birds seen by us.

1. Sri Lanka Small Barbet
2. Sri Lanka Woodshrike
3. Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill
4. Sri Lanka Swallow
5. Black-capped Bulbul
6. Brown-capped Babbler
7. Sri Lanka Junglefowl
8. Green-billed Coucal
9. Red-faced Malkoha
10. Ashy-headed Laughingthrush
11. Orange-billed Babbler
12. Sri Lanka Scimitar Babbler
13. Sri Lanka Crested Drongo
14. White-faced Starling
15. Sri Lanka Myna
16. Chestnut-backed owl
17. Sri Lanka White-eye
18. Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot
19. Layards Parakeet
20. Crimson-backed Flameback
21. Sri Lanka Scaly Thrush
22. Spot-winged Thrush
23. Sri Lanka Blue Magpie
24. Legge's Flowerpecker
25. Yellow-fronted Barbet
26. Sri Lanka Green Pigeon
27. Sri Lanka Wood Pigeon

Endemic species not seen by us.

1. Serendip Scops Owl
2. Sri Lanka Spurfowl
3. Dull-blue Flycatcher
4. Yellow-eared Bulbul
5. Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush
6. Sri Lanka Bush Warbler

If anyone wishes to contact me, please feel free.