

## **SRI LANKA 2012**

**Trip Report for 2<sup>nd</sup> January - 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2012**

**Phil & Joanna Kirk**

Who we are: We are a mature English couple who have been bird watching for 37 years. Phil is predominantly a photographer of all wildlife and has been the Secretary of our local Natural History group, the Chorley and District Natural History Society, for 30 years. We do not keep lists; we forget to do it. We do not have a 'lifetime' list although we do try to keep a garden list. We like to have a good view of a bird, preferably photograph-able, rather than fleeting views of lots of 'brown jobs'. Our holidays are spent exploring the wildlife of an area.

On this trip however we did keep a list! We saw 209 species to our satisfaction as identifiable and heard 3 more. We saw 31 of the 33 endemics and had 10 of the 15 night birds of which 7 were owls. Amila had a longer list whilst with us but our eyes aren't as quick as his!

### **Planning:**

The first thing we did, naturally, was to search the Internet for flights, hotels, packages and tour guides. By the time we decided that we would definitely go to Sri Lanka our chosen tour guide, Amila Salgado, was only available for 7 days rather than his preferred 14 day Absolute Tour. This suited us as we wanted time at the start of our holiday to become acclimatised to the time difference, climate, food and lifestyle, and to spot the basic birds. Also at the end we wanted to do some sightseeing and then have a couple of days relaxing on the coast nearer to the airport.

We chose Amila Salgado as he had excellent reviews. Also he replied very quickly to any e-mail I sent which we discovered was an impressive achievement as he spends days at a time unable to gain internet connection. Throughout our planning stage he provided constant advice and help with where to stay, booking some hotels for us, and where to go and what we needed to bring with us. He also provided us with an excellent driver, Channa, for the duration of our stay.

### **Day 1 Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> January arrived 16.00**

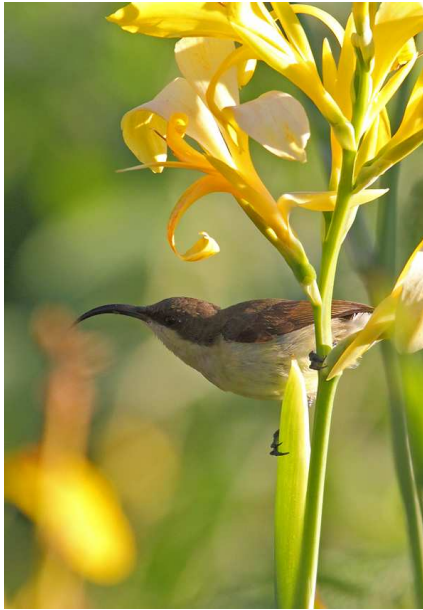
To Kogalla

We arrived at Colombo from Doha to discover that, despite checking only 30 days beforehand, on January 1<sup>st</sup> visas had been introduced, and that we and the entire plane load of people had to queue up for over an hour. (Visas can now be obtained online) Fortunately we were able to phone our driver, Channa, who was waiting patiently outside in the arrivals hall as arranged with Amila. We eventually got out and met him. The journey out of Colombo was very slow but speeded up considerably once we got onto the new motorway to Galle (Toll RS400), arriving at our hotel at Kogalla just before 9pm. We sat and ate our evening meal on the verandah of the hotel listening to a Brown Hawk Owl.



*Villa Modarawattha at Kogalla*

Accommodation: Villa Modarawattha at Kogalla. A quiet & beautiful old Dutch planters house. Evening meal mainly western-based of grilled meat and vegetables. Breakfast: Juice, fruit plate, eggs, toast & preserves. A luxury start £100 per night DB&B for 2.



*Loten's Sunbird*

## **Day 2 Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> Kogalla:** To Galle and Welligama

We awoke the next morning without any problems over the time difference.

The beautiful grounds of the hotel are adjacent to the Kogalla estuarine lake, and the verandah for meals faces the lake. Therefore we started to bird watch from the breakfast table with, amongst others, Blue-tailed Bee-eater, Black-hooded Oriole, Loten's Sunbird and Black-rumped Flameback a constant within the grounds.

In the morning we visited the fort town of Galle with Channa and, after lunch at the hotel, drove out east along the coast towards Welligama to see stilt fishermen. At the boatyard at Mirissa we had our first of many good views of White-bellied Sea Eagle.

We returned via the Kataluwa Temple where we were shown the beautiful paintings by a charming and informative Buddhist monk (RS500 donation).

## **Day 3 Thursday 5<sup>th</sup>**

Kogalla: Balapitiya and local walk

We were taken by Channa to the Balapitya estuary stopping at the Pareliya Buddha on the way. This is where the Tsunami hit the train carrying 1700 passengers. The Buddha, donated ironically by the Japanese, is a replica of one of the Bamiyan Buddhas destroyed in Afghanistan.

At Balapitya Channa took us to a boat trip company and organised a friendly guide with a good knowledge of the birds on the lake. We had good views of Stork Billed Kingfisher and saw water monitors for the first time of many. Included in the trip is a visit to a cinnamon island and a Buddhist Temple. (RS7700 for 2 and driver 'free', RS300 cinnamon products, RS1000 Temple donation and RS500 tip)

On our return Channa took us to a beach-side restaurant where for RS300 each we had some excellent Sri Lankan food.



*Stork Billed Kingfisher*

In the afternoon we walked out from the hotel to the estuary and railway line. The main west coast railway runs within 100metres of the hotel but this adds to the charm of the hotel. The trains are very infrequent and trundle over the river bridge at walking pace. The railway line provided good bird watching opportunities. Towards dusk thousands of Rose Ringed Parakeets flew over the railway line along with 5 Malabar Pied Hornbill. In this area we also spotted a Common Mynah with a totally yellow head.

#### **Day 4 Friday 6<sup>th</sup>**

Kogalla: Kottawa, Hiyare, and Kogalla Lake

The night before we got detailed instructions off the internet on how to get to Kottawa Reserve.



On the way we stopped off at various paddy fields for, amongst others, Black Winged Stilt.

Kottawa is a small reserve where the main path is no more than 50 yards from the road. It innocently resembles a wood in England but it does have leeches. Not having leech socks at that time we tucked our trousers into our socks and set off. We were rewarded with our first endemics, Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill and Brown Capped Babblers, and some strange looking lizards. On our way back I was following Phil and I could see he'd been leeches on his ankles. I was fine as I had kept rigidly to the path but Phil had explored the undergrowth..

Our next stop was Hiyare reservoir which again could be in England. We observed a lot of smaller birds here including White-browed Fantail and the tiny Scaly-breasted Munia building a nest the size of a football.

*Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill*

We needed to pay entrance for Kottawa (RS644) but not Hiyare.

We stopped at the same beach-side restaurant on our return and then in the afternoon went out on a boat trip on the Kogalla lake. We negotiated with the boatman to skip the temple/cinnamon part of the trip, which seems part of all boat trips, in favour of more birds (RS2500 + RS500 tip). We were able to get up close to, amongst others, Ashy Woodswallow and Whiskered and Gull-billed Terns.

#### **Day 5 Saturday 7<sup>th</sup>**

Travelling: Lighthouse Hotel, Lunugana and Arthurugiriya

We left Kogalla and made our way up the coast towards Colombo in order to meet up with Amila the following day. Our first stop was the Lighthouse Hotel designed by Sri Lankan architect, Geoffrey Bawa. Twentieth Century architecture is one of our interests.

We then visited Lunugana on the Bentota River. This had been the home of Geoffrey Bawa and is now a very upmarket hotel. Despite having instructions again from the internet it took a little finding. Also if there hadn't been other drivers at the gates we would have thought it was closed. It is possible to have a guided tour of the gardens and at first they weren't for letting Phil take his camera in. After he had promised solemnly he was only interested in photographing wildlife and not in selling pictures of Geoffrey Bawa's architecture they let him take it. The gardens and hotel were very good and we had close encounters with both water and land monitors. (RS2500 for 2 + RS500 tip)

Following a visit to a very large Buddha at Kande Vihara we got onto the motorway and returned to the Colombo area stopping off for a late lunch at an authentic local Sri Lankan restaurant near to Channa's home.



He then took us to our hotel at Arthurugiriya and returned to his home for the night. We walked out from the hotel to explore the village and were rewarded with a large tally of small birds including Sri Lankan Swallow and Common Tailor Bird. We also met some of the nicest people in our whole time in Sri Lanka. Arthurugiriya is an industrial area and tourists never stay there. We were very much an oddity but the people were genuinely friendly.



*Common Tailor Bird at Arthurugiriya*

In the evening there was the most incredible thunderstorm which knocked off the electricity several times in our little bungalow and caused an ominous spark across a metal window. Later we had our meal in the main hotel as a wedding was going on which was extremely interesting.

Accommodation: Field View Holiday Resort at Arthurugiriya. Bungalow accommodation facing fenced paddy field. Room only, reasonably priced. Evening meal: Curry & rice at very reasonable price (RS1200 with drinks). Approx £40 per night DB&B for 2

#### **Day 6 (1 with Amila) Sunday 8<sup>th</sup>**

To Sinharaja

Channa returned at 7.00 the next morning to take us to meet up with Amila at his house. After picking up some Wellies for me we all piled into the car and made for Amila's local patch, an area of wetland. From there we set off on the journey to Sinharaja breaking for a mid-morning breakfast at a bakers on the way. Restaurant/bakers are common in Sri Lanka and are a good place to buy lunch. Often the fillings for a roll are baked inside the roll which we thought was unusual.

Also on the way we stopped in a village to see the view of Adam's Peak with its Temple on the summit. Amila used his telescope and before we left I think most of the village had seen the Temple through the telescope. As he pointed out, most of them would never have had the opportunity to see the Temple before..

During our journey Amila discussed with us our aspirations and goals for our time with him

After the bumpy jeep ride up the track we reached Martin's Simple lodge at around 2pm for a quick late lunch.. Then we set out on a walk to find, amongst others, SL Spur Fowl. We also started to realise how impressive Amila's skills are both at finding birds and predicting the weather. Rain forced us back to Martin's but we were able to get SL Frogmouth before the end of the day.

Accommodation: Martins Simple Lodge Basic but well laid out rooms with hot & cold water in en-suite. Lunch & Evening meal: Curry & Rice Breakfast: Bananas, eggs, toast & preserves.

### Day 7 (2 with Amila) Monday 9<sup>th</sup> Sinharaja



*Malabar Trogon*

Following breakfast at 6.00am with the Blue Magpies and a distant Besra we set out to walk down to the Park Entrance. On the way down hill we stopped to observe the formation of a flock around us. It started with a Crested Drongo mimicking other bird's song helped out by Amila's amazing ability to create bird sounds and song. It then grew into a full flock containing, amongst others, Malabar Trogon, Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, Scimitar Babbler and Lesser Yellownappe Woodpecker.

We were very impressed. At 10am we reached the bottom, picked up our permit and guide for Sinharaja itself and started back up the hill. By 11.00am we were into the park and had seen further delights such as Black-naped Monarch and Ashy-headed Thrush. However by mid-afternoon the rain had started again in earnest and we made our way back to Martin's getting SL Jungle Fowl on the way. During late lunch we picked up Greater Flameback and Spot Wing Thrush and then had to wait out the weather.

By late afternoon the rain had eased and Phil and Amila went off to get Serendip Scops Owl plus leeches.

After dinner Amila took us up above Martin's to see a beautiful Sambar Deer by torchlight.

### Day 8 (3 with Amila) Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup>

To Udawalawe

At 6.00am we were up & out for a walk with Amila to pick up, amongst others, Green-billed Coucal.



*Malabar Pied Hornbill*

By 10.00am we were transferring from the jeep which had brought us downhill to Channa's car ready for the long drive to Udawalawe. After lunch at our hotel we were entering the Udawalawe reserve at 3.00pm in an open topped jeep in which we could stand up. My note book pages for Udawalawe are a rusty orange as it is a pretty dusty place famous for its elephants. Highlights included, amongst others, good views of Malabar Pied Hornbill, Spot-billed Pelican, Grey-bellied and Jacobin Cuckoos, Jerdon's Bushlark, and Little Indian Nightjar, and a little brown bird we've always longed to see properly, the Zitting Cisticola.



A Crested Hawk Eagle cooling its feet in a puddle of water on the road was very impressive though Amila said it was just drinking.

After dinner back in the hotel grounds we had an excellent view of an Indian Scops Owl.



*Crested Hawk Eagle*

Accommodation: Safari Village at Udawalawe      Lovely gardens and pool area and good food.  
Lunch and Dinner: Curry and Rice with a Chinese twist.      Breakfast: Juice, fruit, eggs & sausage, Toast & preserves.

### **Day 9 (4 with Amila) Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup>**

To Yala

Up at 6.00am for, amongst others, an Indian Pitta in the grounds of the hotel. Then back in the car for the drive to Yala. We stopped on the way at the track to the reserve at Lunugamwehera. This is where a week before Amila had found the Yellow-Rumped Flycatcher; only the second recording for Sri Lanka. With a little patience we were also rewarded with views of the flycatcher and again it was only due to Amila's skill that we saw it. We also picked up a large tally of birds including Chestnut-Winged Crested Cuckoo and Large Cuckooshrike.

At another stop on the way a highlight for us was our first male Pheasant-tailed Jacana, a bird we had only seen the female of in Goa.

After lunch in the hotel we set out in another open jeep for Yala Reserve. This jeep was higher than the day before and had a cover over the top so you couldn't stand up. The sides were totally open allowing photography. Initially there is about a 30 minute ride on roads before reaching any birds. Outside the park there are areas of wetland where we had excellent views of, amongst others, Yellow-wattled Lapwing,, Oriental Darter, Painted Stork plus waders galore.



*Yellow Wattled Lapwing*

Within the park the roads are very rough and what had been a slightly bumpy ride up until then became an extremely bumpy ride, not much different from the ride up & down to Martin's place.



*Land Monitors*

Leopard sightings must have been thin on the ground that day because all the jeeps in the park congregated to one area of rocks. Something like over 30 jeeps were crazily manoeuvring to get a sighting of the back end of a leopard for their occupants. We found the experience both sad and annoying. We were ashamed to be a part of such eco-tourism. Amila could see our distress and we found some quieter tracks. Highlights were Yellow-crowned Woodpecker, Brown Fish Owl, Baya Weavers and their nests, and a pair of large male Land Monitors fighting. As we left the park Jerdons Nightjars were flying around us.

Accommodation: Hibiscus Garden near Tissa    Modern hotel with lovely pool area.    Buffet meals with lots of Sri Lankan dishes to try.

### **Day 10 (5 with Amila) Thursday 12<sup>th</sup>**

To Nuwara Eliya

After a slightly later start time of 7.30 we set off for Nuwara Eliya stopping firstly at a wetland lake near Tissa for Black-crowned Night Heron and Yellow Bittern. We then stopped again at the forest track from yesterday at Lunugamwehera. Overnight rain meant that what had been dry ground amongst the undergrowth the day before turned into ditches and pools of water with associated mosquitoes. We discovered that evening we had quite a few bites. We continued to see new birds significantly adding to the list including birds such as the SL Woodshrike and the White-rumped Shama.



For lunch we stopped at the restaurant at Ella's gap and enjoyed stunning views. Throughout our time with Amila we met other groups of birders with their Bird Guide. These encounters were always friendly if somewhat guarded affairs. We didn't want to upset people if we'd seen for example the SL Spurfowl but they hadn't and wouldn't. Visa-versa didn't matter that much to us. Amila chatted to the other Guides mainly about 'his' flycatcher, the site of which he shared openly, and where other birds can be found without giving away too many specifics. After all these Guides are all in competition with each other. At Ella's Gap we met a very pleasant birder but his Guide was the rudest person we met in the whole of Sri Lanka. We felt very sorry for the birder to have to spend two weeks with such a Guide and it made us very pleased that we had chosen Amila to be our Guide.



*Kashmir Flycatcher*

After a further stop for SL Woodpigeon and Brown Wood Owl we arrived at Victoria Park in Nuwara Eliya with a little over an hour's worth of daylight. Amila went into overdrive to ensure that we saw all the birds available in Victoria Park, and we did, including Pied Thrush, Indian Blue Robin and Kashmir Flycatcher.

Accommodation: Leisure Village at Nuwara Eliya. Our room in the annex was comfortable and modern but had a strange layout in the shower room. Lunches were curry & rice but the evening meals were more westernised with the usual type of breakfast.

### **Day 11 (6 with Amila) Friday 13<sup>th</sup>**

An early start in the dark saw us in place in a local gully at first light to try for SL Whistling Thrush. Although there, it wasn't for showing itself. However there were plenty of more visible birds such as SL Whiteye and Velvet-fronted Nuthatch. We then visited the home of a friend of Amila's and enjoyed some Sri Lankan hospitality.

By 9.30 am we were back in Victoria Park for Phil to spend time on photography whilst Channa had the brake pads changed on the car. After returning to the hotel for lunch we had a walk along the lakeside for further photo opportunities.



*Velvet Fronted Nuthatch*





*Whistling Thrush*

Mid-afternoon Amila took us to an area near the main road which he had seen from the car but had never previously explored. He felt that the area would be the sort of place a Whistling Thrush should be present. The next hour was a Master Class in fieldcraft for us as Amila listened and searched and called. Sure enough a Whistling Thrush was present at the little stream along with a Bush Warbler.

As we watched and waited Amila alerted us to a flock of birds passing through including Grey-headed Canary Flycatchers, Dull Blue Flycatchers and SL Whiteyes. Amazing. We celebrated his success with Strawberry Pancakes. Back at the lakeside we picked up Pintail Snipe as the light was fading.

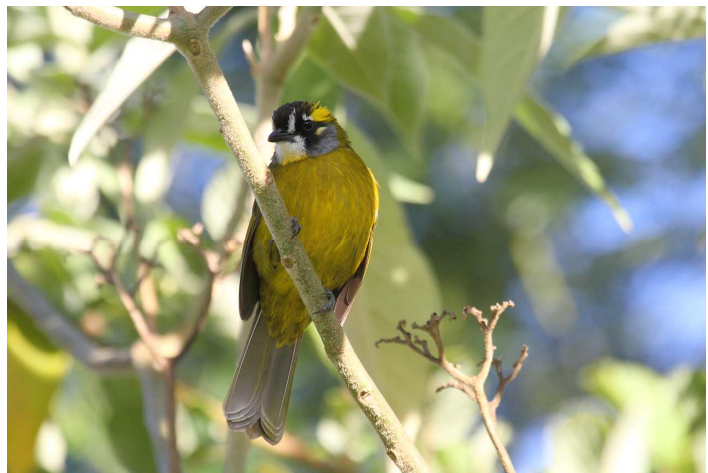
Amila had been wanting to play a game of Scrabble from the first evening. This was our last evening so it was now or never so Phil and Amila started a game over dinner. Phil hasn't played Scrabble for several years as no-one in the family will play him as he's slow in our opinion and then always wins. Amila however seemed confident of success. We were often teasing Amila about how he never concentrates on one thing at a time. He is a multi-tasker with his mind racing away on several things at once. Anyway possibly he was paying too much attention to the conversation at the next table where a couple of birders were being told by their Bird Guide they would have to go to Horton Plains at 5.00am the next morning in order to get Whistling Thrush when we three knew that they were present in Nuwara Eliya. Ethics between Guides did not allow us to interfere and the couple told their Guide they wanted to see Horton Plains.

It was a close game up until the last two rounds when Phil romped home to win. I think Amila was surprised to have been beaten!

**Day 12 (7 with Amila) Saturday 14<sup>th</sup>.**  
To Kandy

This was our last day with Amila who was going to leave us in Kandy at lunch-time.

We returned first thing to the area near Amila's friend's house for further photos of, amongst others, Yellow-eared Bulbil.



*Yellow Eared Bulbul*

We then set out for Kandy stopping on the way at a tea factory for the delightful little Hill Swallow and to sample some complimentary tea. At Kandy we had an early lunch at an Indian restaurant that looks out over the Temple of the Tooth.

After checking into the hotel we accompanied Amila to the Temple of the Tooth where he very kindly showed us around (RS5000 for 2) We then very sadly said goodbye to him leaving him to pray before he went back to Colombo with Channa. We had become very fond of him over the last week.

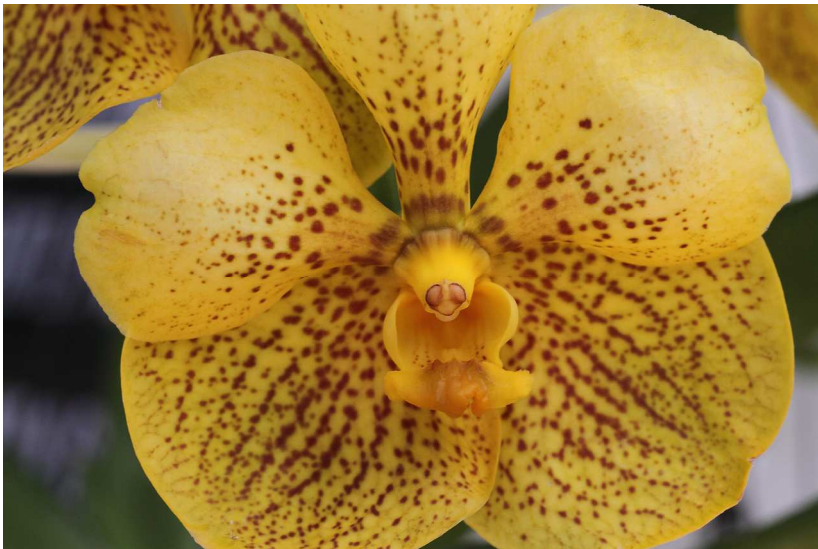
We then continued to explore the city of Kandy, the second largest in Sri Lanka and did a bit of shopping for souvenirs.

Next to the hotel is a club which is open solely for one daily performance (5.30pm) of Kandyan dance and music. This was a very enjoyable experience. (RS500 each)

Accommodation: Nature Walk at Kandy Excellent room with balcony and views. Very reasonable price. Westernised approach to evening meals and usual breakfast. About 30 minute walk with some uphill from Kandy's shopping centre. 2<sup>nd</sup> night £32 DB&B for 2

### **Day 13 Sunday 15<sup>th</sup>**

Kandy.



*Orchids at the Botanical Gardens*

The day before Channa had arranged through his Kandyan relatives for a tuk-tuk driver to pick us up first thing and take us to the Royal Botanic Gardens.(?RS1200 for 2?) We spent a very pleasant morning strolling through the gardens.

The tuk-tuk driver had waited for us and took us back to the lake opposite the Temple so that we could walk back up the hill to the hotel. (RS1600 + RS400 tip). We picked up some bakery products on the way and had a picnic on our very comfortable balcony. Mid-afternoon we walked up the approach road to the back entrance of the Udawattakele Sanctuary and picked up Tickell's Blue Flycatcher. There is no entry to the reserve this way but we were able to sit on a bench in front of the Forest Department Office without being challenged.



## Day 14 Monday 16<sup>th</sup>

To Sigiriya

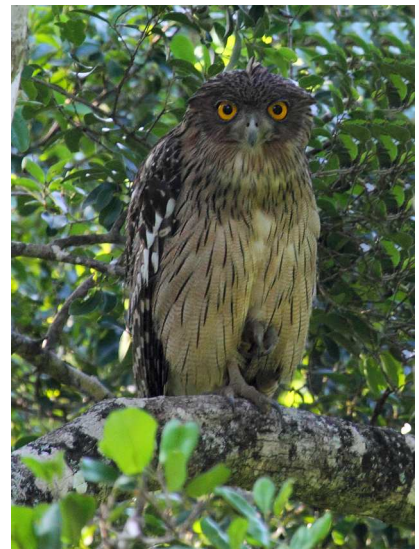
Early next morning we were back on the same approach road for Phil to try and get more photos of the Flycatcher before Channa returned from Colombo to pick us up.

Then we were off to Sigiriya stopping at the Dambullah Caves on the way. (RS2600 for 2) This was quite a trek up hill as the car park half-way up the hill was closed.. Channa borrowed some sarongs for us half-way up as our guide book said shorts were OK at Dambullah and they're not. It was worth the walk though for the caves and the view. We stopped at the large Sigiriya restaurant for a buffet lunch (RS1000 each) and a brilliant Garden Lizard, and then checked into our hotel before going onto Polonnaruwa.



*Garden Lizard*

Amila had advised us to get a local guide whilst there (\$30 each entry plus ?RS1500 for guide?) and it is as well we did as the site is very large. Fortunately we had read up about Polonnaruwa the night before and the young guide was excellent because, as is always the problem in the Tropics, we were running out of daylight. We therefore explored the site at an impressive pace without feeling we'd missed out on anything except for the very last Temple. Amila had informed us that there is a Barn Owl at this Temple so with the light fading fast and driving on a rather bumpy track we had to make a decision. Do we go to see the Barn Owl, a species that we get at home, and increase our list for the holiday, or do we visit the Lotus Pond? The Lotus Pond won and as the four of us ran to see it before darkness completely fell Channa spotted a Brown Fish Owl next to the 'pond'. He was ecstatic that he had spotted something so impressive and it was one of those magical moments for all four of us; an incredible man-made structure next to an even more incredible work of Nature.



*Brown Fish Owl*

Accommodation: Sigiriya Rest House Initially we weren't keen on this hotel but it grew on us, especially once we got the hot water working. It was however the second most expensive of the hotels we stayed in that we paid for, rather than in Amila's package. Sigiriya is a very big tourist draw with a limited amount of accommodation. £67.25 per night DB&B for 2

## **Day 15 Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup>**

### **Sigiriya**

We made an early start the next morning in order to climb the rock at Sigiriya before it got too hot. Channa dropped us off at the entrance at 8.30 (\$30 each) and taking it slow and steady we were at the top by 9.45. We did not want a local guide and rebuffed approaches politely and firmly. At



*Sigiriya*

times it was a difficult climb but worthwhile. We then took our time on the descent exploring all the woods and gardens possible. From the park we walked back towards the hotels and chose to eat our lunch at the upmarket Sigiriya Hotel (see observations).

Mid-afternoon we'd arranged with Channa to drive around and explore the base of the rock. Again as the light was fading we picked up another bird, the Orange-headed Thrush.

## **Day 17 Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup>**

### **To Waikkala**

As usual we were out for a pre-breakfast walk at 6am to spend time at the tank near the hotels.

Then it was time to make our journey to our last accommodation. On the way we stopped off at the Kandalama Hotel. This is another of Geoffrey Bawa's hotels and from across the opposite side of the Kandalama tank the hotel blends into the hillside. The grounds of the hotel are well wooded and as we were driving through we spotted a Blue-faced Malkoha. Near to the tank we had some excellent views of a pair of Grey-headed Fish Eagles interacting.



*Grey Headed Fish Eagle*

After lunch at a bakery we arrived in Negombo where Channa's parents own a gem shop. As well as looking at their shop we spent an hour exploring the beach at Negombo. We were then delayed reaching our hotel as the rough tracks had taken their toll on Channa's car tyres and we had a puncture. Once fixed we arrived at the Ging Oya Lodge as darkness was falling and said farewell to Channa, a careful driver and a good companion.

Accommodation: Ging Oya Lodge Spacious comfortable bungalows in lovely grounds beside the river. Evening meal: Belgian with a Sri Lankan twist, or visa-versa, prepared by Leo. Usual



plentiful breakfast. Very reasonably priced for the quality & service. £54 per night DB&B for 2

### **Day 18 Thursday 19<sup>th</sup>**

Ging Oya



*Pied Kingfisher*

After our early morning walk we took the hotel's Canadian canoe and paddled down towards the beach and back. This was a very enjoyable way to observe wildlife and we were rewarded with close up views of a pair of Pied Kingfishers. However I had forgotten to put sun cream on my feet as for the past two weeks they had been in hiking boots or Wellies so I had lobster red feet. In the afternoon we walked out from the hotel to the beach and watched the sunset.

### **Day 19 Friday 20<sup>th</sup>**

Ging Oya

Our day followed the same pattern as the day before but this time we took the canoe on the inland rivers.

As we ate our dinner that evening we were once again 'serenaded' by a Brown Hawk Owl.

### **Day 20 Saturday 21<sup>st</sup>**

Ging Oya and to Airport

Following our walk Phil took one of the hotel's bikes and cycled down to the beach while I started packing up. We spent the time before the taxi came to take us to the airport relaxing and reading the many reference books on flowers and butterflies that Leo & Myrjam keep for guests' use. Phil also tried again to get a decent photo of the male Paradise Flycatcher that spends its days by the entrance lodge to Ging Oya.

I chose Ging Oya because it had good reviews and is relatively close to the airport. It is an excellent hotel with a lovely pool and open dining area, all at a very reasonable price. It served the purpose ideally as a place to relax before the journey home.

The taxi was arranged by Myrjam and cost SR1800 + SR200 tip.



*Asian Paradise Flycatcher*

## **Practicalities**

**Daylight in January:** 6.10am – 6.20pm (roughly!) Birds active early morning until 11.30 -12.30 and then 3.30 -4.00 until dark (again roughly). It was rare that we weren't out at 6am even if only in the hotels' grounds.

**Money** A large part of the money we spent went on 'tips' and drinks as well as lunches and entrance/ boat trip fees. On arrival at the airport we had no SL rupees, only dollars and pounds so we gave the chap who lifted our bags from the ground into the boot of the car a pound coin. From then on we were constantly thinking about making sure we had plenty of small value notes. You need RS 100 for the minimum tip such as a hotel porter. RS 300 is needed for the reserve guides who don't do too much. RS 500 for better service from guides and hotel staff. Channa & Amila guided us initially on amounts for tips. Amila paid the reserve fees when we were with him but we had to pay the tips to the reserve guides and drivers of the jeeps.

Drinks are about RS 300 for a beer and RS250 for a lime soda. (Sweetened fresh lime juice with soda water is an excellent cold drink if you don't like coke or sprite.)

We took a lot of dollars with us and paid for the airport visa, Amila, Channa and some of the hotels and entrance fees in dollars. There are plenty of banks with ATMs (and guards). Don't do what we did and put the wrong number of noughts in. We got out £30 instead of £300. Took us 2 days at the beginning of our holiday to realise our mistake!

We thought Sri Lanka was generally more expensive than Goa.

The entire holiday with airport parking, flights and everything else cost £5400.

**Travelling Time and Drivers** Traffic is slow in Sri Lanka but not so chaotic as in Goa. They do drive mainly on the left-hand side of the road. I reckon we managed about 30 miles an hour outside Colombo. Don't expect to get anywhere quickly. To drive along the coast road from the outskirts of Colombo to Galle would take about 4 hours, about 25mph in fact. Using the new motorway shortens this considerably. Phil would not have wanted to drive in Colombo but he thought he might have managed driving in the country areas whereas he would never want to drive in Goa.

At all the hotels we stayed Channa stayed at no extra cost to us.

We paid for Channa's services for the 8 days outside of the days covered by Amila's package. The going rate is \$50 a day up to 100kms then \$0.5 per km plus a basic daily salary of \$12. With Channa, Amila arranged for us to pay an average rate as some days we only did a few kms and some we did well over 100kms. We therefore paid \$660 for the 8 days with an RS18000 tip (about £65 per day total).

**Finding sites independently:** We struggled to find certain temples and sites on our own with Channa. The maps of Sri Lanka are not wonderful and Internet information is not always accurate. If you stop to ask someone the way they may never have heard of it even if it's only a mile away. Alternatively they may send you with utter confidence in completely the wrong direction. As with everything in Sri Lanka patience is needed. Que sera sera

**Language:** Amila speaks excellent English. Only occasionally did we get at cross purposes with Channa when chatting with him, but that was mainly our fault for using colloquialisms. Most people we came across spoke English necessary to the task and we had no problems.

**Leeches:** Leeches are not a real problem but they cause a messy problem. Personally I hate them. It's just we've all watched 'African Queen' in our youth. The little puncture wounds do take a while to stop bleeding. If not careful they can mess up clothes and the hotel's sheets and towels. We took some antiseptic wipes and plasters with us to mop up Phil's 'bites'. The wounds stopped bleeding totally only after 24 hours and were still visible a week later, but totally healed two weeks on.



Leech socks are a must. They are just a long foot shaped pocket of firm material that tie at the top. The ones we used from Martin's Simple Lodge are made of strong curtain lining and their light colour made spotting the leeches easier. Also at Amila's advice we wore Wellies at Sinharaja. I borrowed a pair of Amila's but Phil took his from home. He reckoned he was the only person on holiday in Sri Lanka with his own Wellies. Again it was easier to spot the leeches on the Wellies and they seemed to prefer to stay off them. On returning to your room you strip off boots, socks and any other clothing the leeches have got too and leave it all outside the room. The leeches walk away because they're not interested in your clothes. We were fortunate that we didn't do much walking in the rain that involved brushing against bushes. The leeches will then come at you from all directions and one lady at Martin's had got one in her hair. I didn't get any but I didn't go out as much as Phil & Amila. The local guides walk about in flip-flops and just squeeze them off, but they do seem to spend their entire time out walking checking their feet. Most of the time it really is not a problem and they only occur in the 'rainforests'.

Useful items and Clothing:. Umbrella per person, Wellies. If you need to buy any clothing then go for an olive green colour. Otherwise choose your forest green and khaki clothes followed by darker subdued clothing; no white. We wore old jeans and short sleeved shirts in Sinharaja and didn't bother bringing them home with us. I was surprised that I only got too hot in direct sunlight. Short sleeved shirts were fine when it was dry but we would have been better with rolled-up long-sleeved shirts in the wet and rolled the sleeves down to avoid the leeches (perhaps with elastic bands at the wrists?) A dark coloured fleece or warm jumper is needed for early mornings at Nuwaya Eliya as it does get cold overnight. When visiting all (despite what guide books may say) Temples and sacred sites such as Dambullah caves you need to remove your shoes at the entrance to Temples and cover your knees and shoulders. We never had a problem with our top half as we wear polo shirts or shirts with our binoculars. We do wear shorts above the knees so we often changed into long trousers or wore a temporary sarong. Many tourists simply had below knee cut-off shorts.

**Observations:** Watch out if you go to the Sigiriya hotel, or any large hotel or restaurant who deal in tour groups. The restaurant staff run a scam of overpricing for their drinks which you might not spot when paying for with a meal.

The village children's constant mantra of 'Hello Bonbon' can be a little wearing at times. They seem to have no real expectation of being given sweets so it seems that the name for a European is 'Bonbon'!

**Retrospect:** We thoroughly enjoyed what we did. However in retrospect we would possibly have chosen the 14 day tour rather than 7 days as there was a lot of driving time in proportion to the bird watching time over 7 days. It would also have been more economical.

If we had chosen 7 days again, we would have gone to Bundalla from Kogalla as we felt we missed out on this area, and visited Balapitiya on our way back towards meeting Amila. Alternatively we would have met Amila at Sinharaja rather than returning to the Colombo area. Our itinerary was not perfect!

We were glad that we had included sight-seeing in our itinerary as we have started to consider, as the years pass, that we will never go back to places. Amila's section of the trip did not allow time for much casual sight-seeing.

**Amila's package:** This included all transport, entry and accommodation costs for 7 nights (including 1 night in Kandy), lunches in the hotels/ restaurants and Amila's personal service for six and a half days. It did not include any snacks in bakers/restaurants or roadside cafés, any drinks or any tips especially to guides and drivers. The price was \$1690 per person but this would have reduced if there had been more than just the two of us. We equated (justified) this cost with the cost of a cruise with P&O with excursions and considered it to be a comparable price.

We paid a deposit through Royal Mail's International payments service and took the balance in

hundred dollar bills.

**Recommendation of Amila as a Tour guide:** We were very pleased with the service we received from Amila. His enthusiasm was infectious and his field skills truly remarkable. If you are a 'lister' then his services are a must. If, like us, you prefer to take your time and stand & stare at the wonders of Sri Lanka he will listen & adapt his approach to your needs. He is an enthusiastic photographer himself so understands the needs of photographers. We found him to be considerate and unfailingly helpful.