

IT'S peace to the mind, beauty to the eyes and music to the ears, that greets one entering this hidden paradise. Dombagaskanda provides such and many more to all who love nature. The Dombagaskanda forest reserve situated very close to Colombo (less than 40 km) is unbelievably rich in fauna and flora.

Dombagaskanda located in the Kalutara District, near Ingiriya has an extent of land not exceeding 650 acres. It's bounded on three sides by roads and by the Kalu ganga on the southern side. Its elevation ranges from about 20 m to 200 m above mean sea level. Dombagaskanda has three mountain peaks, all above 155 m.

been gradually changing to a natural forest, is also a habitat to many species.

At Dombagaskanda, the day begins with a wide variety of musical calls which comprise mostly of bird songs. Birds in Dombagaskanda, are represented by more than 150 species, including nine species endemic to Sri Lanka. Because of the limited extent of the forest, a fortunate bird watcher, may observe more than half of these in one day.

Birds as large as the Grey Hornbil (*Tlkus ginghalensis*) and small dainty birds like the Orange breasted Blue Flycatcher (*Mascicapa ticedliae*) are commonly met with

GLORY OF DOMBAGASKANDA

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The forest can grossly be delivered into four categories. The natural forest and the three plantations, *Albiya*, *Pinas* and *Dipteroconpas*. The natural forest belongs to the forest type, 'Tropical rain forest', which is considered as the most important type of forests in the world. The natural forest, which provides shelter to a large number of animals than the plantations, has a *Dipteroconpas* dominant vegetation with a prominent bamboo undergrowth. The *Albiya* plantation which has

in the natural forest. The colourful Trogen (*Harpactes fasciats*), Blue Chat (*Brithacus brunncus*) and three-toed Kingfisher (*ceyx erithacus*) along with the Bulbuls and Bee-eaters add glamour to the forest. The three-toed Kingfisher is one of the most brightly coloured bird in Sri Lanka. It's bright orange, red and blue combination of colours makes it a fascinating sight to watch in the dark forest.

The Yellow-Fronted Barbet (*megalaima flans*) and the Lorikeet (*Loricalus beryllinus*) are the commonest of the endemic birds living here. The Green-billed Coucal (*Centropus chlorohynchus*) is probably the most precious bird named by Dombagaskanda. As it has been categorized under endangered species, in the red data back 1990. This Coucal conformed to a few locations in the wet zone of Sri Lanka, is encountered with quite frequently, in the area with a dense bamboo undergrowth. This bird differs only slightly in appearance from it's near relative, the common coucal (*centropus sivensis*). But the Green-billed coucal can early be defferentiated from the latter, by it's deep call vote.

The thirteen species of raptors that roam the forest, speak of the abundance of other small animals which prey to the former. Of the birds of prey the commonest is the Serpent Eagle (*spilornus cheela*). The Crested Gashawk (*Accipiter bivigadis*) a striking bird that hunts in the interior of the forest, is quite local and rare.

The mammals are more elusive in manner, making them a difficult subject to study. The Wild Boar (*sus croya*), the Black-naped Hare (*sepus mgricollis*) and the Porcupine (*Hystrix indrca*) are quite common in the forest. Areas of disturbed soil and other signs of their nocturnal activities prove this. But as they eschew human company, it will be a rare chance to observe them. The Torque Monkey (*Macaca sintca*) and the Leaf Monkeys (*Presbybs serex*) are plentiful and are the noisiest animals dwelling in the forest. These monkeys live in small colours of about ten individuals. Both species are endemic to Sri Lanka.

The Indian Rock Python (*Python malurus*) is the largest reptile that inhabits the Dombagaskanda forest reserve. A Python captured from the periphery of the forest measured more than eight feet. The common Cobra (*Naja naja*) the most venomous snake in the forest, is not common. But the mild venomous thumb-nosed Viper (*Hypnale hypnale*) is commoner, especially along the banks of the streamlets. Here they are found on rocks of leaf debris, with their colour camon flagging them completely. The venom of these vipers cause severe pain on injection, but is not normally fatal to humans. The Bronze-backs, the Whip Snakes and the endemic Green pit Viper (*Trimerasums bignocephalus*) are the more colourful of snakes. The decomposing layer of soil provides the ideal habit to the Dumenos Kikeri Snake (*oligodon sublineatus*) and Gunther's Roughside (*Aspidura guentheri*), two slender innocent snakes.

The Earless Lizard (*Otocryptus wergmanni*) is called the 'pinum katussa' in Sinhala, because of it's mode of travel. Because it's hind limbs are larger than the step it

takes. A rarer species, the Hump-nosed Lizard (*lyriocephalus scutotus*) is an appalling sight to the observer.

The reptiles show a greater preference to habitats than the other animals. Thus, they have a clearly marked distribution in the forest.

Frogs and toads which are silent throughout the day, awake in the night, to make it more mysterious with their eerie calls. The most important species of frogs found here is the species belonging to the endemic gevera *Monophrys*. It's found under slabs of rock which are moist and wet. This frog is well adopted to its habitat. Its body is almost totally flat, making it possible for it to live in minute spaces and enabling it to have a firm grip on the rock. The tadpoles of these frogs do not live in water pools like most others, but grow in the moist underneath of rocks to become full grown adults in a few weeks. Eventhough, the amphibians are not an enticing group of animals deal with, they provide much information of the ground and soil situation of the forest, to which they are very sensitive.

The many streams that flow across the jungle originate within the reserve. these are inhabited by a large number of fishes, representing more than 50% of the Sri Lankan freshwater fish species.

Four fishes listed in the red data book live in the streams of Dombagaskanda. They are the Cumming's Barb (*puntius cumming*), Cherry Barb (*Puntine tittaya*), Combtail (*belantia signata*) and the Jonklaas's Loach (*Lepibocephalithyes janklaasi*). The Jonklaas's Loach is a small fish (about 6 cm in length) living very close to the substratum which is mainly sand. Because of its colour it is very difficult to distinguish from the substratum when immobile. The endemic Jonklaas's Loach has only been recorded from three other sites in Sri Lanka. The above should be adequate to signify the importance and the value of Dombagaskanda forest.

The butterflies, probably the prettiest of all, are represented by seventy five or more species. The Blue Mordon (*Papilio polymnester*) and the Birdwing (*holdes helena*) are the largest butterflies in the forest. The Tree Nympu (*Idea lynceus*) has a fascinating method of flying. When in our, it prefers to glide rather than fly actively. It's butterfly commonly met with in the dense forest. Minute Swifts and Darts are also abundant, though they are normaly not noticed by passersby. these enchanting insects are commoner on hot days, than on cold damp days.

In the wilderness of Dombagaskanda, is the



Bodhinagala monastery. The history of the monastery dates back to many decades. In the past, it's clear that the monastery had contributed a lot in keeping this forest patch intact. One would hope that it would provide the same sort of protection in the future too.

The Dombagaskanda forest reserve, like most other important forests in Sri Lanka, is under threat of destruction. The main causes are illicit felling of trees, chena cultivation, encroachment and metal quarrying. Some endemic fishes are also threatened because of unauthorized collection of fish at will, for export.

The need for immediate protective methods is clear. Security should be provided by upgrading its legal status. Education programmes for the people in the forest should teach them methods of using the forest for their day to day needs, without disturbing the forest, as it was done by the older generations.

The Young Zoologists Association of Sri Lanka carried out a preliminary study of the Dombagaskanda forest from 1990 to 1992. Results of this study have been published in the booklet "Fauna and Flora of Dombagaskanda Forest Preserve". This study report provides a complete checklist of the faunal species and an account of the bio-diversity of the forest. It also stresses on the threats and dangers the forest is facing

and gives a number of recommendations to ensure the protection and conservation of the Dombagaskanda forest reserve.

Dombagaskanda is very rich in orchid flora. Out of the twenty or more epiphytic and ground dwelling orchids, about 25% are endemic to Sri Lanka. The famous ground orchid 'Narilatha' (*Habenaria criniflora*) is scattered throughout the upper part of the forest. This plant has got its Sinhala name because of its glamorous flower, which has a woman like shape. Narilatha blossoms once a year. After 2 or 3 months the flowers, stem and leaves die out leaving only its root. After the next 6-9 months no sign of the plants can be seen, till the Narilatha reappear to blossom in the next season. The Vanilla orchid (*Vanilla moonii*) is an epiphytic orchid with a weak stem, which grows like a creeper. The Vanilla flavour was originally extracted from the flowers of this orchid.

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