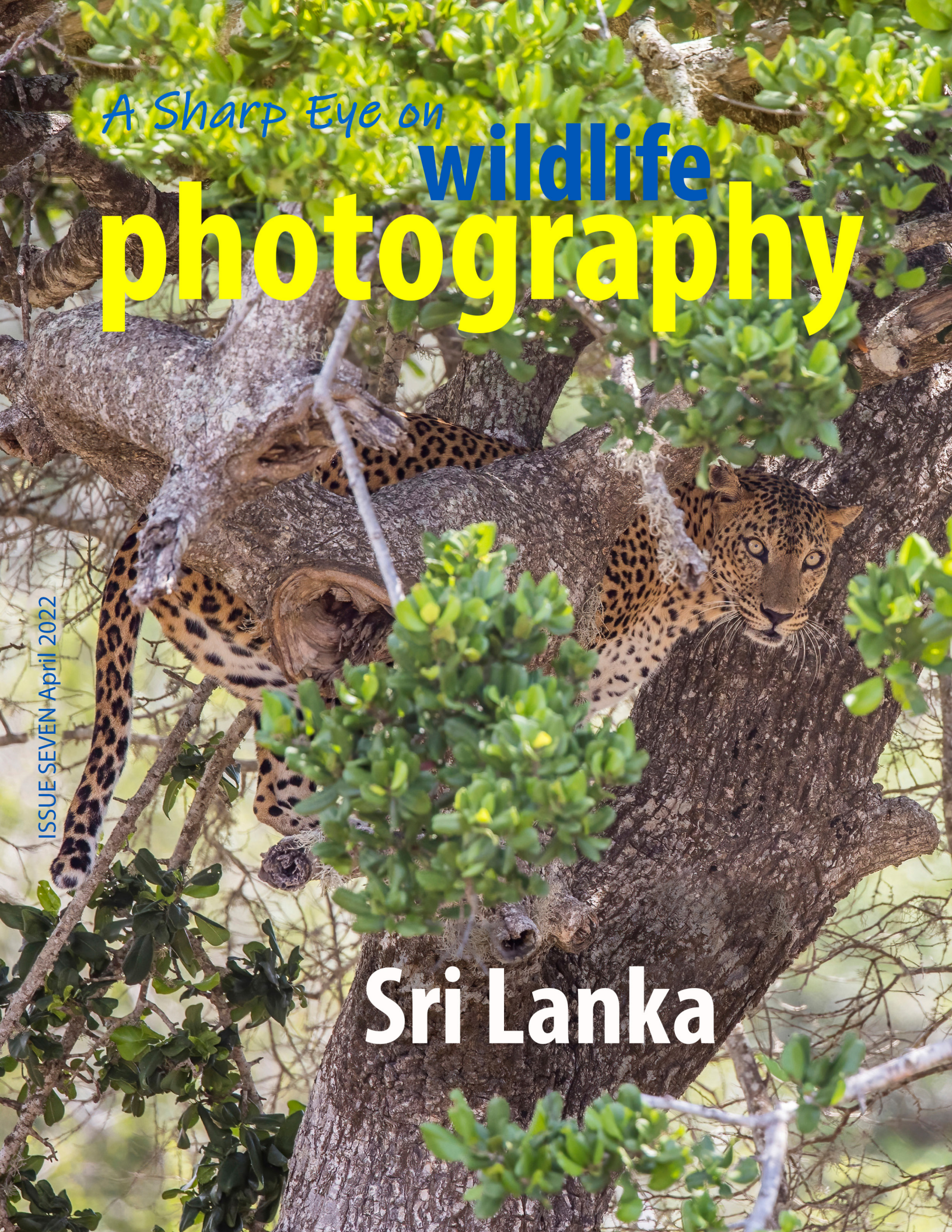


*A Sharp Eye on*

**wildlife**  
**photography**

ISSUE SEVEN April 2022

**Sri Lanka**





Chestnut-headed bee-eater (*Merops leschenaulti*), Yala National Park  
Canon EOS R6, 500mm, 1/1250 sec, F14, ISO 1250

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**Front and back cover**  
 Sri Lankan leopard (*Panthera pardus kotiya*) female  
 A subspecies endemic to Sri Lanka

## Animal Magic

Spinner dolphins are fun to watch, though I would have needed a longer sea-safari to do them justice. The ones we saw performed two or three rotations in each leap out of the water, although seven spins have been recorded. Spinners are about the same size as humans. Mind you, Simone Biles' triple-twisting, double-tucked salto backwards (the Biles II) was pretty impressive.



Spinner dolphin (*Stenella longirostris*)  
Indian Ocean about 10km off Merisa  
Canon EOS R6, 100mm, 1/2000 sec, F8, ISO 800

We did see a blue whale, but it was a long way off. The next biggest whale is the fin whale. This one was about 20m long and weighed around 60 tons. It was cruising at 10-15 km/hour but can reach speeds over 40 km/hour when feeding.



Fin whale (*Balaenoptera physalus*)  
Indian Ocean about 15km off Merisa  
Canon EOS R6, 100mm, 1/2000 sec, F8, ISO 800

## A Sharp Eye on WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY

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Purple-faced langur (*Semnopithecus vetulus vetulus*), Sinharaja  
 Canon EOS R6, 400mm, 1/1000 sec, F6.3, ISO 2500  
 A species endemic to Sri Lanka (see also page 20)



**Critically Endangered (CR)**

Extremely high risk of extinction

**Endangered (EN)**

Very high risk of extinction

**Vulnerable (VU)**

High risk of extinction

**Near Threatened (NT)**

Likely to qualify for a threatened category soon

# Why did we wait so long?

Sri Lanka is not a close cousin of India. Despite its proximity to the mainland, it could hardly be more different. For sure, the tea plantations look like those in Kerala, but the feeling you have as you drive around and interact with Sri Lankans is unique.

We love India, despite the inequalities. Sri Lanka does not display the juxtaposition of extreme wealth and extreme poverty. The economic crisis was only just starting to affect daily life in February 2022. Wicky, our brilliant guide, driver and teacher, did have to spend many hours queuing for diesel but everything else was still OK.

The wildlife in the arid zone along the south coast was great; the wildlife in the rainforest less so. But, as we know, any month of the year brings some advantages and some disadvantages. For us, the three nights we had at Uga Chena Huts to access Yala National Park were the most memorable. Thank you to our Yala guide Vibhu as well as to Mano, our guide at Gal Oya. And thank you to Ed at Selective Asia who found Wicky and booked everything for us.

*Charles Sharp*



Wicky  
 D M Wickramasingha

# Happy families - Sri Lankan elephants

All the World's elephant species are endangered. There are around 415,000 African elephants in the wild and less than 40,000 Asian elephants. There are fewer than 7500 Sri Lankan elephants in the wild, though the population density in the national parks is greater than in India.

There are very few tuskers in Sri Lanka and we didn't see one. Why? The tusk of the Asian elephant is not

very strong and is not used when males fight for dominance. Natural evolution might have meant that tusks would have slowly decreased in size over time. But man intervened. Large tuskers were killed for their ivory. The less well-endowed survived and dominated the gene pool. Only about one in twenty male elephants has tusks and luckily poaching for ivory is now not common.



Sri Lankan elephant (*Elephas maximus maximus*) juvenile, Yala National Park  
Canon EOS R6, 400mm, 1/1250 sec, F7.1, ISO 800

EN



Sri Lankan elephants (*Elephas maximus maximus*), Gal Oya National Park  
Canon EOS R6, 500mm, 1/2000 sec, F7.1, ISO 800  
A subspecies endemic to Sri Lanka

Kataragama is a pilgrimage town sacred to both Buddhist and Hindu religions and also to the Vedda people of Sri Lanka. Pilgrims bring fruit to shrines and they like to feed animals.

Elephants on the Kataragama Road that leads to Yala National Park have learnt a new skill. They wait by the side of the road. When a car approaches, the elephant will move out into the middle of the road, stopping your car, hoping that she will be fed.

On 26 December 2004, the Tsunami hit Sri Lanka. More than 35,000 people died. Elephants living near the coast were reported to have fled to higher ground. Analysis of the movement of animals fitted with satellite tracking has not supported these stories. But that does not mean they are not true...



Sri Lankan elephants (*Elephas maximus maximus*), Yala National Park  
Canon EOS R6, 324mm, 1/1250 sec, F10, ISO 800  
A subspecies endemic to Sri Lanka







## Animal Magic

The pheasant-winged jacana reverses the sex-roles we are used to. The female is territorial and polyandrous. She competes with other females to keep a harem of males. She yells at the males and mates with the ones who respond by yelling the loudest. One male in the harem incubates her clutch of eggs. If he doesn't think he's the father, he may destroy her eggs.



The name pheasant-tailed comes from the long tail feathers grown during the breeding season. The bird also grows golden feathers on the nape of its neck. Like all jacanas, they have very long toes and nails. These allow them to 'walk on water' but landing is a clumsy affair.



Pheasant-tailed jacana (*Hydrophasianus chirurgus*)  
breeding plumage, Yala National Park  
Canon EOS R6, 500mm, 1/1000 sec, F10, ISO 400

## Yala National Park

Yala National Park is the nearest equivalent to a Southern African national park that we have found in Asia. For a wildlife photographer in February it had everything: perfect sunshine; comfortable temperature and low humidity; no wind; wide open spaces; lots of water; great mammals and beautiful birds. What more could you want? Ah! Our driver, park guide and guide from our hotel were all brilliant. They pulled out all the stops to get us closer to the hard-to-find mammals than the other guides who were all trying to do exactly the same thing.



Our Uga Chena Huts safari team at Yala



Yala traffic jam for our first leopard



Yala National Park



# The Sri Lankan must-haves

Sri Lanka has no tigers, lions or rhino, but it has its own big three, the elephant, leopard and sloth bear. That's on land of course. We saw a blue whale but as there were no tourist flights running, we couldn't get the birds-eye view that we see on television. The elephant is on the IUCN red list as endangered. The leopard and sloth bear are classified as vulnerable.

Leopards in India are hard to find and it is much the same in Sri Lanka. You head to Yala National Park and so does everyone else. When there's a sighting, the

drivers go mad and so do the tourists. One leopard we saw was frightened away by a group of young Sri Lankan tourists shouting and screaming with excitement.

There are fewer than 800 adult Sri Lankan leopards in the wild. The leopard lives a solitary life, hunting on its own. We found one resting in a tree and waited. Our guide knew that the noise from the madding crowd would force her to move. He was right. Eventually, she came down. There are more photos on the front and back covers.



Sri Lankan leopard (*Panthera pardus kotiya*) female  
Canon EOS R6, 300mm, 1/800 sec, F7.1, ISO 1600  
A subspecies endemic to Sri Lanka



Sri Lankan leopard (*Panthera pardus kotiya*) female  
Canon EOS R6, 363mm, 1/800 sec, F8, ISO 1600  
A subspecies endemic to Sri Lanka

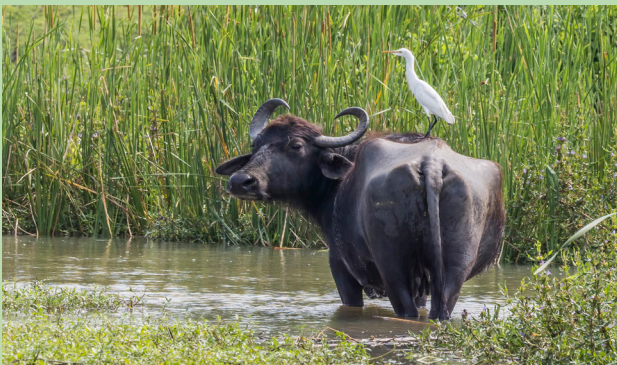
## Animal Magic

Rikki-Tikki-Tavi in Rudyard Kipling's Jungle Book was an Indian grey mongoose. The Indian brown mongoose is a close relation. Like any self-respecting mongoose, Rikki-Tikki-Tavi was good at dealing with venomous snakes. The mongoose has developed a resistance to neurotoxic snake venom, so can keep up an attack even when bitten.



Indian brown mongoose (*Herpestes fuscus*)  
Yala National Park  
Canon EOS R6, 151mm, 1/1600 sec, F9, ISO 1600

The cattle egret has undergone one of the most rapid and wide-reaching natural expansions of any bird species. It was originally native to Africa and parts of Eurasia. It has colonised the rest of the world, mainly due to its symbiotic relationship with domestic livestock: South America in 1937 (though spotted in 1877) and North America in 1953; Australia in 1948; New Zealand in 1963 and the UK and Ireland in 2008. It removes flies, ticks and other parasites from many animals.

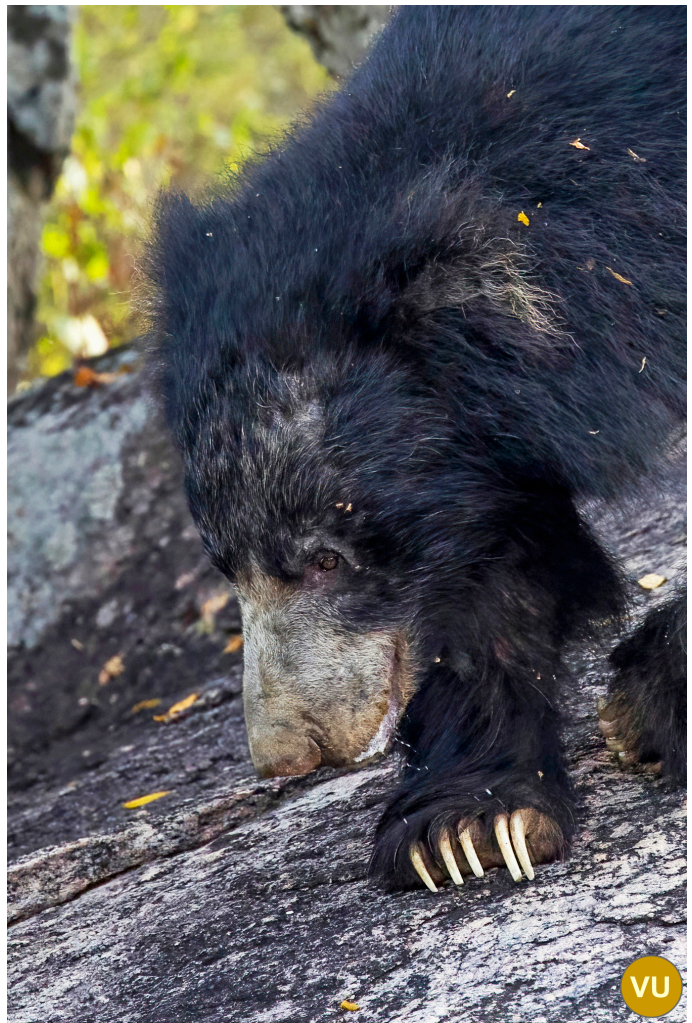


Asian water buffalo (*Bubalus bubalis*) with cattle egret (*Bubulcus ibis*)  
Bundala National Park  
Canon EOS R6, 223mm, 1/800 sec, F10, ISO 800

The Number 3 target mammal in Yala (after the leopard and elephant) is the sloth bear. This is a myrmecophagous bear. Its favourite food is ants and termites. Sloth bears can close their nostrils and this stops any insects getting in. Of course the bears love honey. The closed nostrils keep bees out when they destroy bee-hives and come in handy on a dusty day.

The sloth bear likes fruit and is an occasional meat-eater. Sloth bears do climb trees, but not as efficiently as other bears because of their elongated claws. These claws have developed so that they can extract ants and termites from their mounds which they detect by smell.

The sloth bear is sympatric with the leopard; they co-exist in the same territory, like here in Yala national Park. They seldom fight. The elephants are not so happy having a sloth bear around.





Sri Lankan sloth bear (*Melursus ursinus inornatus*) male, Yala National Park  
Canon EOS R6, 500mm, 1/800 sec, F7.1, ISO 3200  
A subspecies endemic to Sri Lanka



Sri Lankan sloth bear (*Melursus ursinus inornatus*) male, Yala National Park  
Canon EOS R6, 114mm, 1/800 sec, F10, ISO 1600  
A subspecies endemic to Sri Lanka

## Animal Magic

The adult Bengal monitor has few predators. It is too large for an eagle to carry off and leopards can't be bothered unless food is scarce. It is not a picky eater and is happy with left-overs. This one entered a termite mound after a sloth bear had destroyed it.



Bengal monitor (*Varanus bengalensis*)  
Yala National Park  
Canon EOS R6, 500mm, 1/1250 sec, F8, ISO 3200

There are 250 species of turtle in the World. Seven of them are sea turtles and are rightly the subject of comprehensive protection programmes around the world, including in Sri Lanka. The remainder are land turtles (tortoises) and freshwater turtles or terrapins. Freshwater turtles need to get out of the water to warm up. It is important that lakes and ponds have rocks or logs so they can climb up for a spot of sunbathing.



Sri Lanka black terrapins (*Melanochelys trijuga thermalis*)  
Kandy Lake, Kandy  
Canon EOS R6, 472mm, 1/800 sec, F8, ISO 800  
A subspecies endemic to Sri Lanka

## # Photo tip Sit by the pool

Can a photo tip that asks you to sit by the pool be criticised? You do need the right sort of pool – an infinity pool. Birds will come to drink and

bathe in the dry season. Once you are sitting comfortably, they will come. These photos were taken at Kahanda Kanda, an excellent place to stay near Galle.



Tickell's blue flycatcher (*Cyornis tickelliae*)  
Canon EOS R6, 500mm, 1/640 sec, F8, ISO 800



Tickell's blue flycatcher (*Cyornis tickelliae*)  
after a bath  
Canon EOS R6, 500mm, 1/800 sec, F8, ISO 800





Oriental white-eye (*Zosterops palpebrosus*) and red-vented bulbul (*Pycnonotus cafer*)  
Canon EOS R6, 500mm, 1/500 sec, F8, ISO 800

Oriental white-eye (*Zosterops palpebrosus*)  
Kahanda Kanda, Koggala, Near Galle  
Canon EOS R6, 500mm, 1/1250 sec, F6.3, ISO 800





# Sinharaja rainforest

Sinharaja Forest Reserve is a Biosphere Reserve and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is tiny, only 21km by 7km. The only large mammal



Purple-faced langur (*Semnopithecus vetulus vetulus*)  
Canon EOS R6, 500mm, 1/800 sec, F67.1 ISO 1600  
A species endemic to Sri Lanka (see also page 20)

EN



Sri Lanka blue magpie (*Urocissa ornata*)  
Canon EOS R6, 500mm, 1/60 sec, F7.1, ISO 500 with infill flash  
A species endemic to Sri Lanka

VU

you are likely to see is the purple-headed langur. The Sinharaja forest is well known as a biodiversity hotspot but it was quite disappointing, possibly

because a recent lack of rain. The blood-sucking leeches attack you wherever you go and should put off all but the most committed visitors.



Green garden lizard (*Calotes calotes*) male  
Canon EOS R6, 324mm, 1/640 sec, F7.1, ISO 800



Sri Lankan Golden-backed frog (*Indosylvirana serendipi*)  
Canon EOS R6, 100mm, 1/40 sec, F7.1, ISO 800  
A species endemic to Sri Lanka

Green garden lizard (*Calotes calotes*) juvenile and common jezebel (*Delias eucharis*)  
The lizards climb flowering bushes to lie in wait for insects.  
Sinharaja Forest Reserve  
Canon EOS R6, 500mm, 1/1600 sec, F11, ISO 800





## Animal Magic

We have known for ages that migrating birds somehow use the earth's magnetic field for navigation. In 2021, researchers from Oxford University analysed 80 years of data on ringed reed warblers to confirm that they are genetically hard wired. The data showed a direct correlation between changes in the earth's magnetic field and changes in the birds' flight paths. Magnetic declination gives the birds the direction and magnetic inclination tells them when to stop.



Brown shrike (*Lanius cristatus cristatus*) first winter plumage  
Canon EOS R6, 500mm, 1/800 sec, F7.1, ISO 500

The brown shrike breeds in Russia and migrates to the tropics for the winter. You can understand why it might want to escape.

## # Photo tip Set up a moth light

Every child loves a colourful butterfly, but their enthusiasm for the butterfly's closest relation, the moth, is not the same. The problem is that few moths fly by day and the ones we usually see fluttering around light bulbs are small and drab.

You need to set up a moth light. This will give you a realistic chance of attracting some interesting moths. You do not need a moth trap and these are often banned unless you have a licence. I now travel with twin 20w actinic bulbs with a 5m cable. This is usually long enough to set up the light on my balcony, making sure that the light isn't going to annoy the neighbours.

Many moths will settle on a white sheet or on the ground, but when you go out in the morning, there will be some on the windows. Don't leave it too late or the birds will eat all the big ones.

It is difficult to get a photo where the moth is in focus and the background isn't. Here are three ideas. The moth below was hanging upside down. A 180 deg rotation makes it more accessible. The one top right was on a window. I chose a 90 deg rotation. I moved the bottom right twig-mimic onto a curled leaf.



*Amphigonia* sp.  
Canon EOS R6, 100mm, 1/500 sec, F11, ISO 400 with flash





Tussock moth (*Laelia* sp.)  
Canon EOS R6, 100mm, 1/200 sec, F7.1, ISO 200 with flash



Grote's buff-tip (*Phalera grotei*)  
Canon EOS R6, 100mm, 1/250 sec, F9, ISO 800 with flash

## Animal Magic

The magic doesn't always work. There are 129 known damselfly and dragonfly species in Sri Lanka. 57 are endemic. The number of endemics I photographed? Zero.



Yellow waxtail (*Ceriagrion coromandelianum*) male  
Gardens of Kahanda Kanda. Focus stack of three images  
Canon EOS R6, 100mm, 1/160 sec, F8, ISO 800



Pied parasol (*Neurothemis tullia*) male  
Maramba Lake, near Galle  
Canon EOS R6, 500mm, 1/800 sec, F9, ISO 800



Crimson dropwing (*Trithemis aurora*) male  
Royal Botanic Gardens, Kandy  
Canon EOS R6, 500mm, 1/800 sec, F7.1, ISO 800

## Bundala National Park

Bundala was the first Ramsar wetland site in Sri Lanka. In 2005 the park was designated as a UNESCO biosphere reserve. The park has a mixture of fresh water and brackish lagoons. It offers excellent opportunities for wildlife photography.

The stunning malabar hornbill is one resident. Both males and females have huge casques and these indicate maturity. The casque is hollow and acts as a resonating chamber which amplifies the bird's call.



Hanuman langurs (*Semnopithecus priam thersites*) males  
Canon EOS R6, 363mm, 1/2000 sec, F5.6, ISO 400  
A subspecies endemic to Sri Lanka



Hanuman langurs (*Semnopithecus priam thersites*) male  
Canon EOS R6, 500mm, 1/2000 sec, F7.1, ISO 400  
A subspecies endemic to Sri Lanka



Malabar pied hornbill (*Anthracoceros coronatus*) female  
Canon EOS R6, 500mm, 1/800 sec, F13, ISO 800



Crested hawk-eagle (*Nisaetus cirrhatus ceylanensis*) feeding on egret  
Canon EOS R6, 428mm, 1/1000 sec, F7.1, ISO 800  
A subspecies endemic to Sri Lanka

## # *Photo tip* Look for the tell-tales

There are three types of bee-eater in Sri Lanka, all beautifully coloured. They are common and are easier to photograph than bee-eaters in Europe and Africa. They seem to perch on lower branches. They may spend several minutes scanning left and right before spotting an insect. You must have a tripod or monopod or something to support the weight of your lens. If I'm in a car, then I adjust the height of the window to provide a support. Then I watch for the tell-tales – an intense focus and a flexing of the legs. I keep focused on the same perch as the bird may return with a prize. They seldom swallow their prey on the wing.



Green bee-eaters (*Merops orientalis ceylonicus*), Bundala National Park  
Canon EOS R6, 500mm, 1/2000 sec, F7.1, ISO 400  
A subspecies endemic to Sri Lanka



Green bee-eater (*Merops orientalis ceylonicus*) with bee, Bundala National Park  
Canon EOS R6, 500mm, 1/1000 sec, F14, ISO 800  
A subspecies endemic to Sri Lanka

Blue-tailed bee-eater (*Merops philippinus*), Yala National Park  
Canon EOS R6, 500mm, 1/1000 sec, F10, ISO 400





## Animal Magic

The *Gasteracantha* genus of spiny-backed orb-weaver spiders are quite common. The females are three times as large as the males. They have six abdominal spines and are sometimes incorrectly called crab spiders because of their hard 'shells'. Most are black and white and red.



Oriental spiny orb-weaver (*Gasteracantha geminata*) female  
Sinharaja Forest Reserve  
Canon EOS R6, 100mm, 1/400 sec, F8, ISO 800

*Gasteracantha* are usually photographed from the upper (dorsal) side. The underside (ventral side) is equally bizarre.



Oriental spiny orb-weaver (*Gasteracantha geminata*) female  
Sinharaja Forest Reserve  
Canon EOS R6, 100mm, 1/640 sec, F8, ISO 800

## Gal Oya National Park

The Gal Oya river was dammed in 1948 and the reservoir is huge. We had hoped to see elephants swimming from island to island, but they didn't feel like it and just meandered along the shore. There is a photo on page 6.

The highlight was a massive crocodile. Our boat was able to get close enough so we could look through the animal's mouth from eye level.

The brahminy kite is a common sight across Sri Lanka. It is primarily a scavenger. Although this one was perched on a dead tree trunk in the reservoir, it was unlikely to be searching for fish swimming below.

A safari drive in Gal Oya National Park is a complete waste of time. Even the local guide warned us that we wouldn't see much. We didn't see anything. I guess it could be marketed as a vegan safari – a diet of plants.



Brahminy kite (*Haliastur indus indus*)  
Canon EOS R6, 500mm, 1/2000 sec, F13, ISO 800





VU

Mugger crocodile (*Crocodylus palustris*)  
Canon EOS R6, 145mm (above)/500mm (below), 1/1000 sec, F11, ISO 800



VU

## Animal Magic

Skippers (or *Hesperiidae*) are the poor relations of the butterfly world. Most are small and brown, or, if you are lucky, small and brown with a bit of yellow. They are the equivalent of the birder's LBJs. (Little Brown Jobs). From a distance they all look much the same, so you have to be patient and approach one after another to find something new.



Tropic dart (*Potanthus satra*) male, Sinharaja Forest Reserve  
Canon EOS R6, 100mm, 1/250 sec, F8, ISO 1000  
A species endemic to Sri Lanka

As with many Sri Lankan animals, many skippers are endemic to the island or are endemic subspecies i.e. they occur nowhere else.



Dark palm dart (*Telicota bambusae lanka*) male, Sinharaja Forest  
Canon EOS R6, 500mm, 1/400 sec, F11, ISO 1000  
A subspecies endemic to Sri Lanka

## # Photo tip Be patient

One of the advantages of having your own safari vehicle or private guide is that there is no pressure to move on. My wife is prepared. She always has a book with her, though it was hardly ever opened in Sri Lanka.

With many wildlife photo opportunities you can snap a few shots, try to get in a better position, then head off. When animals are feeding or interacting, it is worth hanging around. After all, you've come a long way. And in Yala, you cannot spend every hour of every drive hunting for leopards.

The painted stork was in a small pool of water. It feeds by sweeping its half-open bill from side to side until it touches a fish. It took the bird some time to snatch one; more snack than lunch, but painted storks do specialise in catching small fish.

Golden jackals are social animals. They are monogamous throughout their lifetime. The females have one breeding cycle every year and February is peak season in Sri Lanka. When we spotted this pair, the female was lying down and the male standing nearby. He came over and started grooming her. Eventually she got up and our guide Vibu could see she was pregnant. She then started to groom him, nibbling at his ears. It was a lovely episode to watch. We could have easily missed it. One wonders, what else have we missed over the years?



Painted stork (*Mycteria leucocephala*) with fish  
Yala National Park  
Canon EOS R6, 428mm, 1/1000 sec, F10, ISO 400



Sri Lankan (golden) jackals (*Canis aureus naria*) pregnant female (on ground and left) with male (standing and on the right)  
Canon EOS R6, 500mm, 1/800 sec, F9, ISO 400 (both images)  
A subspecies endemic to Sri Lanka

A Sharp Eye on  
**wildlife**  
**photography**

Sri Lankan leopard (*Panthera pardus kotiya*) female

A subspecies endemic to Sri Lanka

*Back cover*

Our first sight of this leopard

Canon EOS R6, 500mm, 1/1000 sec, F7.1, ISO 1600

*Front cover*

Canon EOS R6, 500mm, 1/800 sec, F7.1, ISO 1600

She comes down after seven minutes

The same leopard photographed from the back of our safari vehicle  
in Yala National Park, February 2022

