



Getting to know the island country of Sri Lanka

Our journey to Sri Lanka begins late at night on the 15th of February, 2020, landing in the Colombo airport. I was impressed by the speed and efficiency of the customs department as I was issued straight through without the hassle of waiting in a long line. The hotel I had booked was about half an hour drive from the airport, so I hired a taxi and negotiated a price before leaving the airport. I arrived at the Renuka City Hotel, got checked in and immediately went to sleep for the night eager to begin my birding adventure. I dreamed of all the new birds I would add to my personal list the following morning.



House Crow

I awoke early in the morning and walked to Viharamahadevi Park (about a 20 minute walk one way). Immediately I was struck by the number of House Crows, a species I am familiar with from showing up as a vagrant species occasionally in Florida. House Crows were in every tree, bathing in the fountains by the hundreds, and all over the grounds. I didn't think I would see any other bird species since the crows were so numerous. However, I did find a few more species flitting from

tree to tree avoiding the crowds of corvids. Among them were Brown-headed Barbets, Purple-rumped Sunbirds, Asian Koel, Rose-ringed Parakeets, Yellow-billed Babblers, and Asian Brown Flycatchers. A pond within the park yielded Spot-billed Pelicans and Indian Pond Herons. I even found a diurnal roost of Indian Flying Foxes on the edge of the park.



Brown-headed Barbets

Two days later on February 18th, our tour of Sri Lanka along with Ornithvacations officially began. Tharanga and our driver, Dinesh, picked me up early from my hotel. We stopped and had a breakfast of sambal, dosa, and kola kanda. It was the first time I've eaten this traditional Sri Lankan breakfast, and I loved it. We picked up our client, Robert, from his hotel by the airport and we were on our way to our first adventure in Sigiriya. This town is made famous by a rock fortress, originally constructed in the late 400's AD. The fortress was built on top of a vertical column of rock along with a huge lion statue carved into the rocks and today is one of the Unesco world heritage sites. In fact, the name Sigiriya means rock lion. Right away after our arrival we began seeing some of the iconic birds of Sri Lanka, including the Sri Lanka Gray Hornbill and the Indian Pitta. We also observed Black-capped Bulbuls (an endemic species), Loten's



Sigiriya rock fortress



Sri Lanka Gray Hornbill

Sunbird, Stork-billed Kingfisher, and Shikra (an accipiter similar in appearance to our Cooper's Hawk).

Over the next day and a half we continued to explore this region and had the opportunity to encounter Sri Lanka Green-Pigeon, Black-naped Monarch, Toque Macaque, Common Kingfisher, Oriental Rat Snake, Plain and Jungle Prinias, Malabar Pied-Hornbill, Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, Common Iora, White-browed Bulbul, Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, Red-backed Flameback, Brown-capped Woodpecker, Red-vented Bulbul, Paddyfield Pipit, Indian Robin, and Common Tailorbird.

On February 20th, we packed up and headed out to the town of Kitulgala. We stayed in a comfortable open air hotel. We'd go downstairs for our meals and eat right next to the river, which gave us a great opportunity to observe birds foraging along the bank while we were eating. Notable species included the Yellow-browed and Square-tailed Bulbuls, Spot-winged Thrush, Asian Emerald Dove, Black-backed Dwarf-Kingfisher, Sri Lanka Kangaroo Lizard, Yellow-fronted Barbet, White-bellied Drongo, Brown-breasted Flycatcher, Common Green Forest Lizard, Dark-fronted Babbler, and my personal 1,000th life bird photographed, the Chestnut-backed Owllet! We had a wonderful walk through the Makandawa Rain Forest, which we had to take a ferry across the Kelani Ganga River to access. Here we caught a glimpse of the Malabar Trogan and found several beautiful species of butterflies, damselflies, and even a robber fly.



Red-backed Flameback



Common Bluebottle



Dull-blue Flycatcher

We drove through tea country on our journey to our next destination and even made a stop at the Tea Castle for some of the world-famous Ceylon tea. We watched a Black Eagle hunting in a valley from the side of the road where we pulled over for photos of the tea plants. We got to Nuwara Eliya in time for lunch at our hotel and then an evening trip to Victoria Park in hopes to find some of the secretive endemic thrushes. It was a cold, rainy evening. We did catch a glimpse of 2 endemic species, the Pied Thrush and the Kashmir Flycatcher, but the weather was not on our side for photos. The next morning was foggy, but the rain had stopped. We spent the morning at Horton Plains National Park where we saw Sambar deer, Sri Lanka Whistling-thrush, Pied Bushchat, Sri Lanka White-eye, Dull-blue Flycatcher, Sri Lanka Purple-faced Langur, Large-billed Crow, and Yellow-eared

Bulbul. In the evening, we got a rare surprise just as we were about to go back to our hotel. A Legge's Hawk-Eagle perched low in the trees drenched from the evening rains!



Legge's Hawk-Eagle

Onto our next adventure, the part of the trip everyone was looking forward to! Our first safaris beginning in Bundala and proceeding to Udawalawe and Yala National Parks. The list of species exploded during our days of safaris in the area. They were great for photographers since all of the species were used to seeing people in the safari vehicles. Some of the highlights of the region were Pheasant-tailed Jacana, Indian Peafowl, Eurasian Hoopoe, Pied Cuckoo, Eurasian Spoonbill, Mugger Crocodile, Pied Kingfisher, Pin-tailed Snipe, White-bellied Sea-Eagle, Jungle Owlets, Brown Fish-Owl, Changeable Hawk-Eagle, Jungle Cat, Sri Lanka Jackal, Crimson-backed Flameback, Great Thick-knee, Sri Lanka Leopard, Orange-breasted Green-Pigeon, and Blue-faced Malkoha.



Sri Lanka Leopard photo by Robert Hoopes



Sri Lanka Junglefowl

With a mixture of sadness and excitement, we moved on to our last destination of the tour, the protected area of the Sinharaja Forest Reserve. Luckily for us, our forest reserve guide happened to be the foremost expert on the biology and behavior of the Sri Lanka Frogmouth. Of course he knew just where to go to find a pair of these cryptic birds resting in the forest during the daytime. Other species included the Sri Lanka Junglefowl, Red-faced Malkoha, Sri Lanka Spurfowl, Spot-winged Thrush, Ashy-headed Laughingthrush, Indian Blue Robin, and Sri Lanka Blue-Magpie. As we were preparing for the drive back to the Birds Paradise Hotel, we had one more surprise in store for us. One of the local villagers found a diurnal roost site for the Serendib Scops-Owl! We scaled a near vertical muddy cliff with our camera gear in hopes to catch a photo of this unique species. We had a difficult time, even with hiking boots, but the man who found the owl easily climbed the path in only a pair of flip flops. But our efforts paid off! Sure enough there was the owl resting in a thicket of bamboo just above ground level!



Sri Lanka Blue-Magpie



Sri Lanka Frogmouths



Serendib Scops-Owl



Striated Heron

As our tour with Ornithvacations came to a close on March 1st, we were dropped off at the Ramada Inn by the airport in Colombo and said our goodbyes. However, there were still 2 good mornings of birding to do before our flight back to the US. On the first morning, I booked a boat tour of the Muthurajawela Wetlands for us and we got a new life bird species for the trip, the Striated Heron. The second morning was spent at the Gampaha Botanical Gardens where we were finally able to get clear photographs of the White-rumped Munia.



White-rumped Munia

In total we encountered 195 bird species (including all 33 endemic species), 15 mammal species, 17 butterflies, plus various reptiles, amphibians, endemic freshwater fish, and other insects. I would highly recommend visiting this country as a birder, naturalist, or nature photographer. Sri Lankans rely on ecotourism for income and jobs and the country is trying to conserve land for endangered and endemic species. Archaeopteryx Birding and Nature tours will still offer this particular tour, but we're also designing another tour with Classic Sri Lanka specifically for photographers. Our photography tour comes in one-week or two-week sessions and will incorporate blinds/hides to get closer photographs without disturbing the birds. Please consider joining us for an adventure of a lifetime with unforgettable memories!



Black-capped Bulbul



Glad-eye Bushbrown



Yellow-wattled Lapwing



Indian Pitta