# THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

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### **Tour Report**

Sri Lanka - Blue Whales, Dolphins & Leopards 10 – 23 March 2023

Long-snouted spinner dolphin



Sri Lankan leopard



Blue whale



Long-snouted spinner dolphin



Compiled by Susantha Weerappuli



#### Day 2: Colombo/Kalpitiya

Saturday 11 March 2023

The group arrived at Colombo Airport early in the afternoon. As soon we left the airplane, we were hit with the warm temperatures of tropical Sri Lanka. For most of the group, it was quite a contrast from their colder home climate.

The drive to the Blue Whale Resort at Kalpitiya was an eventful and enjoyable one. The first half of the journey took us through small towns full of bustling traffic, then we headed out into the beautiful countryside. We encountered a wide variety of birds, with particular highlights being blue-tailed bee-eater, Indian roller, cattle egret, whiskered tern, Caspian terns with massive red bills, and common redshank – which are overwintering at this time of the year in Sri Lanka. A small troop of Toque Macagues, an endemic species to Sri Lanka, were also seen by the side of the road, eating berries from a fruiting tree.

We stopped at a local shop to taste our first cup of Ceylon tea and enjoy a much-needed leg stretch before continuing our journey and arriving at the hotel just before dark. We got checked in and agreed to reconvene for dinner that evening. Supper was an enjoyable experience with lots of laughter and plenty of animated discussions about the possibility of seeing dolphins the next day.

Sunday 12 March 2023 Day 3: Kalpitiya

Starting the day early with a cup of coffee, we eagerly headed to the beach to catch our boat. We set to sea full of hope, but as there had not been any dolphin sightings for a few days I was also a little apprehensive.

The first hour was pretty quiet, but then we hit rush hour. Boats that had been cruising around in search of dolphins all started heading in one direction. Soon the fiesta began and several pods of dolphins appeared in the vicinity – we estimated there were 200-300 individuals. An incredible sighting!

We identified them as long-snouted spinner dolphins – a very acrobatic species. The group watched in awe as the dolphins threw themselves into the air, twisting around several times. It was such a beautiful encounter. On the way back to the shore, we also had two separate encounters with green turtles.

After a joyful morning, we tucked into a late breakfast. We had all thoroughly enjoyed the very first day of the tour.

Day 4: Kalpitiya Monday 13 March 2023

On our second day, we saw plenty of terns, especially little terns, which were feeding voraciously on shoals of fish on the water's surface. Initially, we didn't have much luck with dolphin sightings, but just as we were resigning ourselves to a dolphin-less day, the skipper revved the engine and steered our boat into deeper water.

There they were. For a second consecutive day, we were treated to excellent sightings of long-snouted spinner dolphins. This time the encounters were much closer and lasted longer.

On our way home, we saw a mating pair of green turtles.

#### Day 5: Kalpitiya/Udawalawe

Tuesday 14 March 2023

We left Kalpitiya right after breakfast and began the long journey to Udawalawe. Our route took us through the countryside again and into different climatic zones.



On the way, we stopped to do some birdwatching, sighting Asian woolly-necked stork, Asian openbill stork, black-headed Ibis, and some egrets that were feeding in a recently harvested rice field. Next, we encountered a pair of crested serpent eagles sitting on an electric post just by the roadside, which seemed to pose for us while we took pictures. A short while later, we saw a grizzled giant squirrel with a big bushy tail running along a wire parallel to the main road.

It was quite astonishing for the group to see such a vast number of man-made tanks (reservoirs) scattered around the country. Since ancient times, these have been constructed to preserve monsoon rainwater for agricultural use, simultaneously enriching the habitats for biodiversity.

We also stopped at the city of Ratnapura - the jewel of Sri Lanka - to visit the gem mines. The miners in Sri Lanka still use a traditional method called 'pit-head mining' and tunnelling using basic hand tools, rather than big machines. These traditional methods are less harmful to the environment.

We reached Udawalawe in the late afternoon and went to bed early.

#### Day 6: Udawalawe National Park/Tissamaharama

Wednesday 15 March 2023

We left the hotel early, laden with picnic breakfasts, and headed to Udawalawe National Park.

On arrival, two big bull elephants were blocking the entrance for the safari vehicles, so we had to wait for them to move away. The larger bull was in musth and was letting off a strong smell. Udawalawe National Park is known for all-male herds or bull pairs.

Once inside the park, we had a wide variety of incredible wildlife encounters. Our highlights included: changeable hawk-eagle, Malabar-pied hornbill, orange-breasted green pigeon, painted stork, blue-faced malkoha, yellow-wattled lapwing, grey-bellied cuckoo and white-bellied sea-eagle. We also sighted female elephants with their calves. After the park visit, we started our journey to Tissamaharama.

In the afternoon, we went birdwatching at the nearby wetlands. It was a very productive session which yielded a roosting colony of Indian flying foxes, spot-billed pelican, Sri Lanka green pigeon, baya weaver, greyheaded swamphen, mugger crocodile, and several other bird species.

#### Day 7: Tissamaharama/Lunugamyehera National Park

Thursday 16 March 2023

We visited Lunugamvehera National Park, taking a picnic breakfast and lunch with us. This park is the fifth block of Yala National Park, which was recently developed for visitors. At the time of writing it was not as well known, so we enjoyed a peaceful day.

Our species highlights were: brown fish owl, jungle owlet, grey-headed fish eagle, grey langur, spotted deer, Asian elephant and Indian pitta.

#### Day 8: Tissamaharama/Vala National Park/Koggala

Friday 17 March 2023

We visited Vala National Park early in the morning and enjoyed another picnic breakfast.

At the very first waterhole, we saw a huge tusker feeding grass in the water, along with a big mugger crocodile which was basking on the shore. A short while later, we saw a sloth bear moving slowly through the bushes.

We didn't have to drive for long before we met a congregation of safari vehicles eagerly trying to see something up in a nearby tree. To our surprise, it was the rotting carcass of a spotted deer. This must have been the work of Yala's apex predator: the Sri Lankan leopard. We scanned around for the culprit. He was fast asleep, well hidden on a thick branch in a nearby tree.



The rest of the morning safari was full of wildlife sightings. We encountered wild buffalo, wild boar, spotted deer, grey langur, land monitor, and many species of birds.

After lunch at a nearby restaurant, we started our journey to Koggala. On the way, we visited the famous Veherahena Buddhist Temple, which is well-known for its colossal Buddha statue and beautiful paintings depicting the life stories of the Buddha.

We checked into our hotel late in the afternoon.

#### Day 9: Koggala/Mirissa

Saturday 18 March 2023

We set off early from Mirissa Harbour for our whale watching excursion.

The first hour or so was quiet, but then a pod of long-snouted spinner dolphins started to show off their acrobatics. As soon as their show was over, a Bryde's whale started blowing in the vicinity. It was a beautiful sighting. The whale moved slowly, appearing for short intervals to feed close to the surface.

On the way back to the shore, we witnessed a small pod of bottlenose dolphins and a green turtle. We also saw great crested, lesser crested, gull-billed and white-winged terns.

#### Day 10: Koggala/Mirissa

Sunday 19 March 2023

On our second day of whale watching we had further sightings of long-snouted spinner dolphin, Bryde whale, green turtle and various terns.

#### Day 11: Koggala/Mirissa

Monday 20 March 2023

On the third day of the whale watching, the sea was not very helpful! It was stormy and choppy. We still witnessed two Bryde whales, but the big waves breaking in front of the boat meant it wasn't very easy to see them.

In the afternoon, we visited a Tea Factory and its small estate, within a short distance of the hotel. We enjoyed a nice cuppa and bought some Ceylon Tea.

#### Day 12: Koggala/Mirissa

Tuesday 21 March 2023

This was our fourth day and last day of whale watching excursions in Koggala. We were all hoping for a blue whale to round off the trip.

The sea was extremely flat and calm. Not far from the shore, we saw the spinner dolphins again. As the sea was flat and the day was bright, we could see the dolphins even a couple of metres below the surface as they swam with or across the boat. Such a delight.

Then the Bryde whale appeared. Again, it was a very close encounter.

Finally, our main goal was achieved! A blue whale made its presence known. We could see the spout - a very tall, vertical column of water in the distance. Wow! The sighting was a delight for everyone in the boat.

The blue whale, the largest animal ever to have lived on earth, was right in front of us, showing beautifully on the flat and calm sea. What a nice way to accomplish all our targets and end a successful tour.

In the afternoon, we visited the UNESCO World Heritage Site Galle Fort, which was built when the Dutch ruled Sri Lanka.



#### Day 13: Koggala/Niwala River/Katunayake

Wednesday 22 March 2023

After breakfast, we took a boat ride on the Nilwala River, which is known for its population of estuarine crocodiles. We caught sight of a few individuals, including some young crocodiles, as well as a variety of birds and a day roost of Indian flying foxes.

After the boat ride, we made our way back to the hotel for our last night in Sri Lanka.

Day 14: Departure

Thursday 23 March 2023

We flew home after breakfast.



## **Checklist for Blue Whales, Dolphins & Leopards**



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9	Day 10	Day 11	Day 12
	BIRDS													
1	Cotton pygmy goose	Nettapus coromandelianus					✓	✓	✓					
2	Sri Lanka junglefowl	Gallus lafayettii					✓	✓	✓					
3	Indian peafowl	Pavo cristatus	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓
4	Painted stork	Mycteria leucocephala	✓				✓	✓	✓					
5	Asian openbill	Anastomus oscitans				✓		✓	✓					
6	Woolly-necked stork	Ciconia episcopus				✓								
7	Lesser adjutant	Leptoptilos javanicus						✓						
8	Black-headed ibis	Threskiornis melanocephalus	✓			✓		✓	✓					
9	Eurasian spoonbill	Plata/ea leucorodia					✓							
10	Striated heron	Butorides striata		✓	✓									
11	Indian pond heron	Ardeola grayii	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓
12	Eastern cattle egret	Bubulcus coromandus	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓
13	Grey heron	Ardea cinerea	✓				✓	✓	✓					✓
14	Purple heron	Ardea purpurea	✓				✓	✓	✓					✓
15	Great egret	Ardea alba	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓					
16	Intermediate egret	Egretta intermedia	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓					✓
17	Little egret	Egretta garzetta	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓				✓	
18	Spot-billed pelican	Pelecanus philippensis					✓	✓	✓					✓
19	Little cormorant	Microcarbo niger					✓	✓	✓					✓
20	Indian cormorant	Phalacrocorax fuscicollis	<b>√</b>				✓	✓						
21	Oriental darter	Anhinga melanogaster					✓	✓	✓					
22	Crested serpent eagle	Spilornis cheela				✓		✓	✓					✓
23	Changeable hawk-eagle	Nisaetus cirrhatus						<b>√</b>	<b>✓</b>		<b>✓</b>			<b>✓</b>



24	Booted eagle	Hieraaetus pennatus					<b>✓</b>						
25	Shikra	Accipiter badius			✓	✓		✓					✓
26	Brahminy kite	Haliastur indus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓
27	White-bellied sea eagle	Haliaeetus leucogaster			✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
28	Grey-headed fish eagle	Haliaeetus ichthyaetus						✓	✓				
29	White-breasted waterhen	Amaurornis phoenicurus						<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>				✓
30	Western swamphen	Porphyrio porphyrio					<b>√</b>						
31	Common moorhen	Gallinula chloropus					<b>√</b>						
32	Black-winged stilt	Himontopus himantopus	✓			✓	<b>√</b>		<b>√</b>				
33	Yellow-wattled lapwing	Vanellus malobaricus					<b>√</b>						
34	Red-wattled lapwing	Vanellus indicus		✓		✓	<b>√</b>	✓	<b>√</b>			✓	
35	Little ringed plover	Charadrius dubius						✓					
36	Greater painted-snipe	Rostratula benghalensis					<b>√</b>						
37	Pheasant-tailed jacana	Hydrophasianus chirurgus							<b>√</b>				
38	Eurasian curlew	Numenius arquata		✓	✓								
39	Common redshank	Tringa totanus	✓	✓									
40	Marsh sandpiper	Tringa stagnatilis	✓										
41	Wood sandpiper	Tringa glareola					✓						
42	Common sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos		$\checkmark$	$\checkmark$		✓						
43	Little stint	Calidris minuta	✓										
44	Curlew sandpiper	Calidris ferruginea	✓										
45	Brown-headed gull	Chroicocephalus brunnicephalus	✓										
46	Gull-billed tern	Gelochelidon nilotica	<b>/</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>		<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>
47	Caspian tern	Hydroprogne caspia	<b>√</b>			<b>√</b>							
48	Lesser crested tern	Thalasseus bengalensis		<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>				<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>		
49	Sandwich tern	Thalasseus sandvicensis										<b>✓</b>	<b>√</b>
50	Little tern	Sternula albifrons		<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>					<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>		<b>√</b>
51	Saunders's tern	Sternula saundersi			<b>√</b>						<b>√</b>		
52	Bridled tern	Onychoprion anaethetus									<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	
53	Common tern	Sterno hirundo									✓		



54	Whiskered tern	Chlidonias hybrida	<b>✓</b>			<b>√</b>	<b>✓</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	✓	<b>√</b>
55	White-winged tern	Chlidonias leucopterus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Rock dove	Columbo livia				✓	✓	✓					✓
57	Spotted dove	Spilopelia chinensis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
	Orange-breasted green	Treron bicinctus					<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>				
58	pigeon	Trefon bicinctus					V	V	V				
59	Sri Lanka green pigeon	Treron pompadora					✓	✓	✓				
60	Green imperial pigeon	Ducula aenea				✓	✓	✓	✓				✓
61	Greater coucal	Centropus sinensis		✓		✓	✓		✓			✓	
62	Blue-faced malkoha	Phaenicophaeus viridirostris					✓						
63	Asian keel	Eudynamys scolopaceus		✓	✓							$\checkmark$	
64	Banded bay cuckoo	Cacomantis sonneratii											
65	Grey-bellied cuckoo	Cacomantis passerinus					✓						
66	Brown fish owl	Ketupa zeylonensis						✓					
67	Jungle owlet	Glaucidium radiatum						✓					
68	Crested treeswift	Hemiprocne coronata						✓	✓				
69	Indian swiftlet	Aerodramus unicolor						✓				✓	✓
70	Asian palm swift	Cypsiurus balasiensis		✓	✓							✓	✓
71	Little swift	Apus affinis						✓					
72	Indian roller	Coracias benghalensis	✓			✓	✓	✓					
73	Stork-billed kingfisher	Pelargopsis capensis						✓					
	White-throated	Halcyon smyrnensis	<b>✓</b>		<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>			<b>√</b>	<b>✓</b>
74	kingfisher												
75	Common kingfisher	Alcedo atthis		✓	✓			✓	✓				✓
76	Pied kingfisher	Cery/e rudis						✓					
77	Green bee-eater	Merops orientalis		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓				
78	Blue-tailed bee-eater	Merops philippinus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓
79	Chestnut-headed bee-eater	Merops leschenaulti						✓	✓			✓	
80	Eurasian hoopoe	Upupa epops			✓		✓	✓	✓				
81	Malabar pied hornbill	Anthracoceros coronatus					✓	✓	<b>√</b>				✓
82	Sri Lanka grey hornbill	Ocyceros gingalensis	<b>✓</b>					<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>				

83	Brown-headed barbet	Psilopogon zeylanicus	<b>✓</b>		✓	✓	✓	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	Ì			$\checkmark$
84	Coppersmith barbet	Psilopogon haemacephalus					✓	✓					
85	Brown-capped pygmy woodpecker	Yungipicus nanus						<b>✓</b>					
86	Yellow-crowned woodpecker	Leiopicus mahrattensis						<b>✓</b>					
87	Black-rumped flameback	Dinopium benghalense			✓			✓					
88	Plum-headed parakeet	Psittacula cyanocephala					✓	✓					
89	Alexandrine parakeet	Psittacula eupatria						✓	✓				
90	Rose-ringed parakeet	Psittacula krameri	<b>✓</b>	✓	✓	✓	<b>√</b>	✓	✓			✓	<b>✓</b>
91	Indian pitta	Pitta brachyura						✓					
92	Common iora	Aegithina tiphia						✓	✓				
93	Marshall's iora	Aegithina nigrolutea					✓	✓					
94	Black-headed cuckooshrike	Coracina melanoptera											✓
95	Brown shrike	Lanius cristatus					✓	✓	✓				
96	Black-hooded oriole	Orio/us xanthornus			✓	✓		✓	$\checkmark$				✓
97	White-bellied drongo	Dicrurus caerulescens									✓	✓	✓
98	White-brewed fantail	Rhipidura aureo/a						✓					
99	Indian paradise flycatcher	Terpsiphone paradisi					✓	✓	$\checkmark$				
100	House crow	Corvus splendens	$\checkmark$	✓	✓	$\checkmark$	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
101	Indian jungle crow	Corvus culminatus					✓	✓	✓				
102	Jerdon's bush lark	Mirafra affinis					<b>✓</b>	✓	✓				
103	Red-vented bulbul	Pycnonotus cafer	$\checkmark$	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			$\checkmark$	✓
104	White-brewed bulbul	Pycnonotus luteolus					✓	✓	✓				
105	Barn swallow	Hirundo rustica	<b>✓</b>	<b>√</b>	✓	<b>√</b>	<b>✓</b>	✓	✓				
106	Sri Lanka swallow	Cecropis hyperythra				✓	✓	✓	✓				✓
107	Blyth's reed warbler	Acrocephalus dumetorum					<b>√</b>						
108	Zitting cisticola	Cisticola juncidis					<b>√</b>						
109	Grey-breasted prinia	Prinia hodgsonii					<b>√</b>						
110	Jungle prinia	Prinia sylvatica					✓						

111	Ashy prinia	Prinia socio/is						✓					
112	Plain prinia	Prinia inornata						✓	✓				✓
113	Common tailorbird	Orthotomus sutorius		✓	✓		✓		✓				✓
114	Yellow-billed babbler	Turdoides affinis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
115	Southern hill myna	Gracula indica									✓		
116	Common myna	Acridotheres tristis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	
117	Rosy starling	Pastor roseus					✓						
118	Indian robin	Copsychus fulicatus					✓	✓	✓				
119	Oriental magpie-robin	Copsychus saularis			✓		✓	✓	✓		✓		
120	White-rumped shama	Copsychus malabaricus						✓					
121	Purple-rumped sunbird	Leptocoma zeylonica			✓			✓					
123	Purple sunbird	Cinnyris asiaticus			✓			✓					
124	Loten's sunbird	Cinnyris lotenius					✓	✓				✓	
125	House sparrow	Passer domesticus										✓	
126	Streaked weaver	Ploceus manyar							✓				
127	Baya weaver	Ploceus phifippinus					✓						
128	White-rumped munia	Lonchura striata					✓						
129	Scaly-breasted munia	Lonchura punctulata			✓			✓	✓				
130	Tricolored munia	Lonchura malacca						$\checkmark$					
131	Forest wagtail	Dendronanthus indicus						✓	✓				
132	Grey wagtail	Motacilla cinerea			✓								
133	Paddyfield pipit	Anthus rufulus			$\checkmark$		$\checkmark$						
	MAMMALS												
1	Toque macaque	Macaca sinica	✓			✓	✓	✓					
2	Grey langur	Semnopithecus (Presbytis) entellus					<b>✓</b>	✓	<b>✓</b>				
3	Purple-faced leaf monkey	Trachypithecus (Presbytis) vetulus									✓		
4	Golden jackal	Canis aureus						✓					
5	Sloth bear	Melursus ursinus							✓				
6	Grey mongoose	Herpestes edwardsii				✓		]					

7	Ruddy mongoose	Herpestes smithii					✓	✓	✓					
8	Stripe-necked mongoose	Herpestes vitticollis						✓						
9	Brown mongoose	Herpestes fuseus											✓	
10	Leopard	Panthera pardus kotiya							✓					
11	Asian elephant	Elephas maximus					✓	✓	✓					
12	Wild boar	Sus scrofa						✓	✓					
13	Muntjac	Muntiacus muntjac						✓						
14	Spotted deer	Cervus axis						✓	✓					
15	Water buffalo	Buba/us Buba/is					✓	✓	✓					
16	Indian palm squirrel	Funambulus palmarum	<b>✓</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓
17	Grizzled giant squirrel	Ratufa macroura				✓		✓						
	Indian hare-black-naped	Lepus nigricollis						<b>✓</b>						
18	hare	Lepus myricoms						•						
19	Indian flying fox	Pteropus gigantea					✓		✓		✓			✓
20	Blue whale	Balaenoptera musculus											✓	
21	Bryde's whale	Balaenoptera edeni								✓	✓	✓	✓	
22	Bottlenose dolphin	Tursiops truncates								✓				
23	Spinner dolphin	Stene/la mu/la		✓	✓					✓	✓	✓	✓	
	REPTILES AND OTHER													
1	Hump-nosed viper	Hypnale hypnale					✓							
2	Bengal (Land) monitor	Varanus bengalensis		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	
3	Asian water monitor	Varanus salvator				✓								
	Oriental (Common) garden	Ca/otes versicolor		<b>√</b>										
4	lizard	Cu/otes versicoloi		•										
5	Estuarine crocodile	Crocodylus porosus												✓
6	Mugger crocodile	Crocodylus palustris					✓		✓					
7	Hard shelled terrapin	Melanochelys trijuga parkeri					✓							
8	Green turtle	Chelonia mydas		✓	✓					✓	✓			
9	Common house gecko	Hemidactylus frenatus	✓				✓							
	BUTTERFLIES													



1	Crimson rose	Pachliopta hector	$\checkmark$		✓					
2	Lemon emigrant	Catopsilia pomona			$\checkmark$	$\checkmark$	<b>✓</b>			
3	Blue glassy tiger	Ideopsis similis				$\checkmark$				
4	Plain tiger	Danaus chrysippus	<b>✓</b>	✓		✓				
5	Common tiger	Danaus genutia				✓				
6	Common crow	Euploea core	$\checkmark$			✓				