

Sri Lanka – Blue Whales & Leopards

Naturetrek Tour Report

3 - 12 March 2018



Blue Whale



Asian Water Monitor



Leopard



Sloth Bear

Report & images compiled by Mukesh Hirdaramani



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Mukesh Hirdaramani (leader) with six Naturetrek clients

Highlights/Summary

It's not often that a Blue Whale and her calf are sighted, and we were in the right place at the right time to experience the interaction of mother and calf during our first day of whale watching. Sightings kept getting better each day as more close encounters with Blue Whales were experienced, and on the second day we saw up to 12 different Blue Whales all around our boat.

Moving towards Yala, we visited a few owl roosts and came across Brown Fish Owl, Collared Scops Owl and Jungle Owlet. The very rare Black-necked Stork was sighted in Yala, and a close encounter with a curious Sloth Bear was the highlight of the morning safari session. It walked right up to our jeep and gently lifted its head up as if to say "hi" before continuing its journey. The day kept getting better as a lazy Leopard slept under a bush just a few metres from our jeep. We saw it rolling around, cleaning itself and occasionally sitting up to scan its surrounding. Towards the evening another young Leopard was sighted trying to improve its hunting skills by chasing Spotted Deer around a water hole. It tired soon and then climbed up a tree and relaxed, giving us some the best views of a Leopard anyone could want.

From encounters with huge Asian Elephants to small Indian Gerbils, it was a successful tour with sightings of 19 mammal species, nine of reptiles and amphibians, and 141 bird species to conclude another successful tour.

Day 1

Saturday 3rd March

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

Day 2

Sunday 4th March

Arrive Colombo; travel to Weligama

Upon arrival at Katunayake Airport, group members were met by Mukesh and we drove, via the southern highway, to our hotel in Weligama. En route we enjoyed some fresh bananas and had a cup of tea. During our drive sightings included Indian Palm Squirrel, Indian Flying Fox, Bengal Monitor and Oriental Garden Lizard, along with Indian Peafowl, Black-headed Ibis, Indian Pond Heron, Great Egret, Spot-billed Pelican, Brahminy Kite, White-bellied Sea Eagle, Red-wattled Lapwing, Greater Crested Tern, Whiskered Tern, Spotted Dove, Green Imperial Pigeon, White-throated Kingfisher, Common Kingfisher, Blue-tailed Bee-eater, Rose-ringed Parakeet, Black-hooded Oriole, White-bellied Drongo, House Crow, Red-vented Bulbul, Barn Swallow, Sri Lanka Swallow, Common Tailorbird, Yellow-billed Babbler and Common Myna.

We reached the Fisherman's Bay Resort at 5.30pm, did our checklist at 7pm and enjoyed a nice meal before calling it a night.

Day 3

Monday 5th March

Weligama

We left the hotel with a packed breakfast at 6.15am and reached Mirissa pier at 7am. Initially sightings were slow, with our first Blue Whale sighting at 10am. What was special and rare about this sighting was that it was of a mother and her calf, demonstrating different behaviour to that usually observed by these normally solitary animals. The mother stayed as close as possible to her calf as the young one curiously wondered off only to be brought back to the protective side of the mother. The calf stayed on the surface much longer, giving us good views of its rostrum and some shabby 'fluke up' dives.

We returned to the hotel at noon, had lunch and some time to relax. At 4pm we visited Weligama village and did some birding. We encountered a troupe of Purple-faced Leaf Monkeys, Spotted Tree Frog and Common House Gecko, along with Asian Openbill, Little Cormorant, Shikra, White-breasted Waterhen, Asian Koel, Asian Palm Swift, Brown-headed Barbet, Large-billed Crow, Blyth's Reed Warbler, Oriental White-eye, Indian Robin, Oriental Magpie-Robin, Asian Brown Flycatcher, Purple-rumped Sunbird, Loten's Sunbird and Scaly-breasted Munia.

We returned to the hotel at 6.30pm and did the checklist at 7.15pm, followed by dinner and a briefing for the next day.

Day 4

Tuesday 6th March

Weligama

Our second day of whale watching was very successful with over eight Blue Whales sighted. There were many close encounters and great photographic opportunities which were gladly taken. The weather was also very favourable for our activity today.

After lunch we visited a turtle conservation and hatchery centre where we were educated on the five species of turtle which visit Sri Lanka: Leatherback, Olive Ridley, Hawksbill, Green and Loggerhead Turtles. We then went to Galle Fort and enjoyed walking along the old city and learned about the great history and legacy of this over 400 year old fort.

We returned to the hotel at 7pm and did our checklist, followed by dinner. New sightings for the day included Green Turtle, Little Egret, Common Sandpiper, Gull-billed Tern and Whimbrel.

Day 5

Wednesday 7th March

Weligama

Once again we had some fantastic sightings of over six Blue Whales and returned very satisfied with our unforgettable encounters. We also had good sightings of Bridled Tern and the rare Pomarine Skua.

After lunch we relaxed at the hotel before setting off to visit the Kirala Kele sanctuary, where sightings included Common Rat Snake, Lesser Whistling Duck, Little Grebe, Painted Stork, Eurasian Spoonbill, Black Bittern, Purple Heron, Oriental Darter, Changeable Hawk Eagle, Black-winged Stilt, Pheasant-tailed Jacana, Common

Redshank, Sri Lanka Green Pigeon, Jacobin Cuckoo, Pied Kingfisher, Indian Paradise Flycatcher, Clamorous Reed Warbler, Zitting Cisticola, Plain Prinia and Purple Swamphen.

As we returned to the hotel we saw a Brown Mongoose in the hotel garden and had good views of it. Later we did our checklist and called it a night.

Day 6

Thursday 8th March

Yala

We checked out of the hotel after breakfast and proceeded to Yala. En route we stopped near the Bundala National Park and Debara Wewa tank, where we saw Yellow Bittern, Great Stone-curlew, Grey Plover, Little Ringed Plover, Lesser Sand Plover, Marsh and Wood Sandpipers, Little Stint, Black-headed Gull, Caspian Tern, Orange-breasted Green Pigeon, Collared Scops Owl, Brown Fish Owl, Jungle Owlet, Little Swift, Indian Roller, Green Bee-eater, Indian Pitta, White-browed Fantail, White-browed Bulbul, Purple Sunbird, House Sparrow and Western Wagtail.

We reached Cinnamon Wild Yala at 2pm and had our lunch. At 4pm we set out for a walk around the hotel garden and encountered Toque Macaque, Grey Langur, Grey Mongoose, Wild Boar, Black-naped Hare and Mugger Crocodile, along with many birds seen before.

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

Day 7

Friday 9th March

Lunugamvehera

We had tea/coffee at 5am and left the hotel at 5.15am with packed meals for our safari at Lunugamvehera National Park. It was a gloomy day and had rained the previous night, yet the birds were plentiful with Sri Lanka Junglefowl, Lesser Adjutant, Black-crowned Night Heron, Grey-headed Fish Eagle, Yellow-wattled Lapwing, Common Emerald Dove, Greater Coucal, Blue-faced Malkoha, Grey-bellied Cuckoo, Indian Nightjar, Crested Treeswift, Chestnut-headed Bee-eater, Eurasian Hoopoe, Malabar Pied Hornbill, Coppersmith Barbet, Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker, Black-rumped Flameback, Crimson-backed Flameback, Alexandrine Parakeet, Sri Lanka Woodshrike, Brown Shrike, Jerdon's Bush Lark, Black-capped Bulbul, Grey-breasted Prinia, Jungle Prinia, Brown-capped Babbler, White-rumped Shama, Brown-breasted Flycatcher, Forest Wagtail, Grey Wagtail and Paddyfield Pipit showing well. Spotted Deer, Water Buffalo and Grizzled Giant Squirrel were also sighted. We followed three alarm calls made by the Langurs and Spotted Deer but were not lucky enough to see a Leopard.

At 5pm it started to rain heavily and our visibility was drastically reduced, at which point we managed to see the outline of a few Asian Elephants enjoying the downpour. The rains continued until we left the park and en route the hotel we came across a huge Asian Elephant standing in the middle of the road, blocking our way. After a few minutes we managed to evade it and drive by, only to come across another elephant on the road!

Finally, after reaching Yala, we drove towards Cinnamon Wild Hotel, situated in the Yala National Park buffer zone, and came across Samba Deer and Ruddy Mongoose, along with many Black-naped Hares. We reached the hotel at 8pm and had our dinner before calling it a night.

Day 8

Saturday 10th March

Yala

The rains had continued throughout the night, but by 5am it had stopped and we set out to search for the Leopards of Yala National Park. Our first fantastic sighting of the day was of a Sloth Bear that was seen eating fruit from a shrub. After some time it decided to walk along the path, came up to our jeep and started sniffing the air. Later it calmly walked away, giving us some superb views.

By 8am we were in pursuit of a Leopard that had been sighted sleeping under a bush not ten metres away from the jeep path. We saw this beautiful animal stretched across the floor with its stomach up. It kept rolling around the ground as if to find a comfortable position to sleep in. We stayed with this Leopard for over 45 minutes before realising that it was not very interested in waking up anytime soon!

We had a heavy downpour at 12.30pm and were confined to our vehicle for more than an hour, but managed to finish our packed lunch during this time. At 2pm we set off again and encountered a pair of very rare Black-necked Storks at a water hole. Other sightings included Woolly-necked Stork, Intermediate Egret, Pacific Golden Plover, Kentish Plover, Common Greenshank, Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderling, Yellow-crowned Woodpecker, Common Iora, Black-headed Cuckooshrike, Small Minivet and Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark.

Around 4.30pm we got word that a Leopard and its two cubs had been sighted near a small water hole. We rushed to the spot to be greeted by a young Leopard which was resting on the ground. The Leopard then decided to chase and try and hunt some Spotted Deer which were around the area, but it wasn't able to catch any. Later we saw this Leopard resting on a tree branch just a few metres above our head, before we exited the park.

We returned to the hotel at 6.30pm, did the checklist and had our dinner at 8pm. Two group members did a small walk around the hotel garden and came across an Indian Gerbil.

Day 9

Sunday 11th March

Katunayake

We had breakfast and checked out of the hotel at 10am. We visited the Udawalawe reservoir where we had some close views of two Elephants. We had lunch at Udawalawe and then set off to Katunayake.

We reached the Gateway Airport Garden Hotel at 6.30pm and met for the checklist and dinner for 7.30pm.

Day 10

Monday 12th March

Return to UK

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

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

Mammals

	Common name	Scientific name
1	Toque Macaque	<i>Macaca sinica</i>
2	Grey Langur	<i>Semnopithecus (Presbytis) entellus</i>
3	Purple-faced Leaf Monkey	<i>Trachypithecus (Presbytis) vetulus</i>
4	Sloth Bear	<i>Melursus ursinus</i>
5	Grey Mongoose	<i>Herpestes edwardsii</i>
6	Ruddy Mongoose	<i>Herpestes smithii</i>
7	Brown Mongoose	<i>Herpestes fuscus</i>
8	Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus kotiya</i>
9	Asian Elephant	<i>Elephas maximus</i>
10	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>
11	Spotted Deer	<i>Cervus axis</i>
12	Sambar	<i>Cervus unicolor</i>
13	Water Buffalo	<i>Bubalus Bubalis</i>
14	Indian Palm Squirrel	<i>Funambulus palmarum</i>
15	Grizzled Giant Squirrel	<i>Ratufa macroura</i>
16	Indian (Black-naped) Hare	<i>Lepus nigricollis</i>
17	Indian Flying Fox	<i>Pteropus gigantea</i>
18	Blue Whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>
19	Indian Gerbil	<i>Tatera indica</i>

Birds

	Common name	Scientific name
1	Lesser Whistling Duck	<i>Dendrocygna javanica</i>
2	Sri Lanka Junglefowl	<i>Gallus lafayettii</i>
3	Indian Peafowl	<i>Pavo cristatus</i>
4	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
5	Painted Stork	<i>Mycteria leucocephala</i>
6	Asian Openbill	<i>Anastomus oscitans</i>
7	Woolly-necked Stork	<i>Ciconia episcopus</i>
8	Black-necked Stork	<i>Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus</i>
9	Lesser Adjutant	<i>Leptoptilos javanicus</i>
10	Black-headed Ibis	<i>Threskiornis elanocephalus</i>
11	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>
12	Yellow Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus sinensis</i>
13	Cinnamon Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus cinnamomeus</i>
14	Black Bittern	<i>Dupetor flavicollis</i>
15	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>
16	Indian Pond Heron	<i>Ardeola grayii</i>
17	Eastern Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus coromandus</i>
18	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
19	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>
20	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>
21	Intermediate Egret	<i>Egretta intermedia</i>
22	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
23	Spot-billed Pelican	<i>Pelecanus philippensis</i>
24	Little Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo niger</i>
25	Oriental Darter (Darter)	<i>Anhinga melanogaster</i>
26	Crested Serpent Eagle	<i>Spilornis cheela</i>

Common name	Scientific name
27 Changeable Hawk Eagle	<i>Nisaetus cirrhatous</i>
28 Shikra	<i>Accipiter badius</i>
29 Brahminy Kite	<i>Haliastur indus</i>
30 White-bellied Sea Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucogaster</i>
31 Grey-headed Fish Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus ichthyaetus</i>
32 White-breasted Waterhen	<i>Amaurornis phoenicurus</i>
33 Great Stone-curlew (Great Thick Knee)	<i>Esacus recurvirostris</i>
34 Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>
35 Yellow-wattled Lapwing	<i>Vanellus malabaricus</i>
36 Red-wattled Lapwing	<i>Vanellus indicus</i>
37 Pacific Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis fulva</i>
38 Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
39 Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>
40 Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>
41 Lesser Sand Plover (Mongolian Plover)	<i>Charadrius mongolus</i>
42 Pheasant-tailed Jacana	<i>Hydrophasianus chirurgus</i>
43 Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
44 Marsh Sandpiper	<i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>
45 Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
46 Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>
47 Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
48 Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>
49 Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>
50 Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>
51 Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>
52 Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>
53 Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>
54 Greater Crested Tern	<i>Thalasseus bergii</i>
55 Bridled Tern	<i>Onychoprion anaethetus</i>
56 Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>
57 Rock Dove (Common Pigeon)	<i>Columba livia</i>
58 Spotted Dove	<i>Spilopelia chinensis</i>
59 Common Emerald Dove (Emerald Dove)	<i>Chalcophaps indica</i>
60 Orange-breasted Green Pigeon	<i>Treron bicinctus</i>
61 Sri Lanka Green Pigeon	<i>Treron pompadora</i>
62 Green Imperial Pigeon	<i>Ducula aenea</i>
63 Greater Coucal	<i>Centropus sinensis</i>
64 Blue-faced Malkoha	<i>Phaenicophaeus viridirostris</i>
65 Jacobin Cuckoo (Pied Cuckoo)	<i>Clamator jacobinus</i>
66 Asian Koel	<i>Eudynamys scolopaceus</i>
67 Grey-bellied Cuckoo (Plaintive Cuckoo)	<i>Cacomantis passerinus</i>
68 Indian Scops Owl (Collared Scops Owl)	<i>Otus bakkamoena</i>
69 Brown Fish Owl	<i>Ketupa zeylonensis</i>
70 Jungle Owlet	<i>Glaucidium radiatum</i>
71 Indian Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus asiaticus</i>
72 Crested Treeswift (Gray-rumped Treeswift)	<i>Hemiprocne coronata</i>
73 Asian Palm Swift	<i>Cypsiurus balasiensis</i>
74 Little Swift (House Swift)	<i>Apus affinis</i>
75 Indian Roller	<i>Coracias benghalensis</i>
76 Stork-billed Kingfisher	<i>Pelargopsis capensis</i>
77 White-throated Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>
78 Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
79 Pied Kingfisher	<i>Ceryle rudis</i>

Common name	Scientific name
80 Green Bee-eater (Little Green Bee-eater)	<i>Merops orientalis</i>
81 Blue-tailed Bee-eater	<i>Merops philippinus</i>
82 Chestnut-headed Bee-eater	<i>Merops leschenaulti</i>
83 Eurasian Hoopoe (Common Hoopoe)	<i>Upupa epops</i>
84 Malabar Pied Hornbill	<i>Anthracoceros coronatus</i>
85 Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill	<i>Ocyrceros gingalensis</i>
86 Brown-headed Barbet	<i>Psilopogon zeylanicus</i>
87 Coppersmith Barbet	<i>Psilopogon haemacephalus</i>
88 Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos nanus</i>
89 Yellow-crowned Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos mahrattensis</i>
90 Black-rumped Flameback (Lesser Goldenback)	<i>Dinopium benghalense</i>
91 Crimson-backed Flameback (Crimson-backed Goldenback)	<i>Chrysocolaptes stricklandi</i>
92 Oriental Hobby	<i>Falco severus</i>
93 Alexandrine Parakeet	<i>Psittacula eupatria</i>
94 Rose-ringed Parakeet	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>
95 Indian Pitta	<i>Pitta brachyura</i>
96 Sri Lanka Woodshrike	<i>Tephrodornis affinis</i>
97 Common Iora	<i>Aegithina tiphia</i>
98 Black-headed Cuckooshrike	<i>Coracina melanoptera</i>
99 Small Minivet	<i>Pericrocotus cinnamomeus</i>
100 Brown Shrike	<i>Lanius cristatus</i>
101 Black-hooded Oriole	<i>Oriolus xanthornus</i>
102 White-bellied Drongo	<i>Dicrurus caerulescens</i>
103 White-browed Fantail	<i>Rhipidura aureola</i>
104 Indian Paradise Flycatcher (Asian Paradise Flycatcher)	<i>Terpsiphone paradisi</i>
105 House Crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>
106 Indian Jungle Crow (Large-billed Crow)	<i>Corvus culminatus</i>
107 Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark	<i>Eremopterix griseus</i>
108 Jerdon's Bush Lark	<i>Mirafra affinis</i>
109 Black-capped Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus melanicterus</i>
110 Red-vented Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>
111 White-browed Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus luteolus</i>
112 Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
113 Sri Lanka Swallow	<i>Cecropis hyperythra</i>
114 Clamorous Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus stentoreus</i>
115 Blyth's Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus dumetorum</i>
116 Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>
117 Grey-breasted Prinia	<i>Prinia hodgsonii</i>
118 Jungle Prinia	<i>Prinia sylvatica</i>
119 Plain Prinia	<i>Prinia inornata</i>
120 Common Tailorbird	<i>Orthotomus sutorius</i>
121 Purple Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>
122 Brown-capped Babbler	<i>Pellorneum fuscicapillus</i>
123 Yellow-billed Babbler	<i>Turdoides affinis</i>
124 Oriental White-Eye	<i>Zosterops palpebrosus</i>
125 Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>
126 Indian Robin	<i>Copsychus fulicatus</i>
127 Oriental Magpie-Robin	<i>Copsychus saularis</i>
128 White-rumped Shama	<i>Copsychus malabaricus</i>
129 Asian Brown Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa dauurica</i>
130 Brown-breasted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa muttui</i>
131 Purple-rumped Sunbird	<i>Nectarinia zeylonica</i>
132 Purple Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris asiaticus</i>

	Common name	Scientific name
133	Loten's Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris lotenius</i>
134	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
135	Scaly-breasted Munia	<i>Lonchura punctulata</i>
136	Forest Wagtail	<i>Dendronanthus indicus</i>
137	Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>
138	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
139	Paddyfield Pipit	<i>Anthus rufulus</i>
140	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>
141	Pomarine Skua	<i>Stercorarius pomarinus</i>

Reptiles & Amphibians

	Common name	Scientific name
1	Common Rat Snake	<i>Ptyas mucosus maximus</i>
2	Bengal (Land) Monitor	<i>Varanus bengalensis</i>
3	Asian Water Monitor	<i>Varanus salvator</i>
4	Oriental (Common) Garden Lizard	<i>Calotes versicolor</i>
5	Mugger Crocodile	<i>Crocodylus palustris</i>
6	Soft-shelled Terrapin	<i>Lissemys punctata</i>
7	Green Turtle	<i>Chelonia mydas</i>
8	Common House Gecko	<i>Hemidactylus frenatus</i>
9	Spotted Tree Frog	<i>Polypedates maculatus</i>