

Birding in Sri Lanka with Upali Ekanayake.

8th – 23rd January 2016 - by JOHN BARKLA, Melbourne, Australia.

With Alison invited to address a medical conference in Colombo in January 2016, I thought I would take the opportunity to return to this beautiful country with its small, but nonetheless interesting avifauna. I was there in 2004, before I developed my interest in photography and shortly after the discovery of a new species of owl, the **Serendib Scops Owl**. At that time and quite reasonably, our guide Upali Ekanayake would not agree to take us to look for the owl while efforts were being made to understand the viability of the population and whether it could withstand an influx of birders. In 2004 I also had had tantalising, but unsatisfactory, views of the endemic **Sri Lanka Spurfowl**.

My goals for this trip, therefore, were:

- a) to see the new Scops Owl and endemic Spurfowl; and
- b) as always, to photograph as many species as possible.

Alison's commitments filled three days in Colombo, with a final day in Kandy. We therefore organised our itinerary so that we could meet her in Kandy on our fourth day.

When I communicated our intention to visit, my Sri Lankan friend, Mr RG, generously offered to let us stay at three of his properties in Agarapatana, Mannar and Lake Balgoda. Raja is a passionate bird photographer and his properties are all close to important bird areas. We used Upali Ekanayake, the same guide as in 2004 and he amended his normal two week tour itinerary, warning that the changes would cost us some species.

We flew Thai Air through Bangkok to Colombo and spent the first day adjusting to the time difference and visiting the Museum. With my camera and binoculars safely locked in the hotel, we still managed to see some common birds, including **Indian Cormorant, Indian Pond Heron, White-breasted Waterhen, Red-wattled Lapwing, Rose-ringed Parakeet, Brown-headed Barbet, Barn Swallow** and both corvids, **House Crow** and **Large-billed Crow**.

On Friday 8 January, Upali picked me up from our Cinnamon Red Colombo hotel and Alison went off to her meetings. On the way to our first destination of Totum House in Agarapatana, in the Central Province, we made a brief rest stop at Kitulgala and had lunch at St Clair's Tea Centre, near Hatton. These stops added some common species, including **Brahminy Kite, Spotted Dove** (race "ceylonensis", which is smaller and looks very different to the Chinese race "chinensis" I am familiar with around Melbourne), **Asian Palm Swift, White-throated Kingfisher, Grey Wagtail, Red-vented Bulbul, Brown Shrike, Purple-rumped** and **Long-billed Sunbirds, White-rumped Munia** and **White-bellied Drongo**. The Totum House property adjoins the world famous Horton Plains National Park at an elevation of 1,550 metres. Here RG is

attempting to return a former tea plantation to native rainforest. Whilst he has made courageous progress, his task has not been made easier by the earlier planting of Australian eucalypts as shade trees. On arrival, I was asked whether I would prefer local or western food. What a simple question to answer. For the remainder of our time in Sri Lanka, but particularly at Mr RG's properties, we enjoyed the most wonderful curries and other local delights.

We spent all of the next two days at Totum House adding to my tally of birds photographed. These included common raptors such as **Oriental Honey Buzzard**, **Crested Serpent Eagle** and **Shikra**, **Greater Coucal**, **Flame Minivet**, **Bar-winged Flycatcher-Shrike**, **Indian Paradise Flycatcher**, **Yellow-eared Bulbul**, **Kashmir Flycatcher**, **Dull-blue Flycatcher**, **Tickell's Blue Flycatcher**, **Sri Lanka Scimitar Babbler**, **Large-billed Leaf Warbler**, **Asian Grey Tit** (a split from **Great Tit**), **Velvet-fronted Nuthatch** and **Sri Lanka White-eye**. For hours I sat in two brilliant bird hides peering into the understory gloom to successfully photograph, using ridiculously high ISO's and slow shutter speeds, **Indian Pitta**, **Forest Wagtail**, a brilliant **Pied Thrush**, **Indian Blue Robin** and the recently split **Sri Lanka Scaly Thrush**. Others I saw but could not photograph were **Common Hawk Cuckoo**, **Indian Swiftlet**, **Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher**, **Yellow-billed Babbler** and **Bright-green Warbler**. we heard the elusive **Sri Lanka Spurfowl**, without seeing it.

On Monday 11 January, we left Totum House at 5.50am and drove into the Horton Plains National Park. Unfortunately, it was a holiday and the Park was crawling with people. We added very little before giving up and heading off for lunch at Nuwara-Eliya. After lunch we went to Bomuruella Reserve, Upali's "reliable" site for the endemic **Sri Lanka Bush Warbler**. It was distressing to see the piles of rubbish dumped at the site and again we saw little and dipped on the Bush Warbler. We continued to Kandy where we met up with Alison. Despite it being a very quiet day, we added one endemic, **Sri Lanka Junglefowl**, and other common species such as **Common Kestrel**, **Asian Koel**, **Indian Cuckoo**, **Pacific Swallow**, **Paddyfield Pipit**, **Oriental Magpie Robin**, **Pied Bushchat**, **Dark-fronted Babbler**, **Zitting Cisticola** and **Tricoloured Munia**.

Before dawn on 12 January we drove to Ud wattakele pond, a known site for **Brown Fish Owl**. Unfortunately, once again we dipped. Close views of **Spot-winged Thrush**, **Brown-breasted Flycatcher** and **White-rumped Shama** and scope views of **Alexandrine Parakeet** and **Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot** provided some compensation, but the light was too poor or the birds too backlit and distant for presentable photos. We drove to Ratnapura Rest House for lunch, where I skipped the chance to eat more food and added **Sri Lanka Green Pigeon**, **White-browed Bulbul**, **Pale-billed Flowerpecker**, **Oriental White-eye** and a nesting **Black-hooded Oriole**. We finished the day at the splendidly named Blue Magpie Lodge in the very bird rich area of Sinharaja. An hour or so walk around the lodge, with its well-stocked bird table and fruiting or flowering trees attracting many species, added lots of new birds - **Emerald Dove**, **Green Imperial Pigeon**, **Blue-tailed Bee-eater**, **Sri Lanka Small Barbet**, **Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker**, **Sri Lanka Lesser Flameback**,

White-browed Fantail, Black-capped Bulbul, Square-tailed Black Bulbul, Tawny-bellied Babbler, Blyth's Reed Warbler, the rare **Black-throated Munia** and **Lesser Hill Myna**. Other birds seen in transit during the day were **Purple Heron, Asian Openbill, Plum-headed Parakeet, Little Swift** (formerly known as **House Swift**), **Crimson-backed Flameback**, and **Ashy Woodswallow**.

Our next two days were in the Sinharaja World Heritage Site or in the villages on its boundaries. They were incredibly productive, but the absolute highlights were:

a) A pre-dawn visit to a villager's private garden, where he attracts elusive birds by feeding them cooked rice and other left-overs. In impossibly poor light we had stunning and close views of my target **Sri Lanka Spurfowl** (rather sub-standard photo attached as proof), plus **Sri Lanka Junglefowl, Spot-winged Thrush** and **Emerald Dove**. A pair of **Green-billed Coucal** were also nesting nearby. Sadly, we were to learn that neighbours who were jealous of the birders' tips he was receiving, were cutting down his trees and setting off fire-crackers to scare away his birds.

b) Being led by villagers, who make their living as bird guides, to three day roosting **Sri Lanka Frogmouths** and a **Serendib Scops Owl**. Finding the Scops Owl, in particular, was an incredible feat of bushmanship. Whilst not wishing to downplay the difficulty of finding a Frogmouth, they tend to re-use the same roosts and once found, can be shown to birders. They are loyal to a roost, reluctant to fly and can be approached very closely. Finding the Scops Owl is an entirely different matter as they are more nervous and flush easily. When we arrived, none had been found for two weeks, despite very intensive searching by the villagers who appreciate the tips from birders. On our second day, a report came in from a driver who had heard one calling before dawn on the up-hill side of the road as he drove to the hotel to pick up his two Japanese photographers. This news was conveyed to our guide, who knowing how keen we were to see one, immediately set off to the exact spot on the road where the call was heard. He then proceeded to comb the hill, eventually finding the bird 150 - 200 metres uphill in a dense clump of bamboo. We were asked if we could manage the steep and slippery conditions, without any track through the dense vegetation. It took a nanosecond to decide we could and we were off. On reaching the site and peering into the bamboo, the bird was almost impossible to see. The guide had a window of a couple of centimetres and could see an eye, but try as we might, we could not see it. After a few nervous minutes, I spotted it and started taking photos, while the guide continued to try to point it out to Upali and Alison. Once we all had it, I asked if I could improve my angle by lowering myself to the forest floor. After another warning to move as slowly as possible so as not to flush it, I did this. The photo attached, which was taken hand held at 5,000 ISO and with a shutter speed of 1/25th of a second, is technically quite ordinary, but it was an unbelievable thrill to get. The attached Frogmouth photo is only slightly better, having been taken at 2,500 IOS at 1/125th second. On a humorous side note, the guide for the two Japanese photographers returned later and carried their cameras up the slope and photographed the bird for them. We saw them later and they were delighted with the result.

c) Wandering through this ancient forest and the adjoining villages, looking for the many special species which occur there. We found another owl, the endemic **Chestnut-backed Owlet** (I could not remember I had seen two in 2004), a few **Malabar Trogons** (all Trogons are great), **Red-faced Malkoha**, **Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill**, **Lesser Yellownappe**, **Black-naped Monarch**, **Gold-fronted Leafbird**, **Yellow-browed Bulbul**, **Ashy-headed Laughingthrush**, **Orange-billed Babbler**, **White-throated Flowerpecker**, **White-faced Starling**, **Sri Lanka Myna**, **Sri Lanka Crested Drongo** and the iconic **Sri Lanka Blue Magpie**, three of which came to our table at lunchtime to be fed.

On Friday 15 January we drove south. Our first stop was to look for a pair of **Jungle Owlets** in a private garden beside the bund of Pannegamuwa Lake, in Tissamaharama (sometimes spelt “Thissamaharama” and known universally simply as “Tissa” or “Thissa”). Upali rang the owner to explain our presence as we walked up the driveway. After locating the owls, we spent the remainder of the day around Tissa, where the habitat was a complex of apparently dry scrub and numerous shallow wetlands. It is where our hotel, Cinnamon Wild Yala, was located and on the edge of the second largest national park in Sri Lanka, Yala National Park (refer https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yala_National_Park). In this rich habitat we located lots of new birds including **Spot-billed Pelican**, **Oriental Darter**, **Grey Heron**, **Striated Heron**, the common, but quite wonderful pink, black & white **Painted Stork**, **Black-headed Ibis**, **Eurasian Spoonbill**, **Lesser Whistling Duck**, **Cotton Pygmy Goose**, **White-bellied Sea-Eagle**, **Indian Peafowl**, **Purple Swamphen** (totally different to ours, but regarded as the same species), **Pheasant-tailed Jacana**, **Yellow-wattled Lapwing**, **Pintail Snipe** (recorded as such without much confidence that at a moderate distance we could pick another snipe species), **Black-winged Stilt**, **Great Thick-knee**, **Small Pratincole**, **Little Tern**, **Whiskered Tern**, **White-winged Tern**, **Crested Tree Swift**, **Common Kingfisher**, **Lesser Pied Kingfisher**, **Little Green Bee-eater** (ridiculously tame if you remained inside the car), **Indian Roller**, **Malabar Pied Hornbill**, **Coppersmith Barbet**, **Jerdon’s Bushlark**, **Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark**, **Citrine & Yellow Wagtails**, **Small Minivet**, **Sri Lanka Wood Shrike**, the rare **Marshall’s Iora** (rated by Upali as his bird of the trip), **Jerdon’s Leafbird**, **Black Robin**, **Plain Prinia**, **Purple Sunbird**, **Scaly-breasted Munia**, **Baya Weaver** and **Brahminy Starling**. We also saw thousands of migratory shorebirds, with the new ones being **Little Ringed Plover**, **Kentish Plover**, **Lesser & Greater Sand Plovers**, **Common Redshank**, **Common Greenshank**, **Marsh Sandpiper**, **Wood Sandpiper**, **Common Sandpiper**, **Little Stint** and just one single **Spotted Redshank**. Just on dark, we had a **Jerdon’s Nightjar** respond to Upali’s imitation of its call and land close by.

On Saturday and Sunday we spent the whole day inside Yala National Park in a specially authorised four-wheel drive. We were in one of hundreds of such vehicles. The traffic jam at 6am as we waited for the gates to open had to be seen to be believed. Yala is the most popular of all Sri Lanka’s National Parks and being there on the weekend is not ideal. Yala is the best known site to see Leopard and the only reliable site to see the endangered Sri Lankan Sloth Bear (refer https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri_Lankan_sloth_bear). **Over the two**

days we saw five Leopards and had unbelievable views of a Sloth Bear.

It walked out of the scrub directly towards our open 4WD and proceeded to sniff around on the ground, less than a third of a metre from Alison and Upali, who were sitting motionless in the vehicle. It then walked to a tree, sat down and start to groom itself. With dozens of other cars arriving and jostling for a viewing spot, we decided it was time to leave. Whilst our driver was mostly focussed on finding mammals, we did add a few more birds including **Woolly-necked Stork, Grey-headed Fish-Eagle, Crested Hawk-Eagle, Barred Button-quail, Pacific Golden & Grey Plovers, Black-tailed Godwit, Gull-billed Tern, Caspian Tern, Great Crested Tern, Saunders's Tern, Orange-breasted Green Pigeon, Blue-faced Malkoha, Pied Crested Cuckoo, Indian Little Nightjar, Stork-billed Kingfisher, Chestnut-headed Bee-eater, Common Hoopoe, Oriental Skylark, Sri Lanka Swallow, Yellow-eyed Babbler, Ashy Prinia and Streaked Weaver.**

On Monday it was time to leave. During the past few days, Upali had been bombarded with calls from a 15 year old student, Omesh, who makes some handy pocket money showing bird groups owls. In his spare time he rides his bike around his neighbourhood looking for **Brown Fish Owl, Spot-bellied Eagle-Owl, Brown Wood Owl and Indian Scops Owl.** He is an incredibly enterprising and impressive young man and we were amused by his daily updates to Upali's mobile, once he became aware we were in his patch. On one occasion, he had run out of credit on his own phone and was calling on his uncle's phone and on another occasion we witnessed him asking another student to ride back and collect a German birder he had seen as he cycled past. The birder was duly collected and joined us. We were not surprised to learn later that young Omesh had won the young inventor of the year award for his region. Our conclusion was that he is an undoubted entrepreneur of the future. He showed us a **Brown Fish Owl** and an **Indian Scops Owl** and we were thrilled and so was he with our tips. We continued to Dambulla, where we had lunch, and finished the day at the Aliya Resort in Sigiriya.

We did not have time to properly explore the bird rich Sigiriya on 19 January and Upali again reminded us this would cost us species. We continued to Mannar, an area not normally included in Upali's itinerary, stopping at Giant's Tank before we got there. We checked into RG's private hotel, Palmyrah House, and went birding. We spent the afternoon visiting Thalladi Ponds, Vankalai Sanctuary, Mannar Causeway and a lagoon on the Talai-Mannar Point Road. We started the next day visiting another of RG's properties at Oorumalai. This property was quite magical, situated on the coast, adjacent to the line of islands stretching north-west towards India and known as Adam's Bridge

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam%27s_Bridge. During our low tide visit the mudflats were crammed with thousands of shorebirds, gulls and terns. Mannar proved to be one of the highlights of our time in Sri Lanka and I encouraged Upali to amend his normal itinerary to include it in future trips. The new birds we added there were **Western Reef Egret, Yellow Bittern, Eurasian Wigeon, Northern Pintail, Garganey, Common Teal, Black Kite, Himalayan Buzzard** (a split from **Common Buzzard**), **Grey Francolin, Watercock, Common Moorhen, Common Ringed Plover, Bar-tailed Godwit, Whimbrel, Eurasian Curlew** (initially misidentified as **Eastern Curlew**),

Terek Sandpiper, Great Knot, Curlew Sandpiper, Broad-billed Sandpiper, Ruff, a single bird each of **Heuglin's Gull** and **Pallas's Gull**, but thousands of **Brown-headed Gulls, Lesser Crested Tern, Eurasian Collared Dove, Golden-backed Woodpecker, Black-headed Cuckoo-Shrike, Long-tailed Shrike, Clamorous Reed Warbler, Hume's Whitethroat** and **Black Drongo**.

Our final destination was another of RG's houses known as Bolgoda Bungalow on Bolgoda Lake, south of Colombo. We set out from Mannar on Friday 22 January and drove all day with only one stop at Puttalam Saltworks, where we saw thousands of shorebirds, but no new ones. This was our final day with Upali and he asked to be dropped off at his sister-in-law's house on the way. We continued with the driver, but with imprecise directions from Upali, he had some trouble finding Bolgoda Bungalow. We eventually got there on dark and were greeted most warmly by the House Manager. The next day was another to remember. RG had generously arranged for his boatman to take us out for the entire morning on Lake Bolgoda. I asked the House Manager if he would join us and this proved to be most beneficial as he had phenomenal eyesight and spotted most birds before I did. The boatman was well versed in catering for a photographer and we crept around the lake edge, seeing plenty of birds as we went. The highlight was close views of five **Yellow Bitterns** and two **Black Bitterns**. I managed photos of **Yellow Bittern**, but each of the **Black Bitterns** moved away before I could focus my camera. We spent the afternoon relaxing and enjoying more superb hospitality, before our driver returned and took us to the airport for our overnight flight home.

Our trip was an unqualified success. We saw 241 species (I only saw 197 in slightly fewer days in 2004) and I managed to photograph 160, a pleasingly high proportion. We achieved the goals of seeing both **Serendib Scops Owl** and **Sri Lanka Spurfowl** and enjoyed most wonderful hospitality at RG's properties. Whilst I would always argue they have too many legs, **seeing five Leopards and a Sri Lankan Sloth Bear was an unexpected pleasure too**.

If Sri Lanka is not on your list, I would recommend it should be. Our experience was the people are ethnically diverse and universally friendly, it is safe (the 26 year civil war ended in 2009), the country has a wealth of cultural and historic sites, the food is unbelievably good and there are large natural areas which are relatively unspoiled and have good birds. If you look for negatives there are few: perhaps the amount of rubbish, the number of stray dogs and the poor emission controls for vehicles could be noted.

Our thanks are to RG and Upali Ekanayake for making it the success it was.

John Barkla

PS The photos I have attached were taken in low light and whilst not that good, do represent special memories.