

SRI LANKA

WHALES AND ELEPHANTS

Trip Summary



Blue Whale

MEETINGS WITH GIANTS

Sri Lanka, 26 March to 6 April 2009

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Day 1. Thursday 26 March 2009

Assembled at the magnificent Mount Lavinia Hotel, meeting for sunset drinks on the pool terrace. Very nice too, although a well-timed rain shower sent us scurrying for cover, conveniently close to the buffet dinner. Ajanthan and Paramie from our ground agents joined us, and chatted about the country and what we hoped to see.

Day 2. Friday 27 March (Colombo to Embilipitya)

After a leisurely buffet breakfast we met at the foyer, where we were entertained by the various Sri Lankan wedding parties, some in traditional Kandyan costumes, passing through. Our coach, and excellent naturalist guide Hetti arrived punctually, and we were off. The journey to Embilipitya was enlivened by the numerous Buddhist shrines, temples and Bo trees we passed; the variety of tropical trees, including durian and rambutan, rubber, tea and kapok; farmers with hand tractors in the paddy fields, closely followed by small flocks birds, including **Little Egret**, **Cattle Egret** and one **Openbill Stork**.



< *Mount Lavinia Hotel*

v *Elephants at Udawalawe*



After lunch at the 'Tropical Paradise' near Ratnapura (with **Red-vented Bulbuls** in the bushes) it was not long before we were checking into the Centauria Hotel at Embilipitya. A late afternoon walk in the gardens produced a wonderful diversity of birds, including a roosting **Collared Scops Owl**, delightful **Purple-rumped Sunbirds**, and a distant **White-bellied Sea Eagle**. But the most impressive of all were the 18+ **Malabar Hornbills**, which whooshed in to roost in the nearby trees. A swim for some was followed by dinner, and an early night for most.

Day 3. Saturday 28 March (at Udawalawe)

We enjoyed two excursions by jeep into Udawalawe National Park today. The morning game drive was superb, with plenty of **Elephants**, plus **Spotted Deer** and a glimpse of a **Jackal**. Under the bright blue sky the park sparkled, and the many birds were a delight. Raptors were, as usual, present in good numbers, with superb sightings of **Crested Serpent Eagle**, **Changeable Hawk Eagle** and **Black-shouldered Kite**, as well as **Brahminy Kite**, **White-bellied Sea Eagle**, **Grey-headed Fish Eagle** and **Common Kestrel**, not to mention the **Barn Owl** dozing in the main park centre. Other avian highlights included the endemic **Sri Lankan Junglefowl**, plus gorgeous **Bee-eaters (Green, Blue-tailed and Chestnut-headed)**, **Indian Roller** and **Orange-breasted Green Pigeon**.

Our afternoon game drive started well. There were plenty of good birds on show again, plus sightings of **Elephant**, **Grey Mongoose**, **Toque Macaque**, **Grey Langur**, **Spotted Deer** and **Soft-shelled Terrapin**. But the clouds that had been gathering got darker and darker, and then, just as we had turned back, the most almighty storm broke. So we rushed back to base, enjoying the tropical rainstorm, and wondering whether the steel bars holding the canvas covers over the back on our vehicles were more likely to behave as a Faraday cage or a lightning conductor!



^ *Preying Mantis*
Green Bee-eater >



Day 4. Sunday 29 March (Embilipitiya to Galle)

Our departure from the Centauria Hotel was only slightly delayed by the appearance of a **praying mantis** on my room door, requiring cameras to be deployed. Then we were off, first heading south at a leisurely pace, past paddy fields being harvested and then wetlands alive with birds. Aside from bird stops, there were plenty of other halts: for drinks overlooking the beach just outside Tangalle; at the British-built Dondra Head Lighthouse (which we were allowed to climb for superb views from the top); to visit the pop-art Weherehena Temple with its giant Buddha statue; and for a late lunch snack at Matara. Finally we reached Galle and arrived at the Lighthouse

Hotel with its splendid entrance, the magnificent spiral staircase with metalwork sculptures leading up to veranda overlooking the Indian Ocean.

Day 5. Monday 30 March (whale watching)

We had six days of whale-watching, with boat trips out every morning, leaving the hotel sometime after 0600 and returning to the hotel in the early afternoon. Our first day started well, albeit rather slowly, with views of two **Blue Whales** (there may have been more present, but they were moving and diving erratically and difficult to count with certainty). It was a hot morning, and we did not get back to Galle until well after lunchtime, so we were all glad of a relaxing afternoon at the hotel.

Day 6. Tuesday 31 March (whale watching)

Our first couple of **Blue Whale** sightings were rather fleeting. But then everything came good, when one Blue gave us some superb sightings. At one point it swam right alongside our boat, and turned behind the stern where showing its glorious glowing blue underwater colouration, from which the species gets its name. This afternoon we visited Galle Fort, a World Heritage Site. We began our tour at the old Dutch Reform Church, with its gruesome tombstones. The Dutch VOC emblem on the inside of the fort gateway, was another reminder of the origins of the walled town. A walk through the old town to the Lighthouse, then along the ramparts led us to the diving rock where local lads risk their necks (quite literally) diving for money.

Day 7. Wednesday 1 April (whale watching)

A slow morning's whale watching, with no big whales at all (an unwelcome first for me!). But there were some wonderful dolphins, with two groups of **Spinner Dolphins** and one of **Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphins**, the latter nearshore as we returned to harbour. Also nearshore we saw several **Whiskered Terns**, and soaring over the coast a **White-bellied Sea Eagle**. In the afternoon we visited Hiyare rainforest reserve, which lived up to its name with some rain as we arrived. But it a delightfully atmospheric location, and it was a pleasure to walk through the trees and by the reservoir. Birds included **Emerald Dove**, **Ceylon Green Pigeon** and **Black Bulbul**. We also had close views of captive Indian Scops Owl and Hog Deer (all abandoned youngsters being raised at the centre).

Day 8. Thursday 2 April (whale watching)

A superb day's whale watching. Our first sighting was of a school of **Spotted Dolphins**. But then the skipper received a call, reporting **Blue Whales** about 5 miles west of us. So off we went. In the distance another school of dolphins leapt energetically. And we were also distracted by a **Bryde's Whale** which suddenly appeared in front of us. After spending some time with the obliging Blue Whale we started to move off, and discovered a passing pod of six **Sperm Whales**. We were able to spend plenty of time with them as they moved slowly eastward, before we ourselves had to turn in towards harbour. We had been joined today by Anoma Wijewardene, and on the way back to Galle we dropped her off and looked around the magnificent seafront villa where she was staying. That left time in the late afternoon for a walk around Kurulu-bedda mangrove near the hotel. **Great Coucal** and **White-breasted Waterhen** were both particularly noisy, but the highlights were the **Purple-faced Leaf Monkeys** and an astonishingly red-headed **Garden Lizard**.



Sperm Whales

Day 9. Friday 3 April (whale watching)

Another good day for **Blue Whales**, with three swimming and surfacing around us at one point. An additional highlight was a **Red-billed Tropicbird**, which was a nice addition to the usual terns. By now we were all feeling rather tired, so a leisurely afternoon at the hotel was most welcome.

Day 10. Saturday 4 April (whale watching)

Our final day of whale-watching, and our best so far. We started with an active school of **Spinner Dolphins**, and then moved on to an area with at least four **Blue Whales**. Three of these were repeatedly diving (and presumably feeding) in one small area, giving us numerous great views. One, recognised by its distinctively damaged dorsal fin, was an individual we had seen yesterday. On the way back in to Mirissa Harbour for the last time, the boat stopped so those in the mood could have a refreshing dip in the ocean. But before that we had a nice view of a **Green Turtle**. This was also a good day for birds, with the largest numbers of seabirds so far. I counted some 225 **Bridled Terns**, 75 **White-winged Black Terns**, 3 **Great Crested Terns**, 10 **Little Terns** and 2 **Saunders Terns**, plus some additional unidentified terns. Back at the hotel, in the evening, we all enjoyed a superb farewell buffet dinner.

Day 11. Sunday 5 April (Galle to Negombo)

After a leisurely buffet breakfast, it was time to say goodbye to the extraordinary Lighthouse Hotel and head back north. For most people this was the last night in Sri Lanka, at the Beach Hotel in Negombo.

Day 12. Monday 6 April (Negombo)

Flights home.

Whale and Dolphin Summary

We had a total of 16 Blue Whale encounters, with a total of 19 animals, and sightings on 5 of our 6 days. Not a 100% record, but not at all bad. We also had sightings of two other big whale species (Bryde's and Sperm) and four species of dolphin.

| Species | | Sightings | Individuals |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Blue Whale | <i>Balaenoptera musculus</i> | 16 | 19 |
| Bryde's Whale | <i>Balaenoptera edeni</i> | 1 | 1 |
| Sperm Whale | <i>Physeter macrocephalus</i> | 1 | 6 |
| Spinner Dolphin | <i>Stenella longirostris</i> | 4 | 220 |
| Spotted Dolphin | <i>Stenella attenuata</i> | 1 | 40+ |
| Striped Dolphin | <i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i> | 1 | 6+ |
| Indo-pacific Bottlenose | <i>Tursiops aduncus</i> | 1 | 12 |
| Unidentified Dolphin | | 1 | 20+ |
| Total | | 26 | 324+ |

Birds and Other Wildlife

The main purpose of our holiday was to see Blue 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. On land, Udawalawe, and our hotel gardens nearby, were particularly productive. I recorded over 70 species there alone. In total I recorded 98 species, of which two were Sri Lankan endemics (*).

| | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Barred Buttonquail | Grey-headed Sea Eagle |
| *Sri Lanka Junglefowl | Crested Serpent Eagle |
| Peacock | Shikra |
| Lesser Whistling-duck | Changeable Hawk Eagle |
| Common Flameback | Common Kestrel |
| Brown-headed Barbet | Little Grebe |
| Coppersmith Barbet | Red-billed Tropicbird |
| Malabar Pied Hombill | Darter |
| Indian Roller | Little Cormorant |
| Common Kingfisher | Little Egret |
| Stork-billed Kingfisher | Great Egret |
| White-breasted Kingfisher | Intermediate Egret |
| Pied Kingfisher | Cattle Egret |
| Green Bee-eater | Indian Pond Heron (Paddybird) |
| Blue-tailed Bee-eater | Grey Heron |
| Chestnut-headed Bee-eater | Little Heron |
| Asian Koel | Black-crowned Night Heron |
| Greater Coucal | Black-headed Ibis |
| Rose-ringed Parakeet | Spot-billed Pelican |
| Indian Swiftlet | Painted Stork |
| Asian Palm Swift | Openbill Stork |
| Little Swift | Woolly-necked Stork |
| Barn Owl | Brown Shrike |
| Collared Scops Owl | House Crow |

Indian Scops Owl (captive)
Green Imperial Pigeon
Spotted Dove
Orange-breasted Green Pigeon
Emerald Dove
Ceylon Green Pigeon
White-breasted Waterhen
Purple Swamphen
Marsh Sandpiper
Greenshank
Common Sandpiper
Wood or Green Sandpiper
Black-winged Stilt
Pheasant-tailed Jacana
Yellow-wattled Lapwing
Red-wattled Lapwing
Great Crested Tern
Common Tern
Little Tern
Saundersø Tern
Whiskered Tern
White-winged Tern
Bridled Tern
Black-shouldered Kite
Brahminy Kite
White-bellied Sea Eagle

Jungle Crow
Black-hooded Oriole
White-bellied Drongo
Small Minivet
White-browed Fantail
Asian Paradise Flycatcher
Indian Robin
Common Myna
Barn Swallow
*Ceylon Swallow
Black Bulbul
Red-vented Bulbul
White-browed Bulbul
Plain Prinia
Ashy Prinia
Yellow-eyed Babbler
Yellow-billed Babbler
Rufous-winged Bushlark
Pale-billed Flowerpecker
Purple-rumped Sunbird
Purple Sunbird
House Sparrow
Paddyfield Pipit
Baya Weaver (nest)
Scaly-breasted Munia

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Blue Whale off the Sri Lankan coast ▲

Toque Macaque ▼



At Galle lighthouse ▲



▲ *Openbill Stork*