Sri Lanka – Blue Whales & Leopards with Sinharaja Extension

Naturetrek Tour Report

23 December 2017- 4 January 2018





Blue Whale

Risso's Dolphin





Indian (Collared) Scops Owl

Report & images compiled by Mukesh Hirdaramani



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Highlights/Summary

This report covers the 10-day Sri Lanka – Blue Whales & Leopards tour, together with the Sinharaja Extension.

Our Blue Whale search at Mirissa was very successful with six sightings on the first day, followed by four and over 10 on the second and third days. Over the previous week a pair of Blue Whales had been seen feeding and socialising together, and we were fortunate to see these two Blue Whales (probably a male and a female) very close to our boat. On Day 3 we were able to identify a few Risso's Dolphins and False Killer Whales amongst a scattered pod of Spinner Dolphins. A mixed pod that yields three different species is always an exciting find and everyone was delighted with this sighting.

Black, Cinnamon and Yellow Bitterns were all sighted on our bird walks, along with many other bird species. A Sloth Bear with her two cubs surprised us during our safari, and an Elephant and a Tusker fought aggressively in a reservoir, almost drowning each other. Our best Leopard sighting came at the end of one day, with her walking close to our jeep and then going to an open field. She was seen playfully pouncing on leaves and twigs before scent-marking her surroundings. On our drive back from Lunugamvehera National Park we were met by another big Tusker on the middle of the road and had to wait until it decided to move back in to the jungle!

Overall we saw 24 mammal species, 13 species of reptiles and amphibians, and 168 bird species to conclude a very successful tour.

Day 1

Saturday 23rd December

The tour started with an overnight flight from the UK to Sri Lanka.

Day 2

Sunday 24th December

Arrive Colombo; travel to Weligama

Our flight arrived into Colombo at 12.35pm and, after meeting the three leaders, we set off to Weligama for our four-night stay at the cosy Fisherman's Bay Hotel. En route we enjoyed some fresh bananas, and drove to our destination via the Southern highway. On the way we had views of Indian Peafowl, Asian Openbill, Grey and Purple Herons, Cattle, Great, Intermediate and Little Egrets, Spot-billed Pelican, Little Cormorant, Crested Serpent Eagle, Changeable Hawk-Eagle, Brahminy Kite, Red-wattled Lapwing, Whiskered Tern, Rock Dove, Spotted Dove, Green Imperial Pigeon, White-throated Kingfisher, Blue-tailed Bee-eater, White-bellied Drongo, House Crow, Red-vented Bulbul and Scaly-breasted Munia, along with Purple-faced Leaf Monkey, Indian Palm Squirrel, Water Monitor, Oriental Garden Lizard and House Gecko.

We reached the Fisherman's Bay Resort at 5pm. Since it was Christmas Eve, the hotel had organised a few Christmas activities and a gala dinner. We did our checklist at 7pm and enjoyed a nice meal before calling it a night.

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Day 3

Monday 25th December

Weligama

Our morning whale-watching excursion to Mirissa was very successful with good sightings of six Blue Whales. Two Blue Whales swam together and many times strayed close to our boat, giving us good views. We returned to our hotel at 11.30am and had lunch at 12.30pm.

At 3pm we set out to Galle Fort and enjoyed a tour of the old Dutch fort and visited the prison cells, clock tower, Dutch Reformed Church and the old jetty. We were greeted by a troupe of Purple-faced Leaf Monkeys within the fort compound and spent most of the time enjoying views of them while birding. Sightings included Indian Pond Heron, Gull-billed Tern, Greater Crested Tern, Asian Koel, Indian Swiftlet, Brown-headed Barbet, Rose-ringed Parakeet, Brown Shrike, White-browed Bulbul, Barn Swallow, Yellow-billed Babbler and Indian Robin, along with Brown Mongoose and Indian Flying Fox.

We returned to the hotel at 6.30pm and did the checklist at 7.30pm, followed by dinner and a briefing for the next day.

Day 4

Tuesday 26th December

Weligama

Another morning whale-watching excursion began at 6.15am, and we saw many Spinner Dolphins and Blue Whales.

After lunch at the hotel we visited the Kirala Kele sanctuary and encountered Lesser Whistling Duck, Cotton Pygmy Goose, Little Grebe, Painted Stork, Eurasian Spoonbill, Yellow, Black and Cinnamon Bitterns, Indian Cormorant, Oriental Darter, White-breasted Waterhen, Black-winged Stilt, Pheasant-tailed Jacana, Black-tailed Godwit, Peregrine Falcon, Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot, Common Iora, Black-hooded Oriole, Indian Paradise Flycatcher, White-browed Bulbul, Sri Lanka Swallow, Green Warbler, Common Tailorbird, Grey-headed Swamphen, Brown-breasted Flycatcher and Purple-rumped Sunbird,

We were back at the hotel at 6.45pm and after doing the checklist, we had dinner and called it a night.

Day 5

Wednesday 27th December

Weligama

Today our whale-watching excursion yielded fantastic sightings of False Killer Whales and Risso's Dolphins, together with many Blue Whales. We returned very satisfied with our sightings. After lunch the group wanted to visit a turtle hatchery, so an optional activity was organised and we spent 45 minutes looking at rescued Loggerhead, Hawksbill, Green and Olive Ridley Turtles. As we were heading back to the hotel it started to rain heavily.

Our usual checklist and dinner continued from 7pm onwards.

Day 6

Thursday 28th December

Yala

After breakfast we checked out of the hotel at 8.30am and proceeded to Yala. En route we visited Tissamaharama wetlands and were able to see Jungle Owlet and Collared Scops Owl at roost. We reached Cinnamon Wild Yala at 2.30pm and had lunch.

At 4pm we set out for a walk around the hotel gardens and encountered Common Moorhen, Yellow-wattled Lapwing, Lesser Sand Plover, Common Redshank, Common Sandpiper, Asian Palm Swift, Little Green Beeeater, Chestnut-headed Bee-eater, Indian Pitta, Small Minivet, Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark, Asian Brown Flycatcher, Purple Sunbird, Paddyfield Pipit and Blyth's Pipit, along with Toque Macaque, Grey Mongoose, Wild Boar, Black-naped Hare and Mugger Crocodile.

We returned to the hotel at 6pm, did the checklist and had dinner.

Day 7

Friday 29th December

Yala

We had tea/coffee at 5am and left the hotel at 5.30am with our packed meals. Yala National Park was crowded due to the holiday traffic and we had a slow morning session. Before lunch we had good sightings of Asian Elephant, Wild Boar, Water Buffalo, Ruddy Mongoose, Grey Mongoose, Grey Langur, Toque Macaque, Spotted Deer, Sambar Deer, Black-naped Hare, and a wonderful sighting of a Sloth Bear with three cubs.

During our afternoon session we came across a Leopard, although it was at a great distance and lasted just a few seconds. Our bird sightings for the day included Great Cormorant, Shikra, Grey-headed Fish Eagle, Great Stone-curlew, Common Ringed, Little Ringed and Kentish Plovers, Marsh and Wood Sandpipers, Little Stint, Orange-breasted Green Pigeon, Sri Lanka Green Pigeon, Blue-faced Malkoha, Grey-bellied Cuckoo, Brown Fish Owl, Indian Roller, Eurasian Hoopoe, Malabar Pied Hornbill, Coppersmith Barbet, Sri Lanka Woodshrike, Jerdon's Bush Lark, Grey-breasted, Jungle, Ashy and Plain Prinias, Streaked and Baya Weavers and Tricolored Munia.

We returned to the hotel at 6.30pm and did our checklist at 7.30pm, followed by the briefing and dinner.

Day 8

Saturday 30th December

Lunugamvehera

We had tea/coffee at 5am and then left the hotel at 5.15am with packed breakfast and lunch. We reached Lunugamvehera National Park by 6.30am and our first sighting for the day was a big Asian Elephant, who stood in the main road causing a traffic jam. Another Elephant was sighted as we entered the park. Our next sighting was a Crested Serpent Eagle which had half swallowed a Green Vine Snake. We stopped for breakfast at 9am overlooking the water channel from the Lunugamvehera Reservoir. Many White-bellied Sea Eagles and Brahminy Kites hovered over us, as Torque Macaques sat up in the trees looking at our food.

The rest of the day continued in the pursuit of Leopard and birds. The rotting smell of a Leopard kill was attracting many jeeps to a possible sighting, yet the wait was fruitless. We followed a new track hoping to find

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another Leopard. Before long we were right in front of a female Leopard, which put up a good show for us when she decided to playfully pounce on a few leaves and twigs. We had very good views of her for about 20 minutes before she disappeared into the jungle.

On our way back from the park we encountered a big Tusker on the road, and another young Elephant which managed to slow down the vehicles. Our other sightings included Muntjac, Grizzled Giant Squirrel, Common Skink, Buff-striped Keelback Snake, Sri Lanka Junglefowl, Barred Buttonquail, Common Greenshank, Greater Coucal, Sirkeer Malkoha, Common Hawk-Cuckoo, Crested Treeswift, Common Kingfisher, Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill, Plum-headed Parakeet, Alexandrine Parakeet, Yellow-browed Bulbul, Yellow-eyed Babbler, White-rumped Shama, White-rumped Munia and Forest Wagtail,

As it was late when we got back to the hotel, we went straight for dinner and didn't do the checklist. A few stayed back after dinner and were able to see a Common Palm Civet.

Main Tour Day 9; Extension Day 1

Sunday 31st December

Katunayake (Main Tour); Sinharaja (Extension)

We had breakfast at 8am and did the checklist at 8.45am before checking out of the hotel at 9.15am. We reached the Silver Ray restaurant at 1pm and had our final group lunch. Three group members then set off to Sinharaja for their extension, while the remaining nine set off to Katunayake for their final night stay at the Airport Garden Hotel.

The Extension party reached the Blue Magpie Lodge at 4pm. Whilst birding around the lodge, sightings included Greater Coucal, Layard's Parakeet, Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot, Sri Lanka Green Pigeon, Black Bulbul and Purplefaced Leaf Monkey.

Main Tour Day 10; Extension Day 2

Monday 1st January

Return to UK (Main Tour); Sinharaja (Extension)

After breakfast the Main Tour group checked out of their hotel and proceeded to the airport in time for a return flight to the UK, where their Naturetrek adventure came to an end.

The Extension party left their hotel at 6am with packed breakfast and lunch. At the Sinharaja Rainforest ticket counter we saw a Green Pit Viper, before setting off in our jeep to the forest entrance. En route we saw Sri Lanka Green Pigeon, Orange Minivet, Yellow-fronted Barbet, White-bellied Drongo, Layard's Parakeet, Legge's Flowerpecker, Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot, Sri Lanka Myna, Black-capped Bulbul, Green Imperial Pigeon, Chestnut-backed Owlet, White-throated Kingfisher, Brown-breasted Flycatcher, Thick-billed Flowerpecker, Purple Sunbird, Green Forest Lizard and Purple-faced Leaf Monkey. Today was unusually hot. We came across a mixed bird flock about 11am and had good sightings of Red-faced Malkoha, Malabar Trogon, Ashy-headed Laughingthrush, Sri Lanka Drongo, Orange-billed Babbler, Lesser Yellownape, Black-naped Monarch, Yellow-browed Bulbul and Sri Lanka Blue Magpie.

After lunch we went in search of Serendib Scops Owl and Sri Lanka Frogmouth, and saw both at their roosts. We returned to the hotel at 4pm and did the checklist at 7pm, before calling it a night.

Extension Day 3

Tuesday 2nd January

Sinharaja

We had a pre-breakfast birding session around the Sinharaja Rainforest buffer zone and encountered Sri Lanka Spurfowl, Scimitar Babbler, Spot-winged Thrush, Emerald Dove, Slaty-legged Crake and Dark-fronted Babbler.

We returned to the hotel for some tea and then went back into the Sinharaja Rainforest. We encountered Black Eagle, Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, Crimson-backed Flameback and Dusky-striped Squirrel, along with many other birds seen before.

We returned to the hotel at 4.30pm and the rest of the evening was at leisure, followed by the checklist and dinner.

Extension Day 4

Wednesday 3rd January

Katunayake

We had a morning birding session around the Sinharaja village and encountered Green-billed Coucal, along with many other birds seen before.

We then left the hotel with a packed lunch and reached Colombo at 3pm for a short tour of the city. After visiting Colombo, we drove to the Gateway Airport Garden Hotel, arriving at 4.30pm. We did a small bird walk around the hotel garden and saw Crimson-fronted Barbet.

The checklist for the day was completed by 6pm and we met for dinner at 7pm.

Extension Day 5

Thursday 4th January

Return flights

We checked out of the hotel and travelled to the airport in time for our return flights home.

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Species Lists (Endemic species in bold; some previous/alternative names in brackets)

Mammals

Common name Scientific name 1 Toque Macaque Macaca sinica 2 Semnopithecus entellus **Grey Langur** 3 Trachypithecus vetulus Purple-faced Leaf Monkey 4 Sloth Bear Melursus ursinus 5 Common Palm Civet Paradoxurus hermaphroitus 6 Grey Mongoose Herpestes edwardsii 7 Ruddy Mongoose Herpestes smithii 8 **Brown Mongoose** Herpestes fuscus 9 Leopard Panthera pardus kotiya 10 Asian Elephant Elephas maximus 11 Wild Boar Sus scrofa 12 Muntjac Muntiacus muntjac 13 Spotted Deer Cervus axis 14 Sambar Cervus unicolor 15 Water Buffalo Bubalus Bubalis 16 Indian Palm Squirrel Funambulus palmarum 17 **Grizzled Giant Squirrel** Ratufa macroura **Dusky Striped Squirrel** 18 Funambulus sublineatus 19 Indian (Black-naped) Hare Lepus nigricollis 20 Indian Flying Fox Pteropus gigantea 21 Blue Whale Balaenoptera musculus Spinner Dolphin Stenella mulla 22

Birds

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Risso's Dolphin

False Killer Whale

Common name	Scientific name

Grampus griseus

Pseudorca crassidens

1	Lesser Whistling Duck	Dendrocygna javanica	
2	Cotton Pygmy Goose	Nettapus coromandelianus	
3	Garganey	Anas querquedula	
4	Sri Lanka Spurfowl	Galloperdix bicalcarata	
5	Sri Lanka Junglefowl	Gallus lafayettii	
6	Indian Peafowl	Pavo cristatus	
7	Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis	
8	Painted Stork	Mycteria leucocephala	
9	Asian Openbill	Anastomus oscitans	
10	Black-headed Ibis	Threskiornis melanocephalus	
11	Eurasian Spoonbill	Platalea leucorodia	
12	Yellow Bittern	Ixobrychus sinensis	
13	Cinnamon Bittern	Ixobrychus cinnamomeus	
14	Black Bittern	Dupetor flavicollis	
15	Black-crowned Night Heron	Nycticorax nycticorax	
16	Striated Heron	Butorides striata	
17	Indian Pond Heron	Ardeola grayii	
18	Eastern Cattle Egret	Bubulcus coromandus	
19	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	
20	Purple Heron	Ardea purpurea	
21	Great Egret	Ardea alba	

Scientific name

Common name

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73 74 Asian Koel

72 Common Hawk-Cuckoo

Serendib Scops Owl

Grey-bellied Cuckoo (Plaintive Cuckoo)

Indian Scops Owl (Collared Scops Owl)

22 Intermediate Egret Egretta intermedia 23 Little Egret Egretta garzetta 24 Spot-billed Pelican Pelecanus philippensis 25 Little Cormorant Microcarbo niger 26 Indian Cormorant Phalacrocorax fuscicollis 27 **Great Cormorant** Phalacrocorax carbo 28 Oriental Darter (Darter) Anhinga melanogaster 29 Crested Serpent Eagle Spilornis cheela 30 Changeable Hawk-Eagle Nisaetus cirrhatus Black Eagle 31 Ictinaetus malaiensis 32 Shikra Accipiter badius 33 Brahminy Kite Haliastur indus 34 White-bellied Sea Eagle Haliaeetus leucogaster Grey-headed Fish Eagle Haliaeetus ichthyaetus 35 36 Slaty-legged Crake Rallina eurizonoides White-breasted Waterhen 37 Amaurornis phoenicurus Gallinula chloropus 38 Common Moorhen 39 Barred Buttonquail Turnix suscitator 40 Great Stone-Curlew (Great Thick Knee) Esacus recurvirostris 41 Black-winged Stilt Himantopus himantopus Vanellus malabaricus 42 Yellow-wattled Lapwing Vanellus indicus 43 Red-wattled Lapwing Charadrius hiaticula 44 Common Ringed Plover Charadrius dubius 45 Little Ringed Plover Charadrius alexandrinus 46 Kentish Plover 47 Lesser Sand Plover (Mongolian Plover) Charadrius mongolus 48 Pheasant-tailed Jacana Hydrophasianus chirurgus 49 Black-tailed Godwit Limosa limosa 50 Common Redshank Tringa totanus Tringa stagnatilis 51 Marsh Sandpiper Tringa nebularia 52 Common Greenshank Tringa glareola 53 Wood Sandpiper Actitis hypoleucos 54 Common Sandpiper Little Stint Calidris minuta 55 56 Gull-billed Tern Gelochelidon nilotica Thalasseus bergii 57 **Greater Crested Tern** 58 Whiskered Tern Chlidonias hybrida 59 Rock Dove (Common Pigeon) Columba livia Spilopelia chinensis 60 Spotted Dove 61 Common Emerald Dove (Emerald Dove) Chalcophaps indica 62 Orange-breasted Green Pigeon Treron bicinctus Sri Lanka Green Pigeon Treron pompadora 64 Green Imperial Pigeon Ducula aenea **Green-billed Coucal** Centropus chlororhynchos 65 66 **Greater Coucal** Centropus sinensis 67 Sirkeer Malkoha Taccocua leschenaultii 68 Red-faced Malkoha Phaenicophaeus pyrrhocephalus 69 Blue-faced Malkoha Phaenicophaeus viridirostris

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Eudynamys scolopaceus

Cacomantis passerinus

Hierococcyx varius

Otus thilohoffmanni

Otus bakkamoena

Common name Scientific name

	Common name	Scientific name
75	Brown Fish Owl	Ketupa zeylonensis
76	Jungle Owlet	Glaucidium radiatum
77	Chestnut backed Owlet	Glaucidium castanotum
78	Sri Lanka Frogmouth	Batrachostomus moniliger
79	Crested Treeswift (Gray-rumped Treeswift)	Hemiprocne coronata
80	Indian Swiftlet	Aerodramus unicolor
81	Asian Palm Swift	Cypsiurus balasiensis
82	Malabar Trogon	Harpactes fasciatus
83	Indian Roller	Coracias benghalensis
84	Stork-billed Kingfisher	Pelargopsis capensis
85	White-throated Kingfisher	Halcyon smyrnensis
86	Common Kingfisher	Alcedo atthis
87	Pied Kingfisher	Ceryle rudis
88	Green Bee-eater (Little Green Bee-eater)	Merops orientalis
89	Blue-tailed Bee-eater	Merops philippinus
90	Chestnut-headed Bee-eater	Merops leschenaulti
91	Eurasian Hoopoe (Common Hoopoe)	Upupa epops
92	Malabar Pied Hornbill	Anthracoceros coronatus
93	Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill	Ocyceros gingalensis
94	Brown-headed Barbet	Psilopogon zeylanicus
95	Yellow-fronted Barbet	Psilopogon flavifrons
96	Crimson-fronted Barbet	Psilopogon rubricapillus
97	Coppersmith Barbet	Psilopogon haemacephalus
98	Lesser Yellownape	Picus chlorolophus
99	Black-rumped Flameback (Lesser Goldenback)	Dinopium benghalense
100	Crimson-backed Flameback (Crimson-backed Goldenback)	Chrysocolaptes stricklandi
101	Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus
102	Plum-headed Parakeet	Psittacula cyanocephala
103	Layard's Parakeet	Psittacula calthrapae
104	Alexandrine Parakeet	Psittacula eupatria
105	Rose-ringed Parakeet	Psittacula krameri
106	Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot	Loriculus beryllinus
107	Indian Pitta	Pitta brachyura
108	Sri Lanka Woodshrike	Tephrodornis affinis
109	Common Iora	Aegithina tiphia
110	Small Minivet	Pericrocotus cinnamomeus
111	Orange Minivet (Scarlet/Flame Minivet)	Pericrocotus flammeus
112	Brown Shrike	Lanius cristatus
113	Black-hooded Oriole	Oriolus xanthornus
114	White-bellied Drongo	Dicrurus caerulescens
115	Sri Lanka Drongo (Sri Lanka Crested Drongo)	Dicrurus lophorinus
116	Black-naped Monarch	Hypothymis azurea
117	Indian Paradise Flycatcher (Asian Paradise Flycatcher)	Terpsiphone paradisi
118	Sri Lanka Blue Magpie	Urocissa ornata
119	House Crow	Corvus splendens
120	Indian Jungle Crow (Large-billed Crow)	Corvus culminatus
121	Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark	Eremopterix griseus
122	Jerdon's Bush Lark	Mirafra affinis
123	Black-capped Bulbul	Pycnonotus melanicterus
124	Red-vented Bulbul	Pycnonotus cafer
125	White-browed Bulbul	Pycnonotus luteolus
126	Yellow-browed Bulbul	Acritillas indica
127	Black Bulbul	Hypsipetes leucocephalus

Common name Scientific name

128 Barn Swallow Hirundo rustica Sri Lanka Swallow 129 Cecropis hyperythra 130 Phylloscopus nitidus Green Warbler 131 Grey-breasted Prinia Prinia hodgsonii 132 Jungle Prinia Prinia sylvatica 133 Ashy Prinia Prinia socialis 134 Plain Prinia Prinia inornata 135 Common Tailorbird Orthotomus sutorius 136 Sri Lanka Scimitar Babbler Pomatorhinus melanurus 137 Grey-headed Swamphen (Purple Swamphen) Porphyrio poliocephalus 138 Dark-fronted Babbler Rhopocichla atriceps 139 Turdoides rufescens **Orange-billed Babbler** 140 Yellow-billed Babbler Turdoides affinis Garrulax cinereifrons 141 Ashy-headed Laughingthrush 142 Yellow-eyed Babbler Chrysomma sinense 143 Oriental White-Eye Zosterops palpebrosus Sitta frontalis 144 Velvet-fronted Nuthatch 145 Sri Lanka Hill Myna (Sri Lanka Myna) Gracula ptilogenys 146 Acridotheres tristis Common Myna 147 **Spot-winged Thrush** Geokichla spiloptera Indian Robin Copsychus fulicatus 148 Copsychus saularis 149 Oriental Magpie-Robin 150 White-rumped Shama Copsychus malabaricus 151 Asian Brown Flycatcher Muscicapa dauurica 152 Brown-breasted Flycatcher Muscicapa muttui 153 Tickell's Blue Flycatcher Cyornis tickelliae 154 Jerdon's Leafbird Chloropsis jerdoni 155 Legge's Flowerpecker (White-throated Flowerpecker) Dicaeum vincens 156 Pale-billed Flowerpecker Dicaeum erythrorhynchos Nectarinia zeylonica 157 Purple-rumped Sunbird 158 Purple Sunbird Cinnyris asiaticus Cinnyris lotenius 159 Loten's Sunbird Passer domesticus 160 House Sparrow 161 Streaked Weaver Ploceus manyar 162 Baya Weaver Ploceus philippinus Lonchura striata 163 White-rumped Munia 164 Lonchura punctulata Scaly-breasted Munia Lonchura malacca 165 Tricolored Munia (Black-headed Munia) 166 Forest Wagtail Dendronanthus indicus 167 Paddyfield Pipit Anthus rufulus 168 Blyth's Pipit Anthus godlewskii

Reptiles & Amphibians

Common name Scientific name

1 Sri Lanka Green Pit Viper Trimeresurus trigonocephalus 2 Ahaetulla nasuta Green Vine Snake 3 Bengal (Land) Monitor Varanus bengalensis 4 Asian Water Monitor Varanus salvator 5 Oriental (Common) Garden Lizard Calotes versicolor 6 Green Garden Lizard Calotes calotes Sri Lanka Kangaroo Lizard Otocryptis wiegmanni 8 Lyriocephalus scutatus **Hump-nosed Lizard**

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- 9 Mugger Crocodile
- 10 Green Turtle
- 11 Common House Gecko
- 12 Common Skink
- 13 Buff-striped Keelback Snake

Crocodylus palustris Chelonia mydas Hemidactylus frenatus Eutropis carinata Amphiesma stolatum