ORIOLE BIRDING



TOUR REPORT
SRI LANKA
1ST – 11TH DECEMBER 2018

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SUMMARY

In December 2018 Paul Roberts of Oriole Birding visited Sri Lanka on a fact-finding trip, with the intention of adding this exciting destination to the company offer. Our route in the eleven days took us to the following main locations: Kitulgala, Sinharaja, Udawalawe, Bundala, Tissamaharama, Nuwara Eliya (Horton Plains), Kandy, Habrarana and Mannar Island. A total of 238 species was recorded, including all but one of the island's endemics. Time constraints meant this itinerary was probably a few days shorter than would be ideal and we consider there would be a good chance of seeing all the endemics on a full-length tour. After consideration of the logistics, we have now put a tour of 14 days together (or 15, if you factor in the overnight flight into the total), which includes all of the above sites, excepting Mannar, and with the addition on of Wilpattu and Yala National Parks.

SATURDAY 1ST DECEMBER 2018 – *Hot, mainly sunny, light winds*

The overnight flight from London Heathrow arrived on schedule at Colombo Bandaranaike at approximately 13:00. Having met up with the local guide Koush and driver Madur, we headed off east from the airport. Crossing the busy main Kandy to Colombo road, we soon made a few short stops, which allowed familiarisation with some of the more widespread and numerous species of the island, such as Spotted Dove, Indian Pond Heron, Cattle Egret, Red-wattled Lapwing, **Blue-tailed Bee-eater**, **White-throated Kingfisher**, Rose-ringed Parakeet, House Crow, Barn Swallow, Red-vented Bulbul, **Yellow-billed Babbler** and Common Myna. One of these stops saw us pick up our first endemic of the tour – **Crimson-fronted Barbet**, with two at a nest hole on a roadside tree.



Crimson-fronted Barbet

Continuing east, the traffic thinned out somewhat and we pulled in at a scenic spot overlooking the Kelani River. Several of the endemic **Sri Lanka Hanging Parrots** entertained and a vibrant **Black-hooded Oriole** showed well. This species was to prove rather frequent during the tour, in the right habitat. Groups of **Sri Lanka Swallows** and **Blue-tailed Bee-eaters** were landing in a nearby dead tree, with two of the scarcer **Chestnut-headed Bee-eaters** also present. A **Yellow-fronted Barbet** called in, yet another endemic to add to the list.

Further birds seen on our journey east included **Indian Swiftlet**, **Asian Palm Swift**, **Asian Openbill**, Little Egret, **Little Cormorant**, Black-winged Stilt, **Common Iora**, **White-bellied Drongo**, **Large-billed Crow**, **Ashy Prinia**, **Square-tailed Bulbul**, and **Pale-billed Flowepecker**.

Late afternoon we arrived at our first main destination, Kitulgala, a forest reserve located in the wet zone. Kitulgala holds a wide range of habitat types, from gardens, to plantations and primary forest, and the more open areas can sometimes provide easier access to some endemics which might otherwise be hard to locate in denser jungle. The Kelaini River at Kitulgala is also famous as the film location for 'The Bridge on the River Kwai'.



Black-hooded Oriole & Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot

After checking in at The Plantation Hotel, we had just enough time to head out to the lane where the local police station is situated, where we were lucky to happen on a group of birders who had located a **Chestnut-backed Owlet**, which hung around for a few minutes, before melting away into the forest.

SUNDAY 2nd DECEMBER 2018 – *Mostly hot and sunny, a few drops of rain late afternoon*

To start the day, we made a pre-breakfast visit to the same area where we had seen the Chestnut-backed Owlet on the previous evening. This proved a great choice, with a host of new species coming thick and fast. Two **Greater Coucals** were noisily scolding an Indian Palm Squirrel as soon as we exited the car, quickly followed by **Blyth's Reed Warbler**, **Brown Shrike**, Red-vented Bulbul, **White-bellied Drongo**, **White-throated Kingfisher** and **Lesser Sri Lanka Flameback** (recent research indicates that this red-backed form of Black-rumped Flameback, confined to southern Sri Lanka, should be considered as an endemic species). Shortly after a **Sri Lanka Junglefowl**, the national bird of the country, strolled nonchalantly across the lane and into a garden, with **Black-capped Bulbul**, **Green Warbler**, **Spot-winged Thrush** (heard only), **Oriental White-eye**, **Purple-rumped Sunbird**, **Purple Sunbird** and **White-rumped Munia** also nearby. A pair of confiding **Crested Serpent-eagles** were observed mating, while a **Lesser Yellownape** (another woodpecker species) dropped in at close quarters. Further species noted in this productive session included **Emerald Dove**, **Green Imperial Pigeon**, **Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill**, **Layard's Parakeet**, Rose-ringed Parakeet, **Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot**, **Black-hooded Oriole**, **Orange Minivet**, **Square-tailed Bulbul**, **Common Tailorbird**, **Orange-billed Babbler**, **Oriental Magpie Robin** and **Tickell's Blue-flycatcher**.

Following a very welcome breakfast in our riverside restaurant, we took the tiny man-powered ferry over the Kelani, in order to visit the dense jungle of Makandawa Forest Reserve. Overall the activity here was perhaps lower than expected, but notable sightings included **Spot-winged Thrush**, **Black-naped Monarch** and **Crimson-backed Flameback**. A search for Serendib Scops Owl at some known roost sites proved fruitless and we headed back to the hotel for lunch.



Sri Lanka Junglefowl



White-bellied Drongo & Black-naped Monarch

Our next destination was the renowned Sinharaja, roughly a three hour drive, which would occupy most of the hot afternoon period. Sinharaja is a biodiversity hotspot of international significance, designated both a Biosphere Reserve and World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Shortly before arrival at the accommodation, we were flagged down by a local, who proudly showed us a **Chestnut-backed Owlet** in his garden, being mobbed by a variety of small passerines. Not a bad start at all! Pulling in ten minutes later at the Blue Magpie Lodge, we were immediately whisked away by a forest ranger in a Jeep, who promised to show us a good bird before the daylight receded. After a bone-shaking trip along a forest track, we were soon scrambling up a steep rocky hillside, where our prize was awaiting, roosting low in some bamboo – a **Serendid Scops Owl**. This highly-sought after endemic was only discovered in 2001. What a great start to our stay here. With the night falling we made our way to check in at the lodge, anticipating the following full day in the reserve.



Chestnut-backed Owlet & Serendib Scops Owl

MONDAY 3rd DECEMBER 2018 – *Hot and humid, torrential rain setting in late afternoon*

An early start saw us heading to the forest reserve with both breakfast and lunch packed into the vehicle. Today we would spend all our time inside the national park, accessed along a very bumpy track. After the necessary formalities at the ticket office and picking up our ranger, we took another bone-shaking track upwards, stopping off a few times when birds were spotted. An endemic **White-faced Starling** showed really well high in a tree, with **Black-headed Cuckooshrike**, **Sri Lanka Green-pigeon**, **Green Imperial-pigeon**, **Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill**, **Crested Treeswift**, **Brown Shrike** and **Lesser Yellownape** also of note.



White-faced Starling & Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill

Taking the flat main trail through the park, we would scan any roving flocks carefully, in the hope of connecting with some of the specialities, while also making an effort for the shy and elusive Sri Lanka Thrush, unlikely to be seen at any other location on the tour. On entering the reserve, we were greeted by a few **Sri Lanka Junglefowl**, with the ranger showing us a roosting **Sri Lanka Frogmouth**, which he had been keeping track of. **Sri Lanka Spurfowl** were heard calling close by, but refused to show. Feeding flocks were frustratingly hard to come by, apart from a couple of groups of **Orange-billed Babblers**, one of which had an **Ashy-headed Laughingthrush** tagging along with it. The endemic **White-throated (Legge's) Flowepecker** called in while we enjoyed breakfast, with a young male **Sri Lanka Junglefowl** on the hunt for titbits. On reaching the research station, some heavy showers set in and we took cover in an outbuilding, where we would take lunch. Allowing the birds to come to us, we added a nice selection of species, including **Velvet-fronted Nuthatch** (two), **Sri Lanka White-eye**, **Dark-fronted Babbler**, **Layard's Parakeet**, **Emerald Dove**, **Yellow-fronted Barbet**, **Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot**, **Brown-breasted Flycatcher**, **Asian Brown Flycatcher**, **Large-billed Leaf Warbler**, **Orange Minivet**, **Yellow-eared Bulbul**, **Indian Paradise-flycatcher** and **Pale-billed Flowepecker.**



Green-billed Coucal & Yellow-browed Bulbul

With the showers easing, we headed back on the return route, finding our first **Sri Lanka Blue Magpies**, a characterful endemic. A **Green-billed Coucal** showed well, with **Spot-winged Thrush**, **Sri Lanka Hill Myna** and **Chestnut-backed Owlet** recorded, although the latter two were only heard. After considerable effort, brief views of a **Sri Lanka Thrush** were obtained. By now, some heavier downpours arrived, and we made our way back to lodge, with the rain soon becoming a deluge and lasting well into the night.

TUESDAY 4th DECEMBER 2018 – *Hot and sunny*

A 05:30 start saw us head to the garden of a local house, in order to stake out a pair of Sri Lanka Spurfowl, which were known to visit for the rice put out there daily. Alas, they deigned not to call in on this occasion, but we spent a very pleasant few hours at the property, noting a range of noteworthy species in the garden and surrounding countryside. A **Spot-winged Thrush** popped up frequently, along with a female **Indian Blue Robin**, a pair of **Sri Lanka Junglefowl** and two **Sri Lanka Blue Magpies**. A **Slaty-legged Crake** crept around in the undergrowth, with a Sri Lanka Giant Squirrel and a shy Yellow-striped Mouse-deer also visiting the garden. Both **White-throated** and **Pale-billed Flowepeckers** called in. A party of **Sri Lanka Scimitar-babblers** passed through and a Grey Wagtail was a familiar species. Trees across the valley held **Sri Lanka Drongos**, **Sri Lanka Hill Mynas**, **Indian Paradise Flycatcher**, **Orange-billed Babblers**, **Sri Lanka Grey Hornbills** and **Crimson-backed Flameback**, Birds of prey here comprised **Black Eagle** and **Shikra**. A Purple-faced Langur basked in the morning sun, while a handsome red-headed Green Garden Lizard posed. A

Brown Shrike repeatedly visited the garden and a **White-throated Kingfisher** was hunting from nearby perches. With time moving on we headed back to the lodge to pick up our bags and check out, noting a **Legge's Hawk-eagle** over a hillside on the way.



Orange-billed Babblers & Sri Lanka Blue Magpie



Woolly-necked Stork

Heading east through a very scenic area of hills and tea plantations (and noting an **Oriental Honey-buzzard**), we eventually pulled up at roughly 15:00 at Udawalawa National Park, a large area of scrub, grass and old plantation around a large reservoir. Picking up a jeep and driver, we headed off into the park for a very enjoyable couple of hours on safari. **Indian Peafowl** were everywhere, with **Black-winged Kite** and **Crested Hawk-eagle** perched at close quarters. The previous day's heavy rain was evidenced by the amount od standing water and small pools at trackside, these attracting waterbirds including **Woolly-necked Stork**, **Painted Stork**, **Asian Openbill**, **Lesser Whistling-duck**, Indian Pond Heron and Red-wattled Lapwing. Many **Blue-tailed** and **Green Bee-eaters** perched trackside, allowing great photo opportunities. **Jerdon's Bushlarks** inhabited grassy areas, with **Indian Robins** and Spotted Doves feeding in the road itself. Udawalawa is famous for its thriving population of Asian Elephants and we weren't to be disappointed, with a number of very close animals enjoyed. Further non-avian interest included Toque Macaque, Ruddy Mongoose, Spotted Deer and Land Monitor.

Reaching the large reservoir, we left the vehicle to scan with telescopes, picking up **Spot-billed Pelican**, **Black-crowned Night Heron**, Grey Heron, **Intermediate Egret, Indian Cormorant**, **Oriental Darter**, **Spotted Redshank** (quite a rare visitor to Sri Lanka), **Common Kingfisher**, Barn Swallows, **Whiskered Terns** and a pair of **White-bellied Sea-eagles**. Taking a different route back we encountered plenty more activity, notably **Crested Serpent-eagle**, **Brahminy Kite**, **Orange-breasted Green-pigeon**, **Crested Treeswift**, **Indian Roller**, **Coppersmith Barbet**, **Alexandrine Parakeet**, **Rosy Starling**, **Small Minivet**, **Sri Lanka Woodshrike** (the only endemic found solely in the dry zone), **White-browed Fantail**, **Brown Shrike, prinias (Grey-breasted**, **Ashy** and **Plain**), **sunbirds (Purple-rumped**, **Purple** and **Loten's**) and **Scaly-breasted Munia**.



Black-winged Kite & Crested Hawk-eagle

It wasn't easy to drag ourselves away from the park, but tonight we would be staying in Tissamaharama (usually shortened to "Tissa"), at the Oak Ray Wild Yala, about a 90 minute drive away. Checking in early evening, we had just enough daylight to enjoy a roving flock of **Malabar Pied Hornbills** in a large fruiting tree on a small plot, viewed from the hotel balcony, completing another wonderful day in Sri Lanka.

WEDNESDAY 5th DECEMBER 2018 – *Showery rain, occasional sunny spells, moderate breeze*

A 05:30 start saw us reach Bundala National Park by first light. This superb reserve is a mixture of scrub jungle, lagoons, saltpans and shore, holding a RAMSAR designation. Despite rather poor weather during our visit, we recorded over 100 species in just a few hours. The extensive marshy areas just before the park proper held plenty of **Grey-headed Swamphens**, **Black-headed Ibis**, **Painted Storks**, **Asian Openbills** and various egrets. **Marsh Sandpipers**, Common Greenshanks, Common Redshanks, Black-tailed Godwits and Curlew Sandpipers were the most numerous waders, with **Whiskered Terns** also well-represented. A small group of warblers on top of a few isolated bushes proved to be **Hume's Whitethroats** and two **Great Thick-knees** strolled around. Further on towards the ticket office, we noticed a **Yellow-crowned Woodpecker** using a tree in the company of several hundred **Rosy Starlings**, with a Eurasian Collared Dove less expected here than some of its congeners.



Blue-tailed Bee-eater & Painted Stork

At the ticket office we climbed aboard the jeep, accompanied by a driver and ranger. A **Jacobin Cuckoo** was perched in a tree by the vehicle as we departed. A colony of **Little Swifts** was nesting in one of the buildings at the entrance, along with some naturalised House Sparrows. The road soon bisected a lagoon, where **Kentish** and **Lesser Sand Plovers** were numerous. Here we also noted Common and **Pin-tailed Snipes**, Curlew Sandpipers, **Paddyfield Pipits** and **Pied Kingfishers**, among others. A little further into the park a more open area held species such as **Oriental Skylark**, **Jerdon's Bushlark**, Western Yellow Wagtail, **Ashy-crowned Sparrow-lark** and **Tricoloured Munia**. An area of saltpans hosted many waders (including Grey Plover, Little Ringed Plover, Whimbrel, Ruddy Turnstone, Little Stint, Common Sandpiper, **Wood Sandpiper** and **Little Pratincole**) and six species of **tern (Little**, **Gull-billed**, **Caspian**, **Whiskered**, **Lesser Crested**, **Greater Crested)**. An **Osprey** was found, while **Indian Thick-knee**, **Great Thick-knee** and **Yellow-wattled Lapwing** were trackside.

Vegetated marshy areas were also productive, witnessed by species such as **Ruddy-breasted Crake**, **White-breasted Waterhen**, Eurasian (Common) Moorhen, **Eurasian Spoonbill**, **Yellow Bittern**, **Cinnamon Bittern**, **Black Bittern**, **Purple Heron**, **Indian Cormorant**, **Baya Weaver** and **Clamorous Reed Warbler**. Some of the more interesting species seen from the jeep in the scrub jungle areas included **Black-winged Kite**, **Indian Peafowl**, **Sri Lanka Junglefowl**, **Orange-breasted Green-pigeon**, **Crested Treeswift** (perched), **Greater Coucal**, **Blue-faced Malkoha**, **Grey-bellied Cuckoo**, **Eurasian (Common) Hoopoe**, **Indian Roller**, **Brown-headed Barbet**, **Common Iora**, **Brown Shrike**, **Jungle Prinia**, **Oriental Magpie Robin**, **Purple-rumped Sunbird** and **Asian Brown Flycatcher**. We also enjoyed several troops of Tufted Grey Langurs as they went about their business, with Indian Hares also observed.

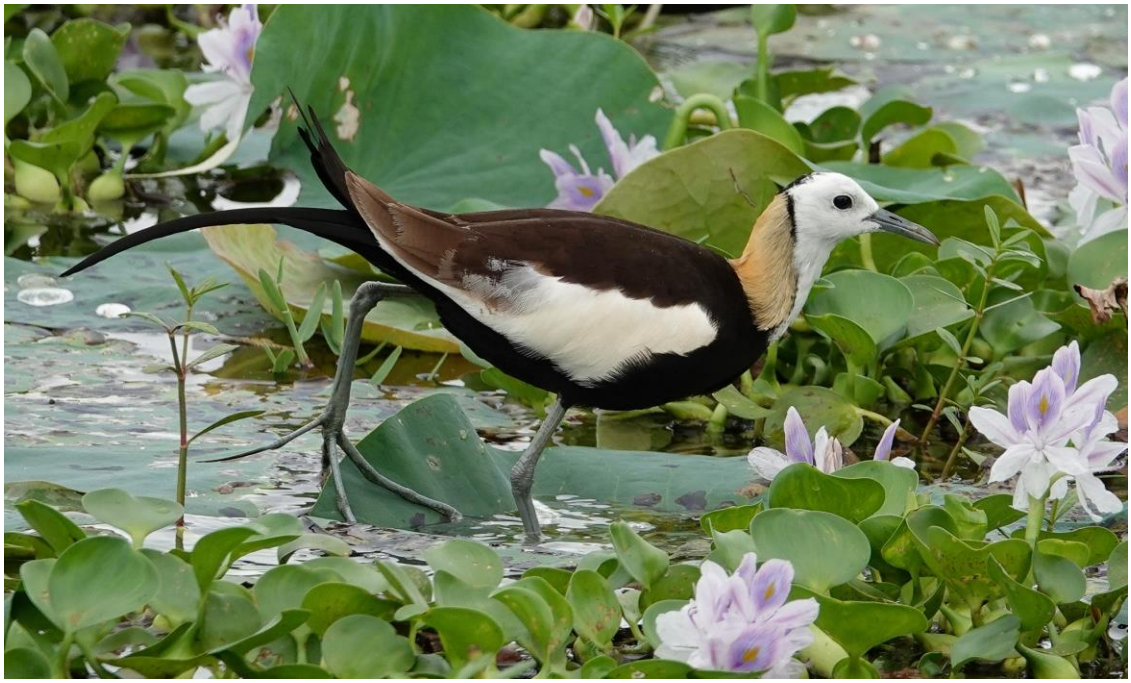



Blue-faced Malkoha & Great Thick-knee



Black Bittern

Heading back to the hotel for a little downtime, following our early start, we planned to head out to the environs of Tissa Tank (tank being a local name for reservoir) late afternoon, staying until almost dark. Here we got to see at least 10 **Pheasant-tailed Jacanas**, negotiating the rafts of floating vegetation A **Stork-billed Kingfisher** shot past and we noted our first **Grey-headed Fish-eagle** of the trip, with **Shikra** and **Brahminy Kite** also logged. A nearby garden yielded two **Jungle Owlets** and a magnificent **Brown Fish Owl** was roosting in a palm down by the river. Further sightings of note in the vicinity were **Yellow Bittern**, **Watercock**, **Spot-billed Pelican**, **Sri Lanka Green-pigeon** and **Western Koel**. To end the day, we watched some of the massive colony of Indian Flying-foxes heading off at dusk, a truly wondrous sight.



Pheasant-tailed Jacana



Brown Fish Owl & Jungle Owlet

THURSDAY 6th DECEMBER 2018 – *Overcast, but dry*

Checking out of the Oak Ray Wild Yala after breakfast, we first called in at Tissa Tank, where some local youths led us to an **Indian Scops Owl**, roosting in a partly built house. The tank held **Grey-headed Swamphen**, **White-breasted Waterhen**, **Black-headed Ibis**, **Purple Heron**, **Little Cormorant**, **Oriental Darter**, **Pheasant-tailed Jacana**, **Whiskered Tern**, **Stork-billed Kingfisher**, **Common Tailorbird** and Sand Martin.

Today, we would be driving north to the old colonial town of Nuwara Eliya in the highland wet zone. This would be a longish drive of the best part of four hours, which we would break up with a couple of stops, one to a tea centre and again at the scenic Ravana Falls, near Ella.

After checking in at the Stamford Star Hotel, where we also took lunch (traditional Sri Lankan curry), we headed off to a vegetated ravine, above the city. Here with patience we were able to get reasonable views of a pair of **Sri Lanka Whistling-thrushes**, never completely in the open, but pleasing all the same for such a tough species.



Pied Thrush & Forest Wagtail

The rest of the day would be spent in Victoria Park in Nuwara Eliya. The park started off as a botanic garden and was named in 1897 to celebrate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. These days it is well known to visiting birders as a site to search for some of the highland-loving wintering specialities of the country. Shortly after entering the park (for a small fee), we were onto a **Forest Wagtail**, in typical perpetual motion. Along the stream we found a few Grey Wagtails and Common Sandpipers, plus a rather obliging **Blyth's Reed Warbler**. One of our main targets here was the sought-after **Pied Thrush**, this being surely one of the most reliable sites in the world for this species, which breeds in the central Himalayan forests. After a bit of persistence, we located at least four males, although the views were mostly up in the branches of streamside trees. An extremely smart thrush to see, all the same. Further sightings in the park included **Green Warbler**, **Yellow-billed Babbler**, **Oriental Magpie Robin** and **Asian Brown Flycatcher**. We searched for Kashmir Flycatcher, which are also regular here, but were beaten by the failing light. One for another time…

FRIDAY 7th DECEMBER 2018 – *Fog, rain, some sunny spells*

This morning we would be visiting the highest site on the tour – Horton Plains, a plateau of forest and grassland, adjoining the Peak Wilderness Sanctuary. At 2300m, Horton Plains has its own often unpredictable mountain weather, but is a must-visit site on any Sri Lanka itinerary, holding as it does a number of desirable endemics.

Leaving the hotel at 05:30, we first stopped at a forested spot, a short distance from the park entrance. Here we were able to 'scope up a group of **Sri Lanka Wood Pigeons**, our first endemic of the day and a great start. It was just getting properly light when we arrived at the entrance and having sorted out the usual permits, we entered the park, soon noting a **Sri Lanka Junglefowl** – these fellas seem to get everywhere! While in the park we mostly employed a tactic of stopping at likely looking spots and walking short distances from the vehicle. It was chilly at the start of the day, with mist blowing in and out, but good birds were coming steadily. A **Himalayan Buzzard** flew past on several occasions, with an **Oriental Honey-buzzard** moving straight through. The more open areas yielded several **Pied Bushchats**, **Zitting Cisticolas**, Grey Wagtails and a somewhat unexpected **Blyth's Pipit**, which called frequently. Scrubby areas brought us a male **Dull-blue Flycatcher** (an

endemic, much more attractive than its name suggests), **Cinereous (Great) Tit**, **Sri Lanka White-eye**, **Green Warbler**, **Common Tailorbird**, **Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot**, **Brown Shrike**, **Yellow-eyed Babbler**, **Blyth's Reed Warbler** and **Thick-billed Flowerpecker**. **Hill Swallows** gave good views both perched on buildings and in flight. Non-bird interest included Purple-faced Langur, Dusky Palm Squirrel, Sambar Deer and Rough-sided Snake.



Dull-blue Flycatcher & Hill Swallow

Ideally, we would have spent more time at this fascinating location, but persistent rain set in mid-morning, with visibility severely restricted. Leaving the park, we drove to a somewhat lower level, where conditions improved measurably. A roadside stop brought us another new endemic – **Sri Lanka Bush-warbler**, with good views of a pair of these uber-skulkers obtained with patience, but at the cost of a couple of leeches picked up. Yuck. We weren't really expecting to be bothered by any of these pests away from the rainforest; shouldn't have packed the leech socks away.



Pied Bushchat & Sri Lanka Bush-warbler

Back at the hotel, we took brunch, checked out and set off on our next leg of the trip – to Kandy. After a drive of around three hours we checked at the Thilanka Hotel, a modern toursist establishment close to Kandy Lake. After a fairly hectic few days, we opted spend the remainder of the day relaxing. This allowed some time to explore some of the city's rich culture, including the

impressive Temple of the Sacred Tooth, Sri Lanka's most important Buddhist shrine. Although the optics were left back at the hotel, while passing the lake we did notice **Great Cormorants** and some very confiding **Black-crowned Night Herons**.

SATURDAY 8th DECEMBER 2018 – *Rain in the morning, drying up early afternoon*

A 06:00 start saw us heading up into the tea plantations above Kandy. Although very much a farmed environment, these plantations harbour a fairly diverse community of birds within their mix of low, pruned bushes and taller shade trees. Despite rain of varying intensity, the plantations were birdable, with species new for the trip here being **Streak-throated Woodpecker**, **Plum-headed Parakeet** and **Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike**. Further sightings, despite the inclement weather, included **Black-headed Cuckooshrike**, **Slaty-legged Crake** (heard), **Crested Serpent-eagle**, **Sri Lanka Swallow**, **Indian Robin**, **Yellow-eyed Babbler**, **Orange Minivet**, **Black-hooded Oriole**, **Crested Treeswift**, **Common Tailorbird**, **Blyth's Reed Warbler**, **Oriental Magpie Robin**, **White-browed Fantail**, **Ashy Prinia**, **Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot**, **Layard's Parakeet**, **Yellow-fronted Barbet**, **Oriental White-eye**, **Green Warbler**, **White-throated Kingfisher** and **Sri Lanka Lesser Flameback**. An interesting assemblage of birds, for sure.



Crested Serpent-eagle

After lunch at the hotel, we checked out and headed north towards Habarana (via Dambulla), checking into The Other Corner late afternoon. The Other Corner is a complex of thatched-roof huts,

set in forested grounds and bordering Habarana Lake. A short stroll around the grounds brought us **Jerdon's Leafbird**, **White-rumped Shama**, **White-browed Bulbul**, **Purple-rumped Sunbird** and **Small Minivet**, among others. To end the day, we headed down a forest track, passing the awesome Sigiriya ancient rock fortress on the way. Although the light was rapidly fading, we managed to add our first **Brown-capped Babblers** (endemic) of the trip, plus brief views of an **Oriental Scops Owl**, with **Jerdon's Nightjars** calling nearby.



Yellow-eyed Babbler & Streak-throated Woodpecker

SUNDAY 9th DECEMBER 2018 – *Sunny spells, light to moderate winds*

The day started with an excellent pre-breakfast session in the vicinity of the hotel, a particular highlight being three **Orange-headed Thrushes** feeding around the huts. While enjoying the thrushes we also noted **White-rumped Shama**, **Brown-capped Babbler**, **Common Iora**, **Indian Paradise-flycatcher**, **White-browed Bulbul** and **Tickell's Blue Flycatcher**. Moving onto the margins of the lake, we located a **Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker** close by, with **Grey-headed Swamphens** much in evidence. Sightings came thick and fast as the day began to warm, including a pair of **White-bellied Sea-eagles**, **Sri Lanka Green-pigeon**, **Green Imperial-pigeon**, **Green Bee-eater**, **Stork-billed Kingfisher**, **Black-hooded Oriole**, **Small Minivet**, **Ashy Prinia**, **Blyth's Reed Warbler**, **Tawny-bellied Babbler**, **Thick-billed Flowerpecker** and **Purple Sunbird**.



Orang-headed Thrush & White-bellied Sea-eagles

Following breakfast, we checked out and headed off north, for our final new area of the tour – Mannar Island. Mannar is a dry near-peninsula with lots of white sand, wild donkeys and fishing boats. Culturally it's an intriguing place: being dotted with Baobab trees and crumbling colonial edifices built by the Portuguese, Dutch and Brits, altogether quite a different feel to the areas of Sri Lanka we had previously visited.

Before completely leaving the Habarana area, however, we were first taken to a nearby area known to the hotel's naturalist, where we noted **Black-winged Kite**, **Brahminy Kite**, **Crested Treeswift**, **Little Swift**, **Sri Lanka Swallow** and **Clamorous Reed Warbler**. The journey north was straightforward on mostly relatively quiet roads. Flooded fields held numerous egrets, plus **Woolly-necked Stork**, **Asian Openbill** and **Painted Stork**. An **Oriental Honey-buzzard** on a roadside bush, a **Black Kite** flew past and **Black Drongos** were conspicuous on the telegraph wires, this species being largely confined to the north-west of Sri Lanka.

Just before reaching the island, we stopped at the Giant's Tank, a large waterbody which can be viewed from its embankments. However, on this occasion the water level was very high, with few birds visible apart from some distant **Spot-billed Pelicans** and cormorants, so we continued on towards the causeway which links the island to the mainland.



Oriental Honey-buzzard & Whiskered Tern

A stop at a likely looking location of pools and flats saw us into various ducks, waders and terns – flocks of **Garganey**, Eurasian Wigeon and Northern Pintail were conspicuous, along with smaller numbers of **Lesser Whistling-ducks**. A flock of around 350 **Greater Flamingos** were massed far from shore in what must have been a very shallow bay. Our first Little Grebes of the trip were added, with plenty of **Whiskered Terns** showing brilliantly, along with smaller numbers of **White-winged Black**, **Little**, **Gull-billed**, **Caspian** and **Lesser Crested Terns**. Waders here comprised **Black-winged Stilt**, Grey Plover, **Pacific Golden Plover**, Common Ringed Plover, **Lesser Sand Plover**, Black-tailed Godwit, Ruddy Turnstone, Curlew Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper, Common Redshank and **Marsh Sandpiper**. A **Common Kingfisher** joined the fray, with **Paddyfield Pipits** and a single **Blyth's Pipit** also noted.

After checking in at our hotel (The Palmyrah House), we had a stroll around the extensive grounds. Sightings in and around the hotel included a covey of **Grey Francolins**, **Black Kites**, **Grey-headed Fish-eagle**, **Jacobin Cuckoo**, **Western Koel**, Eurasian Collared Dove, **Asian Palm Swift**, **Jerdon's Bushlark**, **Zitting Cisticola** and **munias (White-rumped**, **Scaly-breasted** and **Tricoloured)**. Setting off from the hotel, roadside pools and flashes held Red-wattled and **Yellow-wattled Lapwings**, Green Sandpiper, Common Greenshank, Common Redshank and **Marsh Sandpiper**. Our first proper stop after leaving the hotel was the old Talaimannar Pier, which used to be the departure and arrival

point of ferries between here and India. The pier may no longer fulfil its former purpose, but now is crowded with roosting egrets, including some **Great Egrets** already in breeding condition. Offshore a couple of flocks of **Brown-headed Gulls** passed by and a single **Heuglin's Gull** went through. Yet more egrets were attracted to the fishing boats hauling up on the beach. Finally, we headed for the very end of the island, from where a series of small sandy islands reaches out to the Indian mainland, seemingly just a short hop away. Two **Terek Sandpipers** was a highlight here, with Bar-tailed Godwits, Grey Plovers, **Lesser Sand Plovers** and Little Stints feeding on the shallow coastal flats. A **Hume's Whitethroat** in coastal scrub perhaps hinting at the migrant potential of this locality? With the sun setting in the west, we headed back to The Palmyrah, after another fulfilling day in the field.

MONDAY 10th DECEMBER 2018 – *Overcast, humid, no rain*

Leaving the hotel after breakfast, we headed west in the direction of the mainland, intending to make a few stops at likely areas we had identified the day before, but not had time to visit. Firstly, to some lagoons bordered with dry scrub, where a gorgeous **Long-tailed Shrike** was the highlight. An **Indian Pitta** called, but refused to show, other than the briefest of movements in the undergrowth. Also here were various waders (notably **Little Ringed Plover**), a **Brown-headed Barbet** and a tree full of **Rosy Starlings**. A little further on we paused by an extensive flood, which was brimming with waders, most numerously Black-tailed Godwits and **Marsh Sandpipers**. Here we were delighted to find a single **Pallas's Gull**, with **Brown-headed Gulls** also present. Two **Glossy Ibis** were the only ones of the tour, with **Paddyfield Pipit**, **Oriental Skylark**, **Eurasian Spoonbill**, **Caspian Tern** and **Eurasian Curlew** also seen.



Long-tailed Shrike

Continuing west, we next scouted around an area of mangroves and saline lagoons at the border of the island and the mainland. The best find here was a dark morph **Western Reef Egret**, with good numbers of waders (such as **Kentish Plover** and **Whimbrel**) and wildfowl observed.



Western Reef Egret & Little Cormorant

Leaving Mannar in the late morning, we headed back south (noting an **Indian Roller** on the way) to The Other Corner, where we would be spending our final night of the tour. For the final few hours of daylight, we headed off to the same forest track we had previously visited. Here we finally obtained good views of **Indian Pitta**, a stunning bird indeed, along with some other quality species, most notably a male **Indian Blue Robin**, a jewel-like **Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher** and a stunning white male **Indian Paradise-flycatcher**.



Indian Pitta & Indian Peafowl

Following dinner, we visited a rocky area on the outskirts of Habarana, where an **Indian Nightjar** was our final addition to the trip list

TUESDAY 11th DECEMBER 2018 – *Sunny spells, dry*

With a lunchtime flight to catch, there would be no proper birding time, although we did see an **Orange-headed Thrush** and hear several **Indian Pittas** in the hotel grounds as we prepared to leave. The journey to the airport was uneventful, with the flight departing for London on schedule, concluding an excellent tour to this hugely rewarding destination.

SYSTEMATIC LISTS
The taxonomy of the bird list follows **The Clements Checklist of Birds of the World**
Sri Lankan endemic bird species are indicated with **(ES)**
Sri Lankan endemic bird subspecies are indicated with **(ESS)**
H indicates a bird was heard only

BIRDS:
Grey Francolin
Lesser Whistling-duck
Garganey
Eurasian Wigeon
Northern Pintail
Sri Lanka Spurfowl **(ES) H**
Sri Lanka Junglefowl **(ES)**
Indian Peafowl
Little Grebe
Greater Flamingo
Asian Openbill
Woolly-necked Stork
Painted Stork
Indian Cormorant
Great Cormorant
Little Cormorant
Oriental Darter
Spot-billed Pelican
Yellow Bittern
Cinnamon Bittern
Black Bittern
Grey Heron
Purple Heron
Great Egret
Intermediate Egret
Little Egret
Western Reef Egret
(Eastern) Cattle Egret
Indian Pond Heron
Black-crowned Night Heron
Black-headed Ibis
Glossy Ibis
Eurasian Spoonbill
(Western) Osprey
Black-winged Kite
Oriental Honey-buzzard
Crested Serpent-eagle **(ESS)**
Crested Hawk-eagle **(ESS)**
Legge's Hawk-eagle

Black Eagle
Shikra
Brahminy Kite
Black Kite
White-bellied Sea-eagle
Grey-headed Sea-eagle
Himalayan Buzzard
Slaty-legged Crake
Ruddy-breasted Crake
White-breasted Waterhen
Watercock
Grey-headed Swamphen
Eurasian (Common) Moorhen
Indian Thick-knee
Great Thick-knee
Black-winged Stilt
Grey Plover
Pacific Golden Plover
Yellow-wattled Lapwing
Red-wattled Lapwing **(ESS)**
Common Ringed Plover
Lesser Sand Plover
Kentish Plover
Little Ringed Plover
Pheasant-tailed Jacana
Terek Sandpiper
Common Sandpiper
Green Sandpiper
Common Greenshank
Marsh Sandpiper
Wood Sandpiper
Spotted Redshank
Common Redshank
Whimbrel
Eurasian Curlew
Bar-tailed Godwit
Black-tailed Godwit
Ruddy Turnstone
Curlew Sandpiper
Little Stint
Pin-tailed Snipe
Common Snipe
Small Pratincole
Heuglin's Gull
Pallas's Gull
Brown-headed Gull
Little Tern
Gull-billed Tern
Caspian Tern
White-winged Tern
Whiskered Tern
Greater Crested Tern
Lesser Crested Tern
Rock Dove
Sri Lanka Wood-pigeon **(ES)**

Eurasian Collared Dove
Spotted Dove
Emerald Dove **(ESS)**
Orange-breasted Green-pigeon **(ESS)**
Sri Lanka Green-pigeon **(ES)**
Green Imperial-pigeon
Jacobin Cuckoo
Grey-bellied Cuckoo
Common Hawk Cuckoo **H**
Asian Koel
Blue-faced Malkoha
Greater Coucal
Green-billed Coucal **(ES)**
Serendib Scops Owl **(ES)**
Indian Scops Owl
Oriental Scops Owl **(ESS)**
Brown Fish Owl **(ESS)**
Jungle Owlet
Chestnut-backed Owlet **(ES)**
Sri Lanka Frogmouth
Jerdon's Nightjar **(ESS) H**
Indian Nightjar **(ESS)**
Indian Swiftlet
Little Swift
Asian Palm-swift
Crested Treeswift
Common Kingfisher
Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher
Stork-billed Kingfisher
White-throated Kingfisher
Pied Kingfisher
Green Bee-eater
Blue-tailed Bee-eater
Chestnut-headed Bee-eater
Indian Roller
Eurasian (Common) Hoopoe
Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill **(ES)**
Malabar Pied Hornbill
Crimson-fronted Barbet **(ES)**
Coppersmith Barbet
Brown-headed Barbet
Yellow-fronted Barbet **(ES)**
Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker **(ESS)**
Yellow-crowned Woodpecker
Lesser Yellownape **(ESS)**
Streak-throated Woodpecker
Sri Lanka Lesser Flameback **(ES)**
Crimson-backed Flameback **(ES)**
Alexandrine Parakeet
Rose-ringed Parakeet
Plum-headed Parakeet
Layard's Parakeet **(ES)**
Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot **(ES)**
Indian Pitta
Sri Lanka Woodshrike **(ES)**

Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike **(ESS)**
Common Iora
Small Minivet
Orange Minivet
Black-headed Cuckooshrike
Brown Shrike
Black-hooded Oriole **(ESS)**
Black Drongo **(ESS)**
White-bellied Drongo
Sri Lanka Drongo **(ES)**
White-browed Fantail
Black-naped Monarch **(ESS)**
Indian Paradise-flycatcher **(ESS)**
Sri Lanka Blue Magpie **(ES)**
House Crow **(ESS)**
Large-billed Crow
Jerdon's Bushlark
Ashy-crowned Sparrow-lark
Oriental Skylark
Sand Martin
Barn Swallow
Hill Swallow
Sri Lanka Swallow **(ES)**
Cinereous (Great) Tit
Velvet-fronted Nuthatch
Black-capped Bulbul **(ES)**
Red-vented Bulbul **(ESS)**
Yellow-eared Bulbul **(ES)**
White-browed Bulbul **(ESS)**
Yellow-browed Bulbul **(ESS)**
Square-tailed (Black) Bulbul **(ESS)**
Hume's Whitethroat
Green Warbler
Large-billed Leaf Warbler
Blyth's Reed Warbler
Clamorous Reed Warbler
Sri Lanka Bush-warbler **(ES)**
Zitting Cisticola **(ESS)**
Common Tailorbird **(ESS)**
Grey-breasted Prinia **(ESS)**
Jungle Prinia **(ESS)**
Ashy Prinia **(ESS)**
Plain Prinia **(ESS)**
Yellow-eyed Babbler **(ESS)**
Sri Lanka White-eye **(ES)**
Oriental White-eye
Tawny-bellied Babbler **(ESS)**
Dark-fronted Babbler **(ESS)**
Sri Lanka Scimitar-babbler **(ES)**
Brown-capped Babbler **(ES)**
Orange-billed Babbler **(ES)**
Yellow-billed Babbler **(ESS)**
Ashy-headed Laughingthrush **(ES)**
Asian Brown Flycatcher
Brown-breasted Flycatcher

Indian Robin **(ESS)**
Oriental Magpie-robin
White-rumped Shama **(ESS)**
Tickell's Blue-flycatcher **(ESS)**
Dull-blue Flycatcher **(ES)**
Indian Blue Robin
Sri Lanka Whistling-thrush **(ES)**
Pied Bushchat **(ESS)**
Pied Thrush
Spot-winged Thrush **(ES)**
Orange-headed Thrush
Sri Lanka Thrush **(ES)**
Sri Lanka Hill Myna **(ES)**
Common Myna **(ESS)**
White-faced Starling **(ES)**
Rosy Starling
Jerdon's Leafbird
White-throated (Legge's) Flowerpecker **(ES)**
Thick-billed Flowerpecker **(ESS)**
Pale-billed Flowerpecker **(ESS)**
Purple-rumped Sunbird **(ESS)**
Purple Sunbird
Loten's Sunbird **(ESS)**
Western Yellow Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
Paddyfield Pipit
Blyth's Pipit
Forest Wagtail
House Sparrow
Baya Weaver
White-rumped Munia
Black-throated Munia **(ESS)**
Scaly-breasted Munia
Tricoloured Munia

MAMMALS:
Asian Elephant
Tocque Macaque
Tufted Grey Langur
Purple-faced Langur
Sri Lanka Giant Squirrel
Indian Palm Squirrel
Dusky Palm Squirrel
Indian Hare
Indian Flying-fox
Indian Grey Mongoose
Indian Brown Mongoose
Ruddy Mongoose
Yellow-striped Mouse-deer
Sambar Deer
Spotted Deer
Wild Asian Water Buffalo

REPTILES:
Rough-sided Snake

Green Garden Lizard
Kangaroo Lizard
Asian House Gecko
Land Monitor

BUTTERFLIES:
Common Birdwing
Ceylon Rose
Common Rose
Blue Mormon
Common Grass Yellow
Ceylon Tiger
Plain Tiger
Common Sailor
Clipper

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