

The Wild Treasures of an Island – The Big Four

Lal Anthonis

Sri Lanka is a small island with only 25000 sq. mls. of land area. Yet, about one tenth of that land area is still jungle, making it when compared to its size one of the richest game areas in South Asia. Not only the game, the environment they live in, their habitats are also equally rich and varied. They range from the primeval, confined to the 21000 acre Singharaja Forest and, the deep secondary forests down to the thornbrush plains and the mangrove swamps of the low country dry zone. Then from the flood plains of the Mahaweli basin, where strides the great marsh elephant, to the liana knotted, steaming jungles of the wet zone and up to the lichen covered, stark beauty of the mist draped montane forest.

The big game like the elephant, leopard, bear and the buffalao, also known as the big four, are mostly confined to the low country dry zone and the foot hills of the wet. The leopard however is also encountered in the hills, where in fact it thrives.

The leopard undoubtedly, is one of the finest of the big cats and most travellers and wildlife professionals are of the opinion that Sri Lanka is one of the finest places on the globe to see them in the wild. In fact the writer, during a discussion with a famous German wildlife photographer, was told that during his sixteen years in Africa he had seen only six leopards, while during his two years in Sri Lanka he had had more than two hundred sightings. Wilpattu National Park before it was closed temporarily, was the finest place to encounter these big cats. But recently, Yala National Park, in the south too has become famous for its leopards. The Horton Plains, at an elevation of 7200 ft. a saddle on the central hills of the island, is another place where one could see them.

But here they are nocturnal and very shy, and difficult to encounter. Down in the low country, they are found both in the bush and in the forested areas. But they favour the rocky outcrops and sandy patches. Their favourite prey are the spotted deer and the sambur with the specialty being the monkey and the village dog.

Two man-eating leopards have been recorded in the annals of the island. The more famous was known as the Punani man-eater, after a little hamlet off the east coast where it operated. A contemporary of the world famous man-eating leopard of Rudraprayag of India, it was shot in 1923 with 20 recorded human kills. Its mounted carcass could be viewed at the Colombo Museum. The other was the Pottana leopard, which appeared along the ancient Potuvil-Kataragama pilgrim route, in the south east of the island, in the 1950's. Its history however is obscure.

Though no serious count has been done, there is no doubt that this beautiful cat is in the list of endangered species. Though strictly protected they have been shot and sometimes even poisoned for their beautiful pelts.

The sloth bear is the only bear species in the island. Its body is covered with thick, long, coarse, jet black hair and has a long bony snout with which it can suck up termites from an ant-hill, like a vacuum cleaner. Here is a creature that has an evil reputation, especially among the jungle folk, but in fact it is a very gentle creature by nature. Provoked however or defending its young, it is the devil incarnate the perfect mauling machine. One of the most charming sights in the Sri Lankan jungles is the mother bear taking two or three cubs on a piggy back ride. The sloth bear is a vegetarian, but will readily consume carrion if easily come by.

The best time to see bear in the National Parks would be when their favourite fruit, the Palu (Manilkara hexandra) is ripe. This would be in late May going into June.

The wild buffalo is widely distributed in the jungles of the dry zone and is often seen mingling with the domestic herds in the villages. The species found in the island is the water buffalo and it is much smaller than its African cousin the cape buffalo. It is never the less a very powerful beast. It has an evil reputation for attacking without provocation, but recent researches and observations have proved otherwise.

The most majestic creature that walks the jungles of Sri Lanka is the elephant. Sometime ago they were widely distributed all over the island and were encountered even at high elevations. But owing to excessive shooting, especially during the colonial era, their numbers have been drastically reduced and they are now confined to the flat, open, bushy terrain and the lightly forested areas known in the lingo of the wild life man as 'elephant country'.

There is only one species of elephant in the island, what is known as the Indian elephant (*Elephas maximus*). But elephants encountered in different parts of the island differ in stature. This may be due to environmental conditions and food. Most of the elephants seen in the Ruhuna or the south side of the island are rather small and somewhat 'box shaped'. They hold their heads low and their gait when walking lacks the majesty these beasts are noted for. Most of the herds encountered at Yala are these 'Ruhuna getayas' as they are loosely called in the local tongue. They are also sometimes called 'kuru aliya', which literally means 'dwarf elephant'. This perhaps is a misnomer, for though they are small in size to the other elephants there is nothing dwarfish about them.

The Sabaragamuwa type as these creatures are sometimes called are majestic animals. They are tall and well set. A big bull stands over eight feet at the shoulder. It is indeed a grand sight to watch one of these animals move across your field of view. They hold their heads high and walk with an air of dignity and authority. Most of them have very large domes on their heads, known as 'kumbasthale' in Sinhalese. In fact, in judging the breed and stock of an elephant one of the important features looked at is the width of the forehead.

These elephants are not confined to the Sabaragamuwa area which lies in the south central foothills of the island, but are distributed widely. They are come by even in the Yala National Park in the south. They can be seen in large herds in the Uda Walawe, Wasgomuwa and the Gal Oya National Parks. Lahugala, a six sq. ml. National Park, lying fourteen miles west of the south eastern coastal town of Potuvil, is situated slap bang in the middle of a jungle corridor that connects the Yala sector to the Gal Oya sector. It includes a large weva (tank) which is covered by a tall grass known as 'beru' (*Oplismus compositas*), a favourite of the elephants. This would undoubtedly be the finest place in the island to observe elephants in large numbers, which will include the Sabaragamuwa type.

The third of the major types is the marsh elephant or 'vil aliya' in the local tongue. The marsh elephant is confined to the flood plains of the Mahaweli Basin. They can be seen in areas east of Polonnaruwa and Kantalai. The marsh elephant is a huge animal, some big bulls reaching up to about ten feet at the shoulder. The writer himself has had the experience of coming across the spoor of some giant animals on the banks of the Mahaweli river south of Kantalai and on measuring them (two and a half times the circumference of an elephants forefoot gives the height at the shoulder) found them to be almost ten feet at the shoulder. There was a controversy some time ago as to whether the marsh elephant is a different sub species, an unofficial scientific connotation was given to it 'elephas maximus vil aliya', but this has not been established so far. The experts seem to think that the stature of these elephants is due to the food and environmental conditions of their marshy habitat. The Maduru Oya and Flood Plains National Parks were established mainly to preserve the last of the marsh elephants.

Among all the elephants, the most grand and magnificent is the wild tusker. It is also the animal that was most sought after and suffered the most during the days of hunting. As a result it has become the rarest animal in the Sri Lankan jungles. No accurate count of this creature has been possible, but it is believed that no more than 200 of them are left in the wilds, an optimistic estimate perhaps. Unlike the African elephant (*Loxodonta africana*), where both sexes have tusks, in the Indian elephant only the bulls have tusks. Even today the tusker is heavily sought after for its ivory. During the last seven years, the writer himself has come across the carcasses of many tuskers, shot by poachers for the ivory. Among them was the famous tusker of Yala, Podiputtuwa, which was shot just outside the Park in 1986. Then there was the beautiful tusker in the hamlet of Kattamurichcham in 1984, another one shot in the Manankatiya weva in 1988, and in April this year a majestic specimen at Utti Maduwa, all in the Anuradhapura district.

Encouragingly, during the last couple of years, the Yala National Park has been the venue for a number of tusker sightings, ranging from the little 2 ft calf to the mature 9 ft giant. The writer himself has identified 22 different tuskers here during the last seven years.

Not only the tusker, but the entire wild elephant population of Sri Lanka is fighting a tough battle for survival. The conservationists fervently hope that this is not a hopeless one. Very unfortunately, due to the lack of knowledge among other things, the natural habitat of the elephant is fast dwindling. In most parts of the island, they are being

harassed by cultivators who have established their plantations in the wrong place. Most of the time, right in the paths these great beasts have been using for the last thousands of years. Recently a large number of them were quite unnecessarily moved down, allegedly by the northern terrorists near Kumana and some more poisoned in the Wilpattu National Park.

The concept of nature conservation has been a very ancient principle in the island. Words scattered through the pages of that ancient chronicle the Mahawamsa, stand testimony to this. Many stone inscriptions in the ruined cities also echo the same theme. The most famous of these is the 11th century edict of King Nissankamalla of Polonnaruwa on his Royal visit to Anuradhapura. Inscribed on an upright stone slab, it now stands in the shadow of that great stupa, Ruwanweli.

Following the noble tradition of the ancient Buddhist kings, the Government has launched a series of tough and costly ventures to preserve our jungles and their denizens from extinction from wanton destruction and in the wake of development. Together with this, the enthusiasm shown by the younger generation recently, especially among the rural schools towards conservation is very encouraging. In keeping with the good work done by the ancient monarchs, it is also fitting that the island should have the oldest conservation society in the world, the Wild Life and Nature Protection Society of Sri Lanka, which is in its 96th year. Many private bird clubs and conservation organizations too have sprung up in recent times and they have all contributed in no small way towards this very important cause.

