

# **SRI LANKA**

## **WHALES AND ELEPHANTS**

### **Trip Report**



*Sperm Whales*

## **MEETINGS WITH GIANTS**

### **Sri Lanka, 8 to 20 April 2010**

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## Day 1. Thursday 8 April 2010

Today was the official start of the trip, although most people were already in Sri Lanka, watching leopards in Yala or birds in Sinharaja. After checking in to the magnificent Mount Lavinia Hotel, there was time for some birding in the grounds, and a long swim in the ocean-view pool.

## Day 2. Friday 9 April (Colombo to Galle)

Our last guest arrived this morning in good spirits and we were soon off down the coast to Galle. **White-breasted Kingfishers** and the occasional **Drongo** dotted the telephone lines along the road. It was a public holiday following the previous day's general election, so with little traffic we made good time and were in Galle in just over 2 hours. We were soon checked in to the Lighthouse Hotel with its splendid entrance, the magnificent spiral staircase with metalwork sculptures leading up to veranda overlooking the Indian Ocean. Here the rest of the group assembled during the course of the day, all in good time to meet together for the first time over sunset drinks, and an illustrated talk in the bar.

## Day 3. Saturday 10 April (whale watching)

This was the first of our six days of whale-watching. We enjoyed boat trips out every morning, leaving the hotel around 0615, and from Mirissa Harbour soon after 0700, returning in the afternoon. Our first day started well, with a small group of five **Sperm Whales** just an hour after leaving the harbour. They were loafing, logging, and generally minding their own business. We kept our distance, until one eventually approached us, so that for a while we were face to face. She was a magnificent mature female, the knuckles on her dorsal fin betraying her status.



*Face-to-face with a Sperm Whale*

We spent a wonderful 1½ hours with these Sperm Whales, cameras on overdrive, breaking off our observations twice to watch large groups of **Bottlenose Dolphins** charge past to the east. As we followed the second group of dolphins we came across first a single logging **Sperm Whale**, then another pod of about 12. At the same time the other boat reported a Blue Whale, a few miles to our west. Having spent plenty of time with the Sperm Whales by now, we eventually headed in that direction. While the Blue proved elusive, we did find a third pod of four **Sperm Whales**, bringing our day's total of this species to 22. Finally returning to harbour, we were treated to views of **Brahminy Kite**, **Red-billed Tropicbird** and **Whiskered Tern**.

#### **Day 4. Sunday 11 April (whale watching)**

Soon after leaving Mirissa Harbour this morning we caught a glimpse of dolphins. Turning the boat for a closer look, it became clear that they were **Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphins**, the slightly more delicate cousin of the 'Common' Bottlenose Dolphin. We have seen this species in this area in previous years, so these individuals may well be resident (in contrast to most of the other cetaceans we see, which are most likely passing through). Leaving the dolphins we headed further out, and soon enough found our first **Blue Whale**. We had some lovely views as it dived and surfaced, but eventually we decided to move on. Heading SW, just minutes later we encountered a very dispersed group of **Sperm Whales**. They were so spread out it was difficult to keep track of them all, but our best count was of 12. Working our way slowly eastward we came across a second **Blue Whale**, which again had the cameras clicking. Ten minutes later a call from the other boat alerted us to a third **Blue Whale**, just over a mile away. Just then a passing **Sooty Shearwater** provided additional interest for the birders. Other seabirds today included the usual flocks of **Bridled Tern**, both **Pomarine** and **Arctic Skua**, and some very interesting shearwaters which we did not identify clearly today, but turned up again later. And then just as we started back to port we found a group of perhaps 120 **Spinner Dolphins**. We returned to the Lighthouse Hotel, and then in the late afternoon we visited Galle Fort, a World Heritage Site. The old Dutch Reform Church and the VOC emblem on the inside of the fort gateway were evocative reminders of the origins of this walled town. A walk through the old streets to the Lighthouse, then along the ramparts led us to the diving rock where local lads risked their necks (quite literally) diving for money.

#### **Day 5. Monday 12 April (whale watching)**

Another great day of whale watching, with an early sighting of **Spinner Dolphins** as we headed offshore. Soon after that, as we crossed the shipping lane we encountered a nice pod of at least 9 but probably 12 **Sperm Whales**. We were watching four individuals quietly logging side-by-side when there was a huge splash. Another individual had breached, leaping almost right out of the water. We moved slowly closer and were treated to a total of 4 breaches, 2 spy-hops and some lob-tailing. On a rather different scale, an exhausted **Painted Lady** butterfly staggered on board at this point, some 8 nautical miles offshore. We finally left this group of Sperm Whales, but very soon after came across a second larger pod, of about 20 **Sperm Whales**. Again we were happy to spend time with them as they loafed slowly westward. But then we spotted a Blue Whale further to the west. And then another to the east. We headed that way and found a **mother and calf Blue Whale**. We stayed with them for over an hour as they swam eastward, both fluking as they dived, the smaller calf keeping closely alongside its mother, popping up for air a minute or two before she did after each dive.



*Blue Whale mother and calf*

### **Day 6. Tuesday 13 April**

April 13 and 14 are the New Year holidays in Sri Lanka, and we had a change of pace today too. After three days of early starts it was nice to have a lie-in this morning, and overindulge at the buffet breakfast. It was also a chance to relax by the pool, beach-comb or birdwatch in the hotel grounds, and for some to use the spa. But mid-afternoon we were off, to a patch of rainforest inland from Galle. **Hiyare Forest Reserve** surrounds a reservoir, and is actually the main water catchment for Galle. A short walk up the forest path led to a vista of the lake, with a **Common Kingfisher** doing what it does best from a vantage point on the bank. In all I recorded over 20 species of bird here, but the Sri Lankan endemics stand out: **Red-fronted Barbet**, **Hill Myna** and **Ceylon Swallow**. For the photographers a giant spider was another attraction. There were also two small Hog Deer which had been taken in as injured orphans and were being cared for by the staff.

### **Day 7. Wednesday 14 April (whale watching)**

An interesting day. We set off at the normal time for whale watching. Pulling in to Mirissa at 0701 fire crackers suddenly exploded all around us. Sinhalese New Year does not occur at midnight on the same day every year. Rather it occurs at an auspicious time on the 13 or 14 of April. And this year's auspicious time was 0701 on 14 April. Arriving just one minute later at the Mirissa Watersports jetty, the captain told us that although the weather had been ok earlier, it was now too rough to go out, and our trip was cancelled. Not so auspicious! The weather had certainly deteriorated since our previous days out, and it was ominously grey and windy. So back to the Lighthouse in Galle. Which gave a second chance to sample the buffet breakfast, and also a chance for most of us to observe the traditional milk-boiling ceremony associated with the second auspicious time at precisely 0905. While that was all very nice, our thoughts were on the weather, which did seem to be improving. After a couple of phone calls to the captain, it was all back in the bus for a second try. This time we did get out, and although conditions had certainly improved since first thing they were still not ideal. Which may be why our sole cetacean sighting of the day was a nice group of **Spinner Dolphins** at midday. Even the seabirds seemed a bit depleted today, with only one big flock of **Bridled Terns** and a very few other Skuas and Shearwaters. Back in Galle it was still overcast, but there was time for a very pleasant and atmospheric late afternoon walk around Kurulu-bedda mangrove near the

hotel. As we approached we could see **Purple-faced Leaf Monkeys** in the trees. **White-breasted Waterhen** were less visible, but particularly noisy. The grey conditions kept the usual butterflies at bay, but there were still several beautiful dragonflies on show, and the plant life as ever was splendid.

#### **Day 8. Thursday 15 April (whale watching)**

After the wind of yesterday, today was much calmer. In fact the wind died completely soon after we left port, making it a perfect day for whale watching. And so it proved, with our first sighting being a **Blue Whale** at 0840h. This individual was heading east, then south, making a series of regular 10-11 minute dives, regularly showing its magnificent flukes each time it dived. After 1½ hours we left this animal and headed onwards. Soon enough we found two more **Blue Whales**, this time a mother and calf pair. These were just south of Dondra Head, with its famous lighthouse. We tracked them at a distance as they headed slowly westwards. This time while Mum made dives averaging 13 minutes, the calves were just half as long.



*Blue Whale*

We spent most of our time today following Blue Whales, but while doing so we had plenty of views of passing seabirds. There were numerous **Bridled Terns** and **White-winged Terns** (many in their splendid breeding plumage), nearly all flying westwards. There were also distant views of probable Flesh-footed Shearwaters and Pomarine Skuas, as well as good views of two **Red-billed Tropicbirds** as we returned to port. But the birding highlight of the day was our sighting of **Persian Shearwater**, a species not recorded from Sri Lanka before. We had seen a couple of Audubon's-like Shearwaters on previous days, but did not have great views. Today we saw three more, and managed both good views and photos. These clearly showed

the distinctive underwing pattern of Persian Shearwater, a species that breeds up in the northern Arabian Sea, and not previously recorded in Sri Lanka.

### **Day 9. Friday 16 April (whale watching)**

Our final day of whale watching, and another excellent one. Enroute to Mirissa we stopped to see the famous stilt fishermen, back in position on the rising tide after their New Year break. Soon after leaving Mirissa harbour we encountered a group of some 30 **Spinner Dolphins**, but they were not in a mood to play and avoided our boat. A bit later two animals approached the boat but then disappeared, and had to be entered in the log as 'Unidentified Cetaceans'. Not long after we had a glimpse of what was probably a Dwarf Sperm Whale, although it too disappeared without being confirmed. But then our luck changed, with a lovely encounter with some high-leaping and bow-riding **Striped Dolphins**. These exuberant and beautifully-patterned animals really are one of my favourites. At this point we had a call from the other boat that they had seen Blue Whales, so we headed off in that direction, passing **Bottlenose Dolphins** on the way. There were two **Blue Whales**, repeatedly diving in the same general area, presumably feeding on a deep concentration of krill. We spent plenty of time with them, as they repeatedly fluked, at one point one passing just next to our boat and showing its entire length as it turned around us underwater. A wonderful finale to our whale watching. That evening, back at the hotel, we all enjoyed a splendid farewell buffet dinner.



< *Stilt fisherman*  
v *Mirissa harbour*



### **Day 10. Saturday 17 April (Galle to Embilipitiya)**

This morning was our final chance to enjoy the magnificent Lighthouse Hotel, before heading onwards. We were joined by the charming and hugely knowledgeable Sri Lankan naturalist Wicky, and by 1100 we were all on board the coach and ready to leave. We were soon past Mirissa and passing new sights along the south coast road. Making a brief stop at Dondra Head we visited the British-built Lighthouse, before pressing on eastwards. The New Year holidays were being stretched to the limit by some locals, so our normal lunch stop on the outskirts of Tangalle was shut. But we found another with a superb view out over the sea; unfortunately it had little else to recommend it, and our lunch stop remains memorable for most of the wrong reasons!

Anyway, a **White-bellied Sea Eagle** drifting by while being mobbed by House Crows provided some diversion.



*At the Lighthouse Hotel, Galle*



*At the Lighthouse, Dondra Head*

After Tangalle, the road passed acres of wetlands, alive with birds: **Pheasant-tailed Jacana**, **Black-winged Stilt**, **Openbill Stork** and **Black-headed Ibis** all dotted the countryside. Finally the road turned north and soon enough we had arrived at the Centauria Hotel in Embilipitiya. A late afternoon walk in the gardens with Wicky produced a fine crop of birds, including a roosting pair of **Collared Scops Owl** (or Indian Scops Owl depending on which book you use). In the adjacent tank (lake) **Water Buffaloes** wallowed contently, while flights of **Cattle Egret**, **Intermediate Egret** and **Black-headed Ibis** all passed over, heading for their roosts amongst the trees on the far side. For the birders a good view of a **Stork-billed Kingfisher** was another highlight, while for others the insect life, with numerous **Pond Skaters** and dragonflies including many **Asian Groundlings**, provided much interest.

#### **Day11. Sunday 18 April (at Udawalawe)**

We enjoyed two excursions by jeep into Udawalawe National Park today. Setting off early for the morning drive, we were soon at the Park visitor centre, logged in and transferred to our two jeeps. Almost immediately, **Elephants** put in an appearance, and we spent plenty of time admiring a couple of small groups as they browsed right next to the track. We also had wonderful views of **Jackals**, first a small group of three, then a solitary individual. And we saw two species of monkeys: **Grey Langurs** and **Toque Macaques**. Other animals of note included a **Mongoose** on the road, **Soft-shelled Terrapin**, and a glimpse of **Spotted Deer**. The bird life was also superb, with birds of prey as usual being particularly well represented. I recorded **Black-winged Kite**, **Shikra**, **Crested Serpent Eagle**, **Crested Hawk Eagle** and **Grey-headed Fish-eagle**. The latter flew down the river as we were enjoying our breakfast break. At the

same spot Stefan uncovered an enormous and extremely impressive **Land Monitor** lurking in the bushes.



*Elephants crossing, Udawalawe*

Before our afternoon game drive we nipped into the Elephant Transit Home to watch the young orphans being fed (and another **Land Monitor** wandering around the grounds). Entering the National Park the sky was overcast, which made an atmospheric contrast from this morning. We saw more **Elephant** again, as well as **Wild Boar**, Mongoose, Spotted Deer, Grey Langur and **Sambur**. The bird life was if anything even better than in the morning. Among the avian highlights were **Ceylon Green Pigeon**, **Plum-headed Parakeet**, **Blue-faced Malkoha**, **Brown Fish-owl**, **Indian Roller**, **Malabar Pied Hornbill**, **Ceylon Swallow** and **Forest Wagtail**.

#### **Day 12. Monday 19 April (Farewell)**

Our final morning together. After breakfast most left for Negombo, where some stayed longer than planned courtesy of Eyjafjallajokull, the Icelandic volcano. Thanks to Wiki, Ganga, Paramie and all of the JetwingEco team for all their help in sorting things out and making the best of a difficult situation. Fortunately all made it home in reasonable time, and the ash clouds cleared before those who had stayed on needed to fly out.

## Whale and Dolphin Summary

We had **Blue Whale** sightings on 4 of our 6 days: a total of 6 encounters, with 9 animals. This is well down on previous years, but we did have some superb and extended views of the Blue Whales that were present, with excellent photo opportunities. And, of course, I later heard that our boat was seeing 10-14 Blue Whales each day the week after we left! But we also had several wonderful encounters with **Sperm Whales**, and we recorded four different species of dolphin. So, a successful result!

Species		Sightings	Individuals
Blue Whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>	6	9
Probable Blue Whale		2	2
Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>	7	66
Spinner Dolphin	<i>Stenella longirostris</i>	4	171
Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>	1	8
Common Bottlenose	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	2	320
Indo-pacific Bottlenose	<i>Tursiops aduncus</i>	1	8
Unidentified cetaceans		3	13
Total		26	597

## Birds and Other Wildlife

The main purpose of our holiday was to see Whales (and Elephants), but Sri Lanka is such a fabulous birding location that it is impossible not to see good numbers of birds with very little effort. At sea, we had many excellent views of seabirds, particularly tropical terns. The sightings of Persian Shearwater were particularly exciting, because there had been no records at all before this year. On land, Udawalawe and our hotel gardens nearby, were particularly productive. In total I recorded 104 species, of which five were Sri Lankan endemics (\*).

Barred Buttonquail	Crested Serpent Eagle
*Sri Lanka Junglefowl	Shikra
Peacock	Changeable Hawk Eagle
Lesser Whistling-duck	Little Grebe
Common Flameback	Red-billed Tropicbird
Brown-headed Barbet	Darter
*Red-fronted Barbet	Little Cormorant
Coppersmith Barbet	Indian Cormorant
Malabar Pied Hornbill	Little Egret
Indian Roller	Great Egret
Common Kingfisher	Intermediate Egret
Stork-billed Kingfisher	Cattle Egret
White-breasted Kingfisher	Indian Pond Heron (Paddybird)
Green Bee-eater	Purple Heron
Chestnut-headed Bee-eater	Grey Heron
Pied Cuckoo	Yellow Bittern
Asian Koel	Black-headed Ibis
Blue-faced Malkoha	Spot-billed Pelican

Greater Coucal  
Rose-ringed Parakeet  
Plum-headed Parakeet  
Alexandrine Parakeet  
Indian Swiftlet  
Crested Tree Swift  
Asian Palm Swift  
Little Swift  
Collared Scops Owl  
Brown Fish Owl  
Green Imperial Pigeon  
Spotted Dove  
Orange-breasted Green Pigeon  
\*Ceylon Green Pigeon  
White-breasted Waterhen  
Purple Swamphen  
Common Sandpiper  
Black-winged Stilt  
Pheasant-tailed Jacana  
Yellow-wattled Lapwing  
Red-wattled Lapwing  
Pomarine Skua  
Arctic Skua  
Great Crested Tern  
Lesser Crested Tern  
Common Tern  
Little Tern  
Whiskered Tern  
White-winged Tern  
Bridled Tern  
Black-shouldered Kite  
Brahminy Kite  
White-bellied Sea Eagle  
Grey-headed Sea Eagle

Painted Stork  
Openbill Stork  
Woolly-necked Stork  
Lesser Adjutant  
Wedge-tailed Shearwater  
Sooty Shearwater  
Streaked Shearwater  
Persian Shearwater  
Brown Shrike  
House Crow  
Jungle Crow  
Black-hooded Oriole  
White-bellied Drongo  
Small Minivet  
Orange Minivet  
White-rumped Shama  
Oriental Magpie Robin  
Indian Robin  
\*Hill Myna  
Common Myna  
Barn Swallow  
\*Ceylon Swallow  
Red-vented Bulbul  
Plain Prinia  
Ashy Prinia  
Yellow-billed Babbler  
Rufous-winged Bushlark  
Legge's Flowerpecker  
Purple Sunbird  
Yellow Wagtail  
Forest Wagtail  
House Sparrow  
Paddyfield Pipit  
Scaly-breasted Munia

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*Blue Whale off the Sri Lankan coast* ▲



*Dragonfly, Hiyare* ▲



*Galle Fort* ▲



*Intrepid explorers* ▲



▲ *Heading off in search of whales*