

CULTURAL HIGHLIGHTS AND BIRDWATCHING TOUR TO SRI LANKA
COURTESY OF LOCAL TOUR COMPANY
WALKWITHJITH.COM

2ND – 16TH MARCH 2014

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Hazel Peters
Local guide – Nandana Hewagamage

This was a privately organized trip initiated by my friend David Bush, who had expressed an interest in visiting Sri Lanka over a number of recent years. David made the initial contact with Prasanjith Caldera aka Jith, the proprietor of WalkWithJith.com, based in Colombo. Jith put together a 15 night itinerary for us which took in the main cultural sites and a few other visits e.g. to a tea factory, a traditional herb garden, and a wood carvery, plus visits to the main birding areas. At the start we were given nicely presented trip checklists each, plus a handy little Sri Lankan –published guide to the principal species.

We booked our own flights and flew with Jet Airways from LHR to Mumbai then Mumbai to Colombo. We left on 1st Mar and arrived early [4:30 a.m.!!] on 2nd and were met by Jith and Nandana at the airport. Ensconced on our spacious air-conditioned 25-seater coach with driver Nimal and helper Penando, we set off for the longish drive to our first hotel at Sigiriya, location of the World Heritage Site of the Sigiriya Rock Fortress.

En route we stopped for lunch at a large lake and later by a marsh area and soon logged a large number of water birds including 7 species of **egret & heron** including **Indian Pond Heron**, and also **Black-headed Ibis**, **Asian Openbill Stork**, **Indian- and Little Cormorants** and **Oriental Darter**. Our first raptors encountered were the striking **White-bellied Sea-eagle** and **Grey-headed Fish Eagle**. **Common, Stork-billed**, and **White-throated Kingfishers** were noted. We also encountered our first endemic in the shape of a **Small Minivet**.

Our hotel was the very pleasant Sigiriya Village Hotel, which has extensive gardens and accommodation in separate chalets located throughout the gardens. After arrival and a brief settle in, we did some birding around the area near the hotel. The jewel here was a very confiding **Indian Pitta** in the hotel grounds, posing for photographs. We also visited the awe-inspiring 200m high Sigiriya Rock Fortress. This comprises an ancient volcanic plug which a former king of Sri Lanka had selected as the centre of a new capital, and he built a palace and fortress atop the rock. About 1000 steps lead to the top, via caves where well-preserved wall paintings can be seen. The views from the ruins at the top are stunning. Wikipedia has lots of info about this incredible site. During the course of the afternoon, passerines now started to be added to the list, with **Tickell's Blue Flycatcher**, **Oriental White-eye**, **Velvet-fronted Nuthatch**, **Jerdon's Leafbird**, **Marshall's Iora**, **Black-headed Cuckooshrike**, the very striking **Orange-headed Thrush**, and **Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike** being highlights. We also had prolonged views of a **Shaheen Falcon**, a local race of Peregrine. The day was rounded off with a well-earned and excellent meal at the hotel [after the exertions of mounting the 'rock'!].

3rd March

Today we visited Polonnawura historical site, which is near Sigiriya, and has ruins of various temples and Buddhist stupas, and also some huge Buddhas fashioned from solid stone in incredible detail, in the sitting, standing and prone positions. It was once a capital of Sri Lanka and is the site of the ancient city of the Polonnaruwa kingdom. There were birds here too, a valuable one being the endemic **Brown-capped Babbler**.

After spending some time here and being told a lot about the history by Nandana, we had lunch and then headed for Kaugula Reservoir National Nature Reserve, which we explored by jeep. In addition to the herons and egrets already seen we added **Painted Stork** and **Spot-billed Pelican**, **Pheasant-tailed Jacana**, **Purple [Grey-headed] Swamphen**, **Little Ringed Plover** and **Kentish Plover**, **Red-wattled Lapwing**, **Indian Stone-curlew**, [considered by some to be a separate species and by some to be a subspecies of Eurasian Stone-curlew], and **Black-winged Stilt**. There were also many **Whiskered Terns** here. In addition we found a large herd of **Asian Elephants** and were entertained by a couple of young animals having a head-to-head tussle.

4th March

We did some early birding around the hotel before breakfast and added **Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill** [endemic], **Sri Lanka Green Pigeon** [aka **Pompadour Pigeon**] [endemic], **White-rumped Shama**, **Orange-headed Thrush**, **Dark-fronted Babbler**, **Green Imperial Pigeon**, **Sri Lanka Swallow** [endemic], and **Thick-billed Flowerpecker** amongst others.

After breakfast we headed for the old colonial hill town of Kandy, now more a sizeable city. We arrived in time for lunch in a nice restaurant overlooking a small lake and the famed Buddhist Temple of the Tooth, a world heritage site. At lunch we noted a **Black Eagle** soaring over the hillside and an **Oriental Honey-buzzard** also passed over. Once we were settled in our very comfortable hotel, the Hotel Suisse, comprising an elegant old colonial building, we then headed down into the town and Nandana gave us an informative guided tour of the Temple of the Tooth. This is located in the palace complex of the former Kingdom of Kandy and nestles alongside a smaller Hindu temple and a Christian church, which presumably dates from the British colonial days. After the fascinating tour round the temple and its lavish decorations we then attended a show of traditional Kandyan dancing, accompanied by drummers, which ended with a finale of fire walking. The small lake gave us **Black-crowned Night-heron**. After an excellent dinner at the hotel we had a relatively early night in preparation for a transfer day in the morning.

5th March

After breakfast we checked out, and then headed for the nearby Udawatta Kelle Forest reserve area. We did some of our first forest birding here and started logging some interesting species, due in no small part to Nandana's intimate knowledge of calls and habits. Highlights included **Crimson-backed [Great] Flameback** [an endemic woodpecker], **Yellow-fronted Barbet** [endemic], **Oriental [Black-backed] Dwarf Kingfisher**, **Sri Lanka Small Barbet** [endemic], **Layard's Parakeet** [endemic], **Brown Fish Owl**, and **Lesser Hill Mynah**. We then headed for our next location, by a village called Kitulgala. En route a raptor was spotted from the bus and we stopped to check – it was a dark phase **Booted Eagle**, a species familiar to some of us from trips in Europe. After a 3 hour drive to this, the wet zone of Kitulgala, we checked into our lovely little hotel, the Kitulgala Rest House, which has terraced rooms overlooking the confluence of two rivers with rain forest as a background - a lovely spot, and close to where some of the film "Bridge over the River Kwai" was filmed. Some of the walls in the hotel reception area were adorned with pictures of Sir Alec Guinness et al.

Birding around Kitulgala the list continued to build with **Yellow-browed Bulbul**, **Brown-headed Barbet**, **Black-rumped Flameback**, **Lesser Yellownape** [another woodpecker], **Asian Koel**, **Alexandrine Parakeet**, **White-bellied Drongo**, **Shikra**, and **Legge's Flowerpecker** [endemic], to name but a few. By now we were gradually becoming acclimatized to the high temperatures and humidity.

6th March

This was a long, arduous but rewarding day. We did some pre-breakfast birding on the hotel side of the river and then after breakfast, we were ferried across the river in two groups of 4, standing in a narrow dug-out canoe [which did have a bamboo outrigger for stability]. I was in the first crossing and as we landed we saw a **Crested Serpent Eagle** standing on a large outcrop mid-stream. I took a few photos and then as our second group crossed it took flight, allowing some excellent flight shots. The crossing was quite an experience and required a good degree of concentration and balance in the very narrow craft [at most about ¾ of a metre wide!]. This 'ferry' was a lifeline for the locals who lived on the opposite side of the river to the main village. From here we trekked along a track past small dwellings and into the forest. We didn't return until 3 p.m.! Plenty of water was taken of course, and we saw many good birds. Additions to the list included **Sri Lanka Scimitar Babbler** [endemic], **Black-hooded** and **Black-naped Orioles**, **Sri Lanka Hill Mynah** [endemic], **Sri Lanka Crested Drongo** [endemic], **Spot-winged Thrush** [endemic], **Sri Lanka Hanging Parrott** [endemic], and **Chestnut-backed Owlet** [endemic]. Shortly after seeing the latter we had our first of only two occasions of heavy rain during the trip. The Owl was in a tree near a villager's dwelling and we were able to shelter under the overhang of their roof and sample some Durian fruit they offered us [tastes rather like Lychee and is a good laxative so only a small sample was tried!]. Whilst sheltering we had close views of a cock **Sri Lanka Jungle Fowl** [endemic]. After the rain had ceased we set off again and Nandana's sharp hearing soon had us clinching the endemic **Green-billed Coucal**. We 'staked out' a paddyfield in a clearing where **Blue-faced Malkoha** were apparently sometimes seen but had no luck, although a **Besra** flew through, and we had one of only two sightings of **Slaty-legged Crake**. Nandana left us

to watch the area whilst he went off in search the endemic **Serendip Scops Owl**, but he wasn't successful. We were getting pretty tired [and hungry!] by this stage and we had logged 59 species during the walk, so we set off back to the ferry.

That afternoon we chilled at the hotel spotting what we could from the terrace overlooking the river.

7th March

Sadly we had to leave this lovely spot to transfer to the old hill station town of Nuwara Eliya – a long drive. Before leaving we had nice views of **Lotens' Sunbird** by the hotel. En route through scenic hill country we spotted **Mountain Hawk Eagle** and before long we were clearly in tea country with hillsides covered with tea bushes and large hoardings advertising which estate they belonged to. We stopped for a pre-arranged guided tour around a tea factory, and a free sample of delicious freshly made tea. **Hill Swallows** flew around the buildings. We arrived at Nuwara Eliya, which is centred around a large lake [Lake Gregory], and also Victoria Park, and is located at around 2000m above sea level. We had very nice lunch at a restaurant by the lake. We then checked into our hotel, the Binota Residency, a pleasant little hotel above the town. In the afternoon we birded in Victoria Park. Unfortunately it decided to rain fairly steadily which made photography pretty difficult, which was a shame, as there were some special birds to find. A rather smelly river runs through the park and this is where our efforts were concentrated. We soon had **Forest Wagtail** on the list, alongside **Grey Wagtail**, and also a number of **Common Sandpipers**. After much diligent searching by Nandana we soon had good views of the elusive **Pied [Ground] Thrush**, both male and female. Not an endemic but this park is about the only place in Sri Lanka where it can be seen with any certainty. **Indian Pond Herons** were also common along this stretch of water, and we also got our first views of the endemic **Yellow-eared Bulbul**. Dusk was soon on us so we retired to the hotel for dinner.

8th March

Nuwara Eliya is the main jumping off point for access to the renowned Horton Plains National Park, a location in complete contrast to the damp forests. It was a fairly arduous winding trip up to the Park entrance, which we did in jeeps, starting very early before first light, and taking our breakfast with us. We arrived at the entrance at around 6:30 a.m.! We were clearly in different country now, and it was cool enough for warmer clothing. This was more open country with low scrub and more open woodland, and large open areas of grassland. Birds of prey comprised **Oriental Honey Buzzard**, **Black-winged Kite**, **Mountain Hawk Eagle**, and **Common Kestrel**. After a lot of diligent and patient searching we soon had pretty good views of the very skulking **Sri Lanka Bush Warbler**. **Orange-breasted Green Pigeon** was a new addition, as was an **Alpine Swift** overhead. **Paddyfield Pipits** were numerous in the grassy areas, and then we scored with two more endemics – **Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush**, and **Dull Blue Flycatcher**. We also saw **Indian Blackbird**, which although considered by some to be the same species or perhaps a subspecies of our Blackbird, looks totally different, with bright orange bill and legs and a very heavy orange eyering. Other small birds included **Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher**, **Indian Robin**, **Sri Lanka White-eye** [endemic], **Brown Shrike**, **Pied Bushchat**, **Thick-billed/Jungle Crow** and the eastern race of **Great Tit**, which is very greyish in colour. A pair of **Giant Squirrels** posed nicely in a tree. All this was in a pleasant 2.5 km walk through varied habitat [with a pause for breakfast of course!], out to a viewpoint called Mini World's End. There is a longer 9 km walk, which takes you to a more spectacular viewpoint called World's End but we decided against that. We then walked back and boarded our jeeps for the tortuous winding drive back down to Nuwara Eliya where we had lunch in the hotel. Late afternoon Nandana took us to an area behind the town where there was some woodland and a small densely vegetated valley. Patient searching and listening here by Nandana soon has us peering into the dark vegetation for reasonable views of the endemic **Sri Lanka Scaly Thrush**, and shortly after that, the target species – a **Kashmir Flycatcher**, a superb bird with its brown-grey back, deep rufous throat, breast and flanks with a neat black border between the breast and upper parts, and a cocked white-sided tail. A good end to a rewarding and productive day.

9th March

Today we bade farewell to the owner of the Binota Residency and its attentive staff and set off for the long transfer to Tissamaharama in the south-east of the island. En route we had **Black Eagle**, **Oriental Honey Buzzard**, **Plain Prinia**, **Purple-rumped Sunbird**, and **Pale-billed Flowerpecker** to name a few. We travelled via the town of Ella and made a stop at the Ravana waterfall, which is

around 25m high and is named after the legendary king Ravana. We stopped for a pleasant lunch in a roadside café, and eventually arrived at our lovely hotel, the Hibiscus Garden Hotel, where comfortable accommodation was in comfortable bungalows located in well-tended gardens with a central swimming pool. After settling in we drove the short distance from the hotel to the large Lake Tissamaharama [Lake Tissa for short], and had a very productive session scanning at various points. According to my notes we logged around 52 species! New additions included **Black-, Yellow-, and Cinnamon Bitterns**, **Pied Kingfisher**, **Watercock**, **White-breasted Waterhen**, **Painted Stork**, **Caspian- White-winged-**, and **Gull-billed Terns**, and a whole list of waders including **Pintail Snipe**, and a flock of 15 **Oriental Pratincoles** which I spotted flying in and settling. The other waders we saw the next day at Yala NP so I'll mention those for that day. The gardens at the hotel were quite productive with **Orange-breasted Green Pigeon**, **Sri Lanka Green Pigeon**, **Imperial Green Pigeon**, and flowerpeckers and sunbirds.

10th March

Today comprised a full day jeep safari in Yala National Park located on the south-east corner of Sri Lanka. We took a picnic breakfast and lunch with us. This was an very productive day, producing a list of 90 bird species! On top of that we saw **Sambar- and Spotted Deer**, **Grey-faced Langur**, **Golden Jackal**, **Wild Pig**, **Land Monitor**, **Marsh Mugger Crocodiles**, and 3 **Leopard**. The list included 18 wader species, the star of which, for me, was **Great Thick-knee** – a mammoth Stone-curlew species. The others included numerous **Lesser Sand Plovers**, **Pacific Golden Plover**, **Red-wattled- and Yellow-wattled Lapwings**, many **Little Stints**, familiar species such as **Wood Sandpiper**, **Greenshank**, **Grey Plover**, and **Marsh Sandpiper**. The diminutive **Small Pratincole** was also present. Herons etc abounded of course and **Eurasian Spoonbill** was added to the list, and **Brahminy Kites** were common [as indeed they were throughout the trip]. Other species worth mentioning were **Crested Treerswift**, **Greater Coucal**, the awesome **Malabar Pied Hornbill**, **Green-, Blue-tailed- and Chestnut-headed Bee-eaters** and **Indian Roller**, **Large Cuckooshrike**, **White-browed Fantail**, **Jungle Prinia**, and last but not least the attractive **Ashy-crowned Sparrow/Finch Lark**. By lunchtime we were by the beach, but seabirds were surprisingly absent despite the strong onshore wind. At this location was a poignant reminder of the forces of nature – a monument to the 25 Japanese tourists and many local people who drowned when the 2004 Tsunami from the Indonesian earthquake hit. They had been staying in beachside accommodation. In all around 250 people lost their lives in the park. The wave was 6m high. After lunch and a rest we gradually worked our way back through the park, quite surprised as to how far we had travelled along the many tracks.

11th March

Early morning Nandana took us to a minor road somewhere on the outskirts of Tissa, in search of woodpeckers. After some searching we were rewarded with excellent views of a pair of **Black-rumped Flamebacks** and then the scarce **White-naped Woodpecker** at a nest hole in a palm.

The main visit today was to the nearby Bundala Ramsar Wetland Reserve. This was the first wetland to be designated a Ramsar site in Sri Lanka. It comprises scrub jungle, and large shallow saline pools [where salt is extracted]. Once again we were transported in jeeps and took a picnic lunch and once again the waders were numerous. At the lunch stop I was scanning around and a **Red-necked Phalarope** came into view. Also added to the wader tally were **Turnstone**, **Black-tailed Godwit**, **Redshank**, 10 **Curlew Sandpipers**, and a **Curlew**. A huge **Black-necked Stork** dwarfed the other herons and water birds. Familiar species comprised **Barn Swallow** and **Sand Martin**, and on the ground we found **Oriental Skylark**, and the *M.f.beema* race of **Yellow Wagtail**. By the salt lagoons there were numerous resting Terns, including **Little-, Greater Crested-, Lesser Crested-, Caspian-, Gull-billed**, 1 **Common**, and many **Whiskered**. I'm pretty sure there must have been **Roseate** there too but the main groups were quite distant and tightly packed, and also not in full adult plumage, plus it was very hot and the heat haze made 'scoping difficult. Another good bird here was **Ashy Woodswallow**.

We chilled at the hotel afterwards and then late afternoon had another foray around Lake Tissa. **Black- and Yellow Bitterns** showed well again. We scanned for some time under some large trees, which were heaving with roosting Fruit Bats. These were the **Indian Flying Fox** species, otherwise known as **Greater Indian Fruit Bat** *Pteropus giganteus*. In reeds here we clinched Clamorous Reed-warbler, good numbers of Streaked Weaver and also Baya Weaver, plus the diminutive **Scaly-breasted- and Black-headed [Tri-coloured] Munias**. Whilst scanning as dusk at a further location a snipe flew into view in my scope and landed – expecting another Pintail Snipe I was surprised when it turned and revealed itself as a **Painted Snipe**. Soon everyone was on it and Christine and

Clive were both pleased to clinch a lifer. **Common Moorhen** also caused some excitement as a new tick for the list!

12th March

Another transfer day, this time to the famous Sinharaja Rainforest area. On the way we passed the huge water body at Udawalawe National Park where there is an orphaned elephant transit home where they try to rehabilitate orphaned young elephants. It was either here by the entrance where we stopped and had excellent views of an **Indian Scops Owl** looking down at us from a tree. After about a 4 hour drive we arrived at our accommodation for access to Sinharaja, the Rock View Motel, a simple basic motel with a lovely view over the surrounding hills. A wedding was in full swing, with very loud live music provided by a guy on synth and keyboard. Weddings are a very colourful event in Sri Lanka. We had some lunch and then set off for a foray into the Sinharaja rain forest. Transport was by jeeps as the tracks in the reserve are VERY bumpy and rocky. The best species here was a **Sri Lanka Frogmouth**, which despite its name is not an endemic species. We also had **Yellow-browed Bulbul** and **Black Bulbul**, **Brown-breasted Flycatcher**, **Yellow-billed Babbler**, **White-rumped-**, **Black-throated-** and **Scaly-breasted Munias**.

13th March

Today comprised a full day in Sinharaja rainforest, travelling in two small US army type jeeps – very bouncy, numb bum, hang on for dear life stuff, and quite an adventure. At some point prior to today we had learnt that Nandana has received some 'gen' from a contact that a **Blue-and-White Flycatcher** [from the far east] had been found and seen regularly by the main reserve entrance. This was a first for Sri Lanka, so clearly a target bird. After about 30 mins drive we eventually arrived at the reserve entrance very early in the morning. A lot of patient waiting proved negative, although other birds were seen including the attractive **Emerald Dove**. After a while we walked down the road a little and then some activity in the trees was noted, with a **Tickell's Blue Flycatcher** soon picked out, and there it was accompanying the latter, the superb **Blue-and-White Flycatcher**. We had good view of this as it fed just above our heads. The reserve was eventually fully open and we entered with our required ranger accompanying us. Target species here were more endemics and we were soon watching some very tame **Sri Lanka Blue Magpies**. **Sri Lanka Jungle Fowl** were much in evidence, but patient waiting and call-playing in suitable habitat only had us hearing a **Sri Lanka Spurfowl** not 4-5 m away but totally unseen – very frustrating. The endemic **Green-billed Coucal** was seen again [not as showy as Great Coucal although the same size, but much more secretive]. Movement in the tall trees finally had us getting fleeting views of the endemic **Red-faced Malkoha**, a hard bird to find as although being quite large, inhabits the high canopy. Another endemic we managed to connect with was the **Sri Lanka Rufous-, or Orange-billed Babbler**. **Sri Lanka Hill Mynahs** were seen again plus another seemingly difficult endemic species, **White-faced Starling**, with a distinctive loud call which does enable you to locate where it might be in the high canopy. There were many other forest species of course, including **Asian Brown Flycatcher**, **Asian Paradise Flycatcher**, **Sri Lanka [Crested] Drongo**, **Sri Lanka Scimitar Babbler**, and **Malabar Trogon**. I almost forgot – another jewel in the crown as far as endemics go – **Serendib Scops Owl**. As mentioned earlier Nandana had tried unsuccessfully for this species at Kitulgala. However one of our jeep drivers had some local gen and after some 'jungle bashing' through fairly thick undergrowth, and by crouching down low to the ground everyone eventually had good views of a roosting bird low in a dense bush. It was impossible to position oneself to photograph unfortunately, although there was no light in any case. There was also the danger of invading leeches if you spent too long in one position! Leech socks were de rigueur in Sinharaja.

14th March

The failure on the SL Spurfowl yesterday had Nandana acting in more local 'gen' and we were given the option of getting up VERY early [i.e. about 4:30 a.m.!] to visit a site where a pair regularly appeared at first light. Myself, Clive, Dave and Alan opted to go and we set off bleary-eyed in a jeep in the dark. Soon we were bouncing along a tortuous forest track, amazed at seeing mothers with their immaculately dressed schoolchildren walking along the track by torchlight [for some 3-4 km], at around 5 a.m. in order to get to a 'main' track to catch their school bus! We finally arrived at the location just before first light, to discover that the viewing area was the back room of a villager's dwelling. This villager fed his 'garden' birds and whilst waiting we had excellent views of **Indian Blue Robin** and **Spot-winged Thrush**. Then suddenly right on cue, the pair of **Sri Lanka Spurfowl** appeared and wandered around the patch of ground that was the back garden,

feeding contentedly for about 2-3 minutes and then just as suddenly walked off into the undergrowth. A magic moment. We made our way happily back down the track and headed straight to the main Sinharaja reserve entrance where the others were waiting, and sat down to have our picnic breakfast. Some SL birders had some up from Colombo to twitch the Blue-and-White Flycatcher but it didn't show whilst we were there. Post-breakfast we headed again into the main reserve to see what we could find, and to try some different tracks. There was still a 'wanted' endemic to find. We pretty soon had this when Nandana alerted us to the calls of a gang of **Ashy-headed Laughingthrushes**, which showed well by the side of the track, feeding in the leaf litter. We had further views of **Black-naped Monarch**, a lovely blue flycatcher, and connected again with **Orange-billed Babbler**, **Malabar Trogon** [male and female], **Red-faced Malkoha**, **[Bright] Green Warbler**, **Orange Minivet** [a race of Scarlet Minivet], **White-faced Starling** and of course the **Blue Magpies**. Whilst walking around we also had the thrill of seeing a flock of around 10 **Brown-backed Needletail Swifts** as they swooped around in formation and passed all too quickly overhead. Another snippet of 'gen' gave us the option of a very stiff walk up a hillside through a tea plantation and into some forest, to see a Spot-bellied Eagle-owl, which a local villager had alerted the rangers about, as it was nesting. Most of us opted for this, and it was a very steep walk, but worthwhile when we were able to see a very large fluffy chick sitting on a nest, from a rather vertiginous 'platform' overhanging the steep forest slope. Sadly the adult[s] were away from the nest but the chick was impressive. This more or less rounded off the day so we headed back to our motel for a well-earned shower, and dinner.

Sadly it was also time to pack, as this was our last night of the trip proper.

15th March

After breakfast we bade farewell to Sinharaja and the motel staff, and set off for the long drive to Negombo, near Colombo airport for our 1 night in the Tamarind Tree Hotel, our return flight leaving at 05:40 the following morning. The drive went well and we arrived at the impressive Tamarind Tree in time for a spot of late lunch. I then checked us in online – too complicated to explain here but it took over an hour! Some of us then gathered in Clive & Dave's bungalow for a cuppa, after which we had a walk around the extensive grounds of the hotel [again one where the accommodation was in separate bungalows] and saw a few common species, and a Shikra sitting in a tree, by which time dusk was falling.

Jith arrived to see us again and we all had dinner alfresco, with Fruit Bats flying overhead. Jith kindly bought us a couple of bottles of wine, and also courtesy of WalkWithJith we were all given lovely brightly coloured elephant prints on a linen type material, as a parting gift. A nice touch. Ours will be framed and hung somewhere prominent in our house, as a reminder of a fantastic trip.

16th March

We departed early with Jith and Nandana accompanying us, and got to the airport within about 15 mins in good time for the flight. Farewells and thanks were said to Jith for arranging the excellent well-balanced itinerary, to Nandana for his expert guiding and his efforts in making the trip interesting from a cultural point of view, and of course to Limal for his expert driving, and Penando for looking after us so well.

All-in-all a fantastic and thoroughly enjoyable trip, so thanks WalkWithJith.com! Overall nearly everyone saw every bird, the exception of the odd one or two. From my own personal notes I didn't see 6 species, only 2 of which would have been lifers. And to top it all, we broke Nandana's record for a trip list, with 239 species and all 33 endemics!

I should mention of course the other animals seen: those I noted down were Leopard [3 at Yala], Sambar- and Spotted Deer, Asian Elephant, Wild Pig, Black-naped Hare, Golden Jackal, Grey Mongoose, Marsh Mugger Crocodile, Palm Squirrel, Giant Squirrel, the endemic Layard's Palm Squirrel, Grey Langur, Macaque, Purple-faced Leaf-monkey, Greater Indian [Short-nosed] Fruitbat, Land Monitor, a water snake species, various butterflies including the beautiful black & white Sri Lanka Wood Nymph, Geckos, Kangaroo Lizard, Green Garden Lizard, and of course the occasional Leech!.

John Wilson, March 2014.