

SRI LANKA'S WILPATTU NATIONAL PARK

# LAND OF LAKES AND LEOPARDS

Searching for leopards and other  
spectacular wildlife in one of the world's  
most scenic protected areas



*A breathtakingly beautiful  
landscape of serene lakes*

*A splendid panoramic vista  
of a typical villu (lake) landscape,  
Wilpattu National Park, Sri Lanka.*



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Since my first brief visit to Wilpattu National Park, almost forty years ago, I had long dreamed to be able to return there to share its natural beauties with my beloved wife Antonella, and to finally be able to visit it at leisure. Wilpattu, you see, is one of Sri Lanka's most scenic National Parks, and arguably one of the world's most beautiful - it had left an unforgettable impression on me, as it is indeed unlike any other wildlife sanctuary on the island. But what is it that makes it so unique? Wilpattu - Sri Lanka's largest Park - is situated in the dry lowlands of the island's north-west and comprises a

series of lakes - or *villus* - showing varying sizes and degrees of freshness or salinity. With a unique mosaic of over fifty of these wetland areas, these water basins are the Park's most prominent topographical feature (*Villu Pattu* means Land of Lakes). *Villus* are in fact shallow natural lakes that fill with rainwater, and are usually surrounded by white sand beaches and open grassy plains amidst the dense scrub jungle that predominates elsewhere. The *Villus*, with their abundance of water, are topped up during the main rainy season between September and December, when the

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Indian elephant  
*Elephas maximus indicus* feeding on the shores of a villu.

Indian pond  
heron or  
paddybird  
*Ardeola grayii*.



A young Spotted deer Axis axis male.



Park receives heavy downpours thanks to the northeast monsoon. They act as natural reservoirs during the annual drought, which lasts from May to September. Their presence, as the numerous photographs accompanying this article hopefully demonstrate, make Wilpattu's landscapes truly, uniquely and spectacularly beautiful. Declared a wildlife sanctuary in 1905, and elevated to National Park status some 30 years later, Wilpattu is still the largest of Sri Lankan Parks, covering a massive 131,693 hectares, but has gone through a roller-coaster stretch of difficult times during its long life. After having enjoyed for many years the privilege of being the island's most famous and visited Park, it suffered heavily during the hard years of the Tamil uprising and the civil war which followed. The Park was actually closed from the early 1990's until 2003, due to the fighting in the area, and the local wildlife suffered accordingly from

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■ *Target locked!*  
*Sri Lankan leopard*  
*Panthera pardus kotiya focusing on a potential prey nearby.*

Female Spotted deer  
*Axis axis* on the flower-  
filled shore of a villu.

heavy poaching and even landmines. At the moment the wildlife has however successfully rebounded, and sightings are often frequent and spectacular - but Wilpattu is somewhat still suffering, currently from the minority-pleasing maneuvers of local demagogues, petty local politics and the sprouting of illegal settlements in its northern section. But if the landscapes are supremely beautiful, it is the fauna inhabiting them - and which can be observed in such a stunning environment - that makes a visit (possibly more than one, in our case!) a duty for any self-respecting wildlife photographer. This, above all, is the land of leopards, specifically the Sri Lankan subspecies *Panthera pardus kotiya*, noted - particularly in Wilpattu - for its massive size, rich coat and muscular bulkiness. Sightings may not be as regular or as frequent as those in the

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■ Wilpattu is extraordinarily rich in bird species. Left, male Indian peafowl *Pavo cristatus*; top right, Oriental Honey-buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus*; bottom right, Orange-breasted Green pigeon *Treron bicinctus*.







The extraordinarily beautiful courtship display of a male (peacock) Indian peafowl or blue peafowl *Pavo cristatus*.

other crown jewel among Sri Lankan National Parks, Yala NP (see *Anima Mundi - Adventures in Wildlife Photography* Issue 1), but this is the only place in the world where one can hope to admire one stretching languorously, resting or even stalking its prey on the blinding white background of the *villus'* sandy beaches - truly a unique sight. The Park, with its unique rainwater lakes and pools, is also home to large numbers of Asian elephants, Sloth bears, Spotted deer, Sambar deer, Barking deer, Marsh crocodiles, monitor lizards, snakes and turtles, alongside many bird species including raptors, peacocks, hornbills, spoonbills, storks, bee-eaters, pigeons and doves,

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■ Sri Lankan jackal  
*Canis aureus naria*  
bathed in the golden  
light of dawn.





■ Left, Crested  
serpent eagle  
*Spilornis cheela*.  
Right, Crested  
or Changeable  
Hawk Eagle  
*Nisaetus*  
*cirrhatu*s,  
juvenile.



■ Ceylon mugger  
crocodile or Sri  
Lanka marsh  
crocodile  
Crocodylus  
palustris sub.  
kimbula.

*Countless crocodiles basking  
on the villus' sunlit shores*





Far left, Crested or Changeable Hawk Eagle *Nisaetus cirrhatus*. Left, Sri Lankan junglefowl *Gallus lafayettii*.

kingfishers, herons, egrets and ducks. The list is exceedingly long, but to sum it up briefly - a seriously undertaken wildlife photography trip to Wilpattu will never disappoint. On the practical side, Wilpattu's average temperature is a very pleasant 27 C°, and the best time to visit is between February and October: the Park has a good network of gravel roads, particularly those which join the *villus*, and good accommodation is readily available in the vicinity. Wilpattu can be reached in 3-4 hours driving along excellent tarmac roads from Colombo's International Airport; Sri Lanka being such a small island, the Park is also conveniently close to the holy city and archaeological site of Anuradhapura, one of the highlights of the so-called "Cultural Triangle" which lovers of art, religion, culture and history will not want to miss visiting.

### **GOOD TRAILS AND PICNIC SITES**

So the day to return to Wilpattu finally came - the war had been over long enough for the local wildlife to recover from its harrowing hardships and for the long-neglected Park infrastructures to work again. Wilpattu was literally reborn, more beautiful than ever, like a phoenix from its ashes. To explore it in the best possible way and to maximize

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*Male Sambar deer* ■  
*Rusa unicolor.*



■ A rare sight: a pair of Brown Fish Owl *Ketupa zeylonensis* in a breeding or territorial display.



Top left,  Emerald dove  
*Chalcophaps indica*;  
 top right,  
*Pin-tailed snipe*  
*Gallinago stenura*.  
 Bottom left,  
*White-rumped shama*  
*Copsychus malabaricus*;  
 bottom right, *Greater coucal*  
*Centropus sinensis*.





Another rare and unexpected encounter: an adult female Sri Lankan leopard *Panthera pardus kotiya* (on the left) with its two subadult cubs.



Indian elephants *Elephas maximus indicus* feeding in the shallow waters of a villu.





Top left,  Green bee-eater  
*Merops orientalis*;  
 top right,  
 Pacific golden plover  
*Pluvialis fulva*.  
 Bottom left,  
 Indian Pitta  
*Pitta brachyura*;  
 bottom right,  
 White-throated kingfisher  
*Halcyon smyrnensis*.





Ceylon mugger crocodile  
or Sri Lanka marsh crocodile  
*Crocodylus palustris*  
sub. *kimbula* basking  
on the shores of a villu.

our photographic opportunities we turned for advice to our personal friend and naturalist Mevan Piyasena, a local and very knowledgeable wildlife lover who - being exceptionally experienced - agreed to be our guide and tracker for the duration of our stay. After some careful thinking, we opted to spend every single day inside the Park, from dawn to dusk, without going back for lunch to our bungalow, to save time and optimize our stay. Ours was in fact the perfect choice - Wilpattu National Park is equipped with several rest stops where visitors can get off their vehicle, stretch their legs and have a lovely packed lunch, Sri Lankan-style, while basking in the glorious beauty of the surroundings (and possibly even have some unexpected wildlife encounter - pesky Bonnet macaques, monitor lizards, mongooses, snakes and even elephants or leopards might occasionally join the party). Despite several unexpected unseasonal afternoon thunderstorms - which somehow robbed us of a few good opportunities but offered some incredible cloudscapes - we had a truly spectacular trip, with countless

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■ *White-bellied sea eagle Haliaeetus leucogaster.*



■ Left, Painted-lipped lizard *Calotes ceylonensis*, an endemic species; center, Land or Bengal monitor *Varanus bengalensis*; right, Garden lizard *Calotes versicolor*.

Sri Lankan  
leopard *Panthera  
pardus kotiya*.  
This beautiful male  
damaged the tip of  
its tail during a fight  
or a hunting attempt.



Left,  Lesser adjutant stork  
*Leptoptilos javanicus*;  
right, Sri Lankan  
grizzled  
giant squirrel  
*Ratufa macroura*.





sightings of every species we expected to see (in fact, as I am writing these words we are also busy packing for another trip - to Wilpattu, again!). The numbers and variety of encounters were staggering, and the openness of the natural environment allows well-lit photography in most situations, as even the thickest of forests in Wilpattu is a far cry from the oppressive, cathedral-like rainforests of the Amazon or South-East Asia, being open to breeze and above all to that much-desired blessing to wildlife photographers - sunlight.

**A PARADISE FOR WILDLIFE LOVERS**

Wilpattu covers a very extensive area, and to explore it as much as possible *continued on page 41* ➤



Common kingfisher  
*Alcedo atthis.*



Top left, Chestnut-headed bee-eater *Merops leschenaulti*; top right, Jerdon's nightjar *Caprimulgus atripennis*. Bottom left, Sri Lanka grey hornbill *Ocyceros gingalensis*, an endemic species; bottom right, Stork-billed kingfisher *Pelargopsis capensis*.



*Lotus-filled shallow lakes  
dotting the open forest*

Indian pond heron or paddybird  
*Ardeola grayii*.


Left, Malabar pied hornbill  
*Anthracoceros coronatus*;  
center, Woolly-necked stork  
*Ciconia episcopus*;  
right, Purple heron  
*Ardea purpurea*.





Another villu (lake) landscape, typical of the Wilpattu environment.



Right,   
Crested or  
Changeable  
Hawk Eagle  
*Nisaetus cirrhatus*;  
right,  
Black-naped  
monarch  
or Black-naped blue  
flycatcher  
*Hypothymis azurea*,  
in its nest.

one needs to drive around a lot, especially if wishing to reach the Indian Ocean coast (yes - Wilpattu borders with the sea!). It is a rather long day, but well worth it, as the closer one gets to the ocean, the better one can appreciate the subtle changes in the environment and the vegetation. Driving around in Wilpattu basically consists in checking out every *villu* one can think of (there are a few favorites where great sightings of the resident leopards are more or less guaranteed); going from one *villu* to the next, one drives on excellent trails inside the semi-dry forest, where it is easier to observe deer, reptiles and above all an enormous variety of birds - including the most exceptionally inquisitive and friendly Crested Snake eagles *Spilornis cheela* we have ever had the luck to encounter. Asian elephants are also frequently observed as they bathe and feed in the *villus*, often in small herds, while Sloth bears - as anywhere else - are less predictably encountered. ●

**DON'T MISS THE SECOND  
INSTALLMENT OF OUR  
WILPATTU STORY – COMING  
IN JANUARY 2016 ON ISSUE  
21 OF ANIMA MUNDI –  
ADVENTURES IN WILDLIFE  
PHOTOGRAPHY!**



*Sri Lankan leopard*  
*Panthera pardus kotiya*  
*relaxing on the white sand*  
*fringing Maha Patessa,*  
*one of Wilpattu's lakes.*





■ *Green bee-eater*  
*Merops orientalis*,  
a very common  
and strikingly  
beautiful species  
in Wilpattu  
National Park.



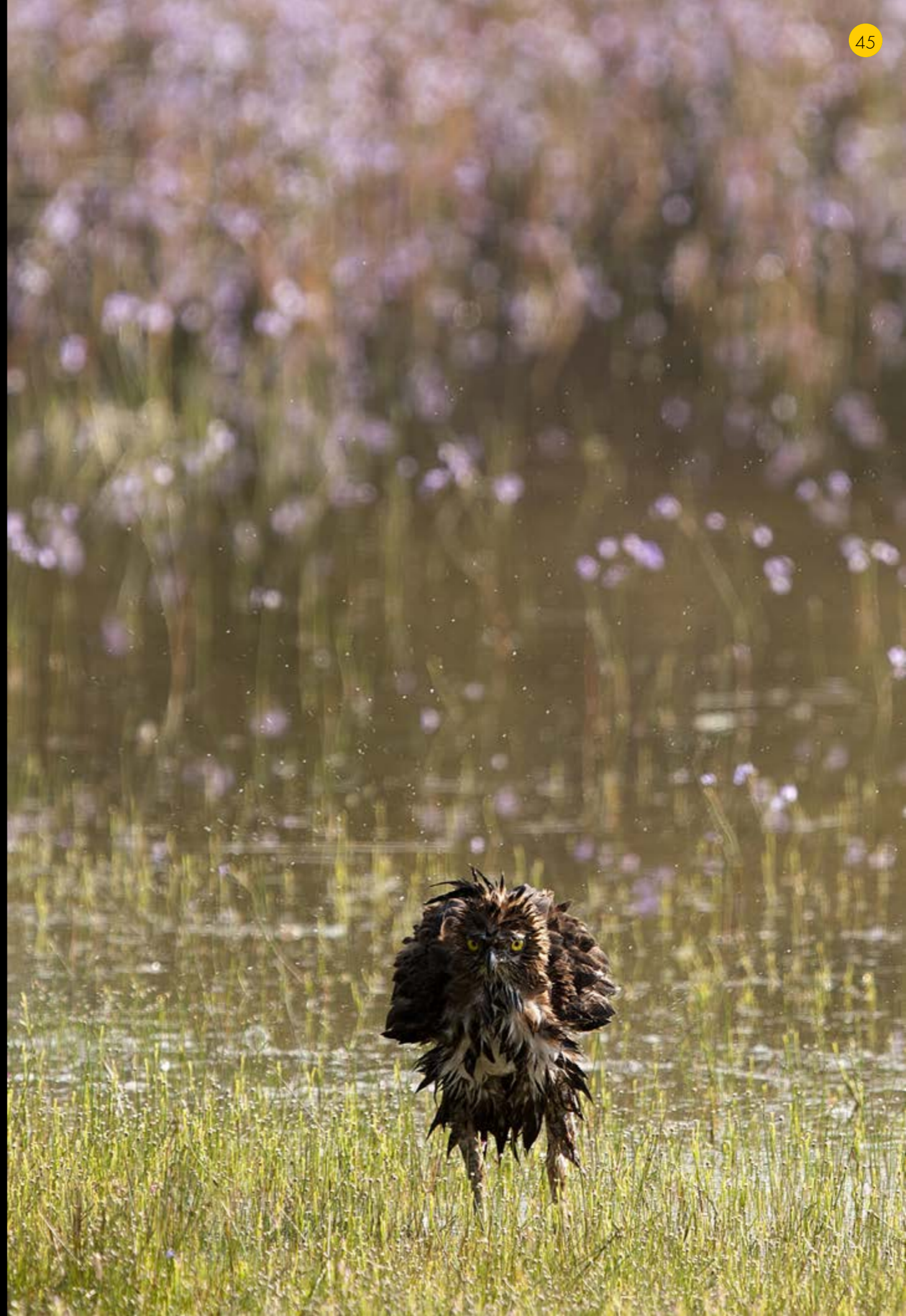


Left, male Indian peafowl or blue peafowl *Pavo cristatus*; right, Little ringed plover *Charadrius dubius*.





■ *Left, a portrait of a juvenile Crested or Changeable Hawk Eagle Nisaetus cirrhatus; right, an adult of the same species looking somehow less dignified after a bath.*



*The unchallenged  
apex predator  
of Sri Lanka's forests*

■ Sri Lankan  
leopard *Panthera  
pardus kotiya*.





Top left, Wild boar *Sus scrofa*; top right, Barking Deer or Muntjak *Muntiacus muntjak malabaricus*. Bottom left, Grey mongoose *Herpestes edwardsii*; bottom right, Indian or Black-naped hare *Lepus nigricollis*.

Spotted deer  
Axis axis, mating.





■ Ceylon mugger  
crocodile or Sri  
Lanka marsh  
crocodile  
*Crocodylus*  
*palustris sub.*  
*kimbula.*



■ Typical Wilpattu landscape under an extraordinarily stormy sky.




■ Far left,  
Brown Fish Owl  
*Ketupa  
zeylonensis*;  
center, Chestnut-  
headed bee-eater  
*Merops  
leschenaulti*;  
right,  
Brahminy kite  
*Haliastur indus*.







Sri Lankan leopard   
Panthera pardus kotiya.



■ Left, Sri Lankan grizzled giant squirrel *Ratufa macroura*; right, portrait of a Toque macaque *Macaca sinica*, an endemic species.

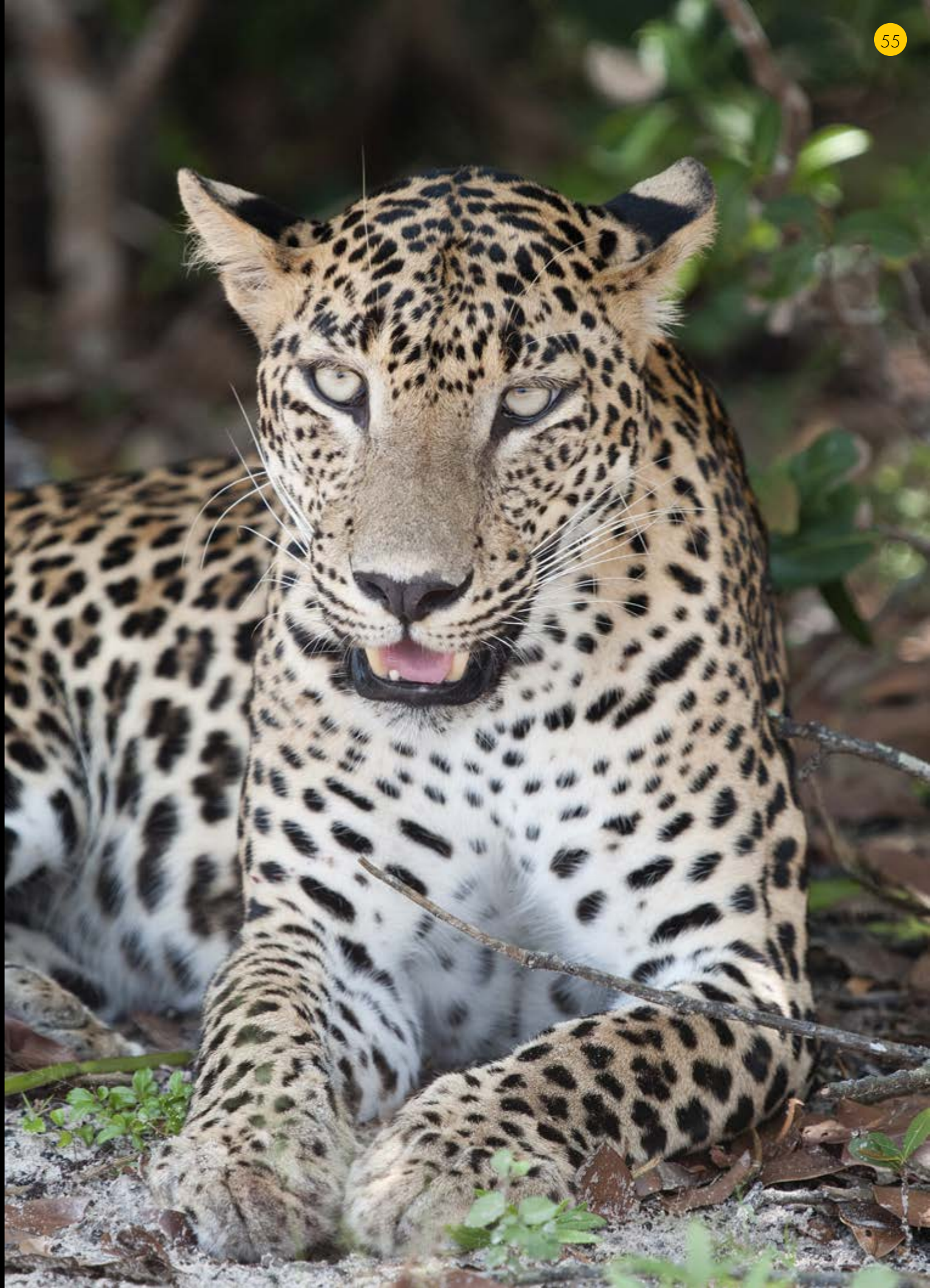




A serene villu (lake) landscape.



Left, seated Buddha statue in the Abhayagiri of the ancient capital city Anuradhapura, a holy Buddhist cult and pilgrimage site which is part of Sri Lanka's Cultural Triangle and is under patronage of UNESCO as a World Heritage site; right, Sri Lankan leopard Panthera pardus kotiya, Wilpattu.





Colossal sitting statue of Buddha in meditation at the Gal Vihare of the ancient capital city of Polonnaruwa, a holy Buddhist cult and pilgrimage site which is part of Sri Lanka's Cultural Triangle and is under patronage of UNESCO as a World Heritage site.



*Indian elephant* ■  
*Elephas maximus indicus*  
*feeding in a shallow villu*  
*in the late afternoon.*



Left, colossal standing Buddha at the Lankatilaka of the ancient capital Polonnaruva, a holy Buddhist cult and pilgrimage site which is part of Sri Lanka's Cultural Triangle; center, Sri Lankan leopard Panthera pardus kotiya; right, the Vatadage of the ancient capital city of Polonnaruva.



A supremely elegant  
young Sri Lankan leopard  
*Panthera pardus kotiya*  
female.







■ A trio of Green bee-eater *Merops orientalis*.