

A large male Asian elephant *Elephas maximus* faces the camera. Yala National Park numbers more than 350 individuals of these majestic animals.

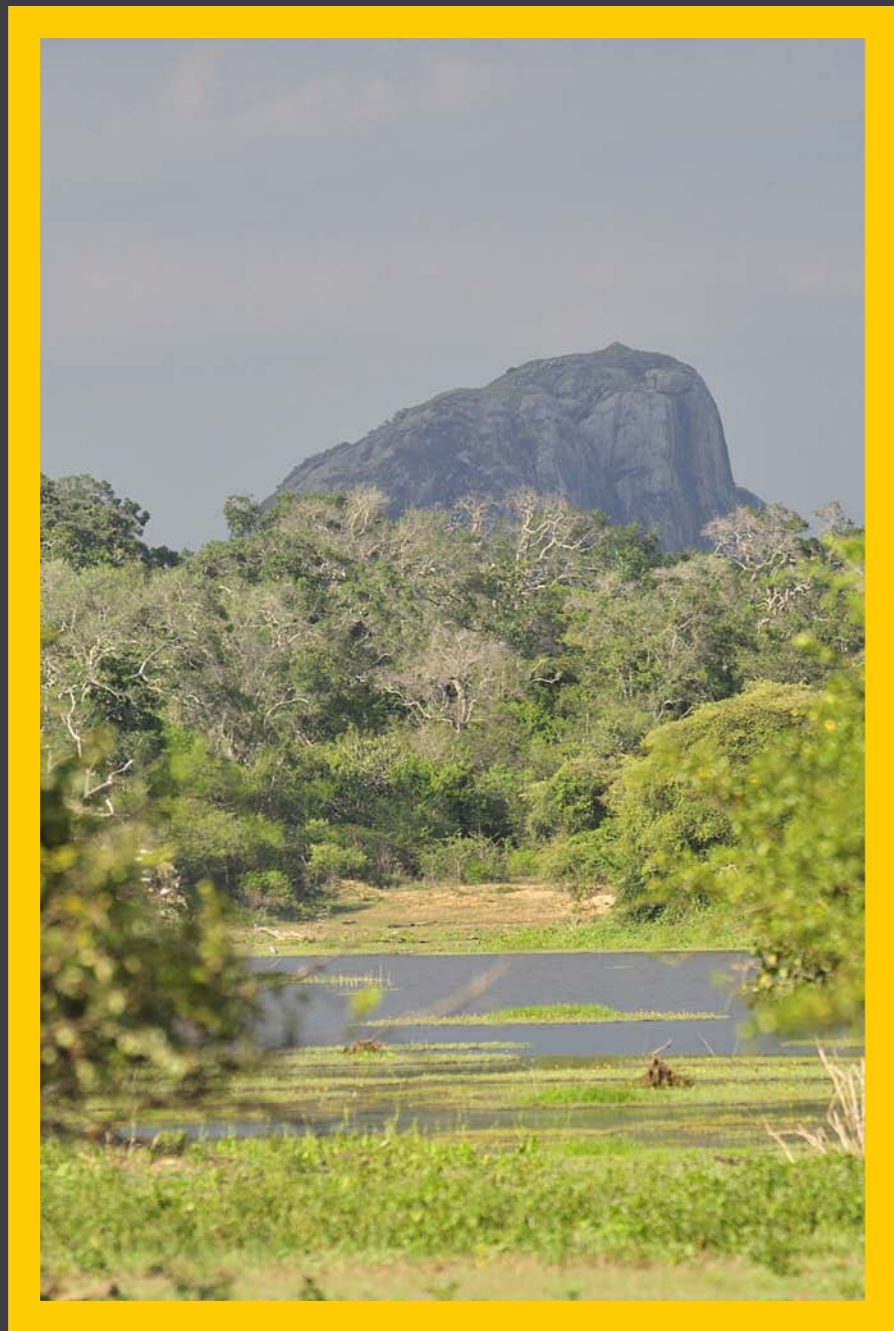


SRI LANKA'S YALA NATIONAL PARK
HEAVEN AND EARTH

Camping among leopards and elephants
in one of the Resplendent Island's most beautiful protected areas



An Asian elephant peacefully feeds among flowering water lilies in one of Yala's countless lakes and man-made reservoirs.



Leopards languorously stretched like exhausted lovers

■ The unmistakable profile of Elephant Rock (above) and a young male leopard *Panthera pardus* relaxing at dawn (right).

TEXT BY ANDREA FERRARI
PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI

Now picture this, my fellow traveller, my reader, my friend. Picture a verdant land of a thousand ponds and lakes, their clear still water blanketed by the rose-pink frost of endless water lilies in bloom, a gentle breeze in the sweltering heat, the air shimmering and vibrating in the silent distance. Picture gentle meadows stretching in the sun, and flowering acacias, and the bright yellow of cassia flowers cascading among delicate bluegreen leaves, and the silver-white naked branching trunks of old dead trees, evenly spaced like chesspieces on this landscape of heartbreaking beauty and peaceful elegance, every single detail of the picture perfectly planned as if by a divine gardener. Picture, then, long dusty red trails snaking along muddy oxbow lagoons and over grassy bunds, among immense rotund boulders of shiny mica and granite, the primeval playground of capricious gods.

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Indian pond herons *Ardeola grayii* are commonly observed along Yala's lakes and ponds, where they hunt for frogs.

And picture leopards as smooth as the night purring lazily in the pink of dawn, languorously stretched like exhausted lovers on top of those same granite mounds, their long ringed tail curled up and sexily undulating in the cool air of a glorious new morning. Picture great old leathery elephants, grazing silently on the morning peaks, their wise and slightly mad brown eyes in a network of ancient wrinkles, their ears flapping in slow motion like big

grey dusty carpets. And antique crocodiles, the hypnotic pattern of their bony scaled armor shining in the dawning sun by the ponds' dark cool water, and great herds of spotted deer, the fawns and females and stags quietly by themselves by the forest's edge, having survived another night, their softly airbrushed coats being one with the early sunlight playing among the leaves above. And rainbow-colored, iridescent peacocks haughtily roosting

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Left, a typical Yala hillside landscape, comprising dry forest, low bushes and gigantic granite boulders, split and smoothed by erosion. Red-wattled Lapwings *Vanellus indicus* (above) are a common sight on open grassy plains.

Single specimens of the stunningly elegant Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* can be frequently observed as they wade in shallow ponds.



In the early sunlight by the ponds' dark cool water

by themselves on low branches, lime-green, red beaked, screeching parakeets shooting like noisy arrows through the sky, crested eagles arrogantly perched like medieval knights on the ramparts of their tree fortresses, their piercing, impossibly yellow, cruel eyes coldly gazing at passerbys like there were no tomorrow. And so much more, there's no way to describe it. And when a day's wonders are temporarily over, and tired limbs are slowly stretched anew, and the day's choking dust has been washed away under a cool shower's trickle, then picture this again, my fellow traveler, my reader, my friend.

Picture the sapphire blue endless great vault of the night sky stretched all over the world, a million silver pins quilting its velvety bottomless void, the Milky Way shimmering from one end to the horizon to the other, and the immense round chinese lantern of the moon hanging above, so close one feels like touching it, its impossibly bright spotlight throwing pitch-black shadows as if it were daytime over the silvery landscape. Picture a long line of flaming torches on top of wrought-iron posts leading the way - as in a fairy tale - to

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— This is how most visitors to Yala usually glimpse their first leopard - a memorable sight of the big cat as it straddles a large, thick horizontal branch several meters above the ground. Such splendid encounters can last a long time if the animal is fully at ease and if one observes absolute silence.



The abundance of Yala's waters is a blessing for the resident elephants, often seen bathing or drinking.



A colorful paddy field frog floats in the featureless void of a muddy rainwater puddle. Deeper bodies of water such as ponds and lakes (left) boast clear water and an abundance of vegetation.

the top of the most immense granite mound you can imagine, and at the end of the crackling, whispering trail a true forest-wood bonfire roaring to the heavens, bright orange sparks shooting towards the night sky before cascading back again to earth in a merry, oddly comforting way, and sitting in the perfume of wild jasmine a perfectly set dinner table for two, two candles gently flickering in the night, the camp's staff smiling happily all around, sharing your happiness, proud of their work. Picture this all, if you can, and more,

and let me tell you about camping in the heart of beauty itself, in Sri Lanka's Yala National Park.

A LAND OF PLENTY

Despite having suffered the cruel devastations of a thirty-year long civil war which only recently has finally seen its end, Sri Lanka - "The Resplendent Island"- is as friendly, welcoming and incredibly beautiful as I remembered it, having visited it twice, all by myself, in 1980-1981.

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■ A strikingly beautiful young female leopard - relaxed and yet ever alert - languidly gazes down from her lofty tree perch.





■ An adult male Malabar Pied Hornbill *Anthracoceros coronatus*, one of Yala's most striking and recognizable bird species.

Yala's beautiful and unmistakable inselberg panoramas, typical of the Park's stunning landscapes. Leopards and Sloth bears often have their dens among these enormous granite boulders.



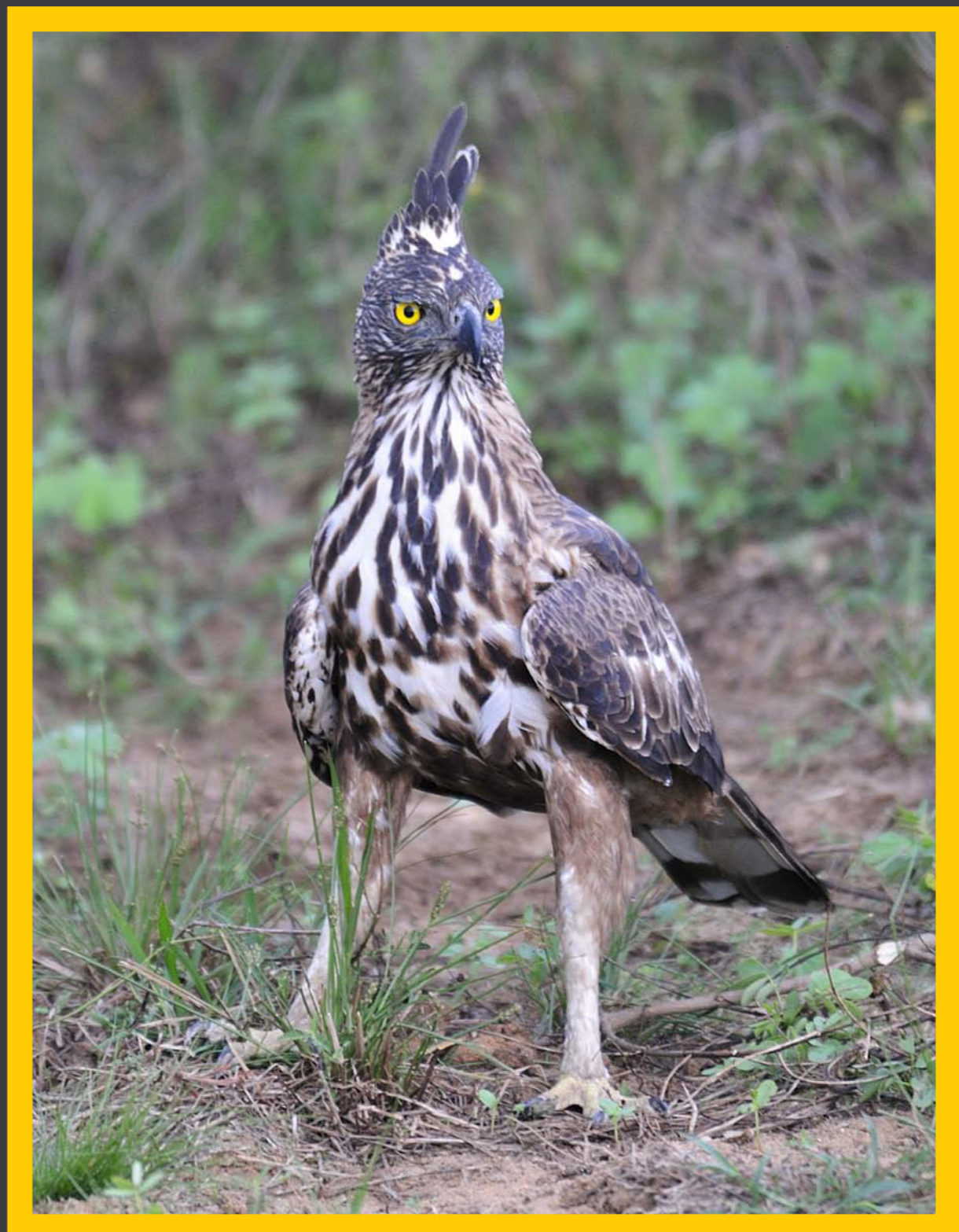
■ A Wild Asian buffalo Bubalus arnee strikes an unexpected pose atop a giant sun-flaked granite slope. Such sights will sadly become ever rarer as Wild Asian buffaloes intergrade more and more with domestic ones gone feral.



The thousand-year old Buddhist tradition of tolerance and deep respect towards all living things is deeply ingrained in its people, and wildlife has long shared, unmolested, the country's natural abundance and wealth with its human inhabitants. This is a place where wild elephants invading orchards are not shot on the spot but relocated to National Parks at the Government's expense, and where drivers risk collisions swerving at the last moment to avoid monitor lizards or snakes sunning themselves on the road tarmac. Carefully managed under the UNESCO umbrella, the country's unique artistic

and archeological treasures are easily visited - one cannot miss the so-called "Cultural Triangle" encompassing the three ancient capitals of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruva and Kandy, plus several minor but equally fascinating sites - and the locals' long standing and deeply felt devotion to Buddhism is part and parcel of every day's occurrences. Kindness, hospitality and a joyful passion for this worlds' pleasures are a way of life in Sri Lanka, making it a quite unique destination in our experience – nowhere else (except maybe in some parts of Italy or France) one can savour beauty, art, nature,

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■ Left, an imposing Spotted Deer *Axis axis* stag showing its splendid set of antlers. Above, a Changeable Hawk Eagle *Spizaetus cirrhatus* caught in a threat display as it claims its territorial stakes to competitors. Yala is home to several species of impressive, easily observed large raptors.



culture and great food at the same time, in such generous measure and in such relaxing, conducive atmosphere. Many other neighbouring countries and cultures in the general area should have carefully noted this in their past history (particularly regarding the beneficial effects of Buddhism on the natural environment), but sadly this has not been the case. In fact, no other destination in Asia can probably boast such a large number of extensive, well-managed and perfectly organized National Parks and Nature Reserves in relation to its territory: large areas with dense wildlife populations and exceptional biodiversity, which make of Sri Lanka a destination not to be missed by wildlife enthusiasts and nature photographers.

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A thousand-year old Buddhist tradition of tolerance

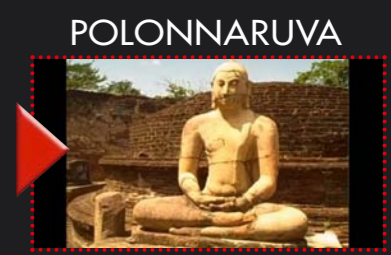
■ The Little Green Bee-eater *Merops orientalis ceylonicus* is a common sight on low bushes and branches.



A baby Langur *Semnopithecus priam* looks very surprised. The Langurs - also commonly known as Hanuman monkeys - found in Yala belong to the subspecies *thersites*, endemic to the island.



CLICK ON THE TITLES AND WATCH FOUR SHORT VIDEOS ON SOME OF SRI LANKA'S MOST SPECTACULAR NATURAL AND CULTURAL HIGHLIGHTS

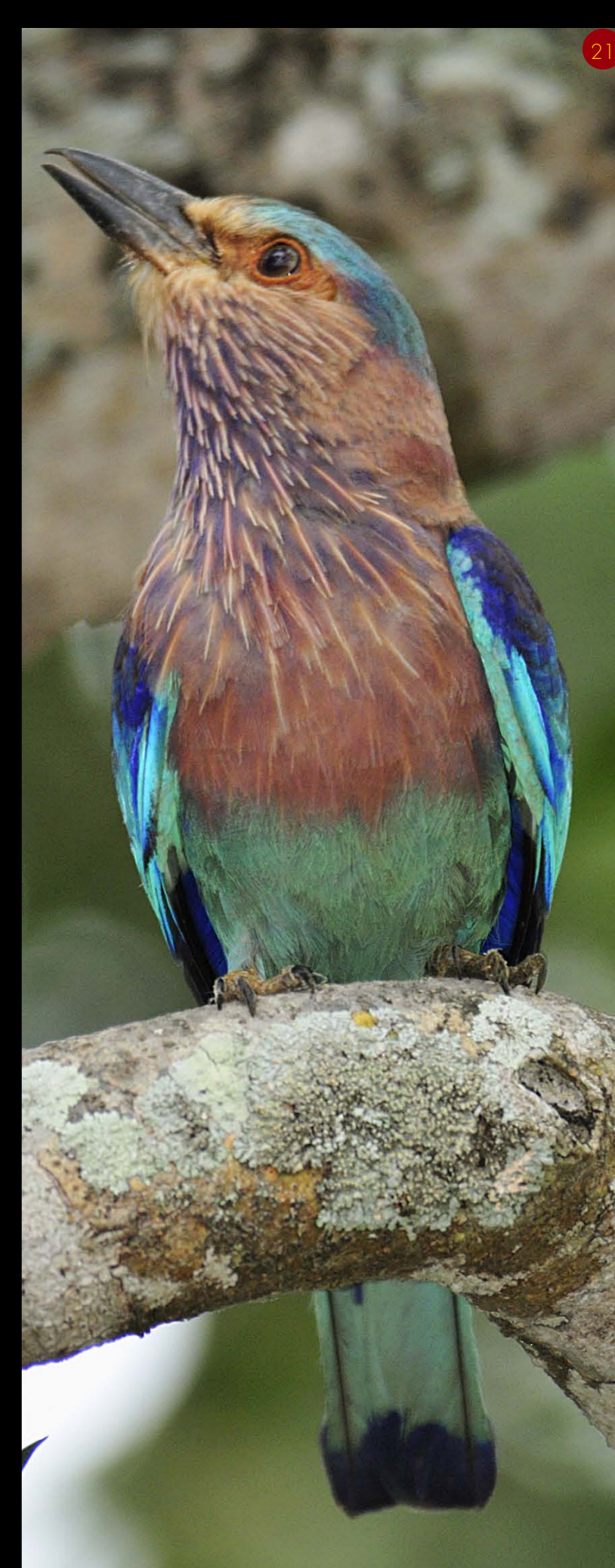


■ A rare view as a large adult male Indian or Marsh crocodile (also known as Mugger) *Crocodylus palustris* adopts a threat display during mating season, bellowing deeply and splashing water with its head. Large male crocodiles can become very aggressive and dangerous during courtship. Large specimens of this normally peaceful species can reach a length of 5 meters and a weight of 450 kilograms.





Female *Pavo cristatus* ■
Peacocks - known as Peahens - are strikingly beautiful birds in their own right. Few birds can however compete with the blindingly colorful plumage of the Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis* (right). Both species are exceedingly common in Yala.



With its bright yellow eyes and feathered crest, the Changeable Hawk Eagle *Spizaetus cirrhatus ceylanensis* is a very martial-looking, intimidating raptor. This subspecies is endemic to the island.



While the recent conclusion of the conflict will hopefully allow the depleted wildlife populations of some Parks (notably those of celebrated Wilpattu in the North) to rebound soon, the island's Park system has a lot to offer – and among the country's many National Parks, Yala certainly reigns as one of the most attractive, interesting and fruitful for visitors, a truly enchanting destination.

A STRONGHOLD FOR ASIAN LEOPARDS

Covering about 1297 square km or 129,700 hectares, Yala is one of the oldest and - together with Wilpattu - probably the most famous among the National Parks of Sri Lanka. Ecosystems represented within its boundaries range from moist monsoon forest to dry monsoon forest, semi-deciduous forest,

thorny forest, grassland, freshwater and marine wetland and even sandy beaches along the coastal line, where it is not unusual to sight elephants quietly strolling by the pounding surf. Swiftly-flowing rivers such as the Kumbukkan Oya in the North-East and the Menik Ganga and its tributaries in the West flow through the area, providing an abundant and much-needed source of water to the animals even during the driest months of the year. In fact, it is the abundance of freshwater which is one of the most striking aspects of the area's environment (the dry season falls between May and August, and the park normally closes for a short time during September and October to avoid undue disturbance to animals, which at this time of the year tend to congregate around waterholes).

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Watercolors of a deceptively peaceful heaven

■ A watercolor-like study in contrasts, as a large Marsh crocodile lurks half-submerged and waiting for its prey in the heavenly, deceptively peaceful environment of one of Yala's numerous lakes.





■ A large, beautiful Marsh crocodile basking in the late afternoon sun.

■ *A strange sight, typical of Yala's unique environment, as a large Asian elephant ambles ponderously on the surf-pounded beach by the Indian Ocean.*

Given its long history and large size, Yala National Park has long played a very significant role in the conservation of a large number of species in the country: sites such as Kataragama, Sithulpahuwa and Magul Maha Vihara add historical and religious importance to the area. Yala West (also known by its original name, Ruhuna) National Park is well recognized as one of the best National Parks in the world to observe and photograph leopards. The park covers an area of over 100,000 hectares and is divided into five blocks: block one is the most visited area, since it contains the highest density of leopards (about thirty-five). Other areas

of Yala, such as Yala East, have been closed to visitors for some years, and it will take some time to research leopard numbers there. Yala West consists of scrub jungle, brackish lagoons, freshwater lakes and man-made reservoirs and stunning, enormous, smooth granite formations rising from the bush (technically known as "inselbergs" or island mountains) scattered throughout the Park, whose eastern edge is bounded by the South East coast of the island: its range boasts a population of well over thirty leopards, probably the highest density anywhere in the world in relation to the extension of the area.

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Serene landscapes alive with a primeval allure

Sambar deer *Rusa* ■
unicolor - here seen
bathing in a brackish
lagoon by the ocean's
edge - are relatively
uncommon in Yala
despite having no
natural enemies once
they reach adulthood.



Oriental Darters Anhinga melanogaster are commonly seen perched above water, and can be easily identified by their typically crooked neck.



Yala is rightly famous for its bird fauna.
This is a Little Cormorant *Phalacrocorax niger*, a relatively common species.





Yala's exceptional biodiversity is mirrored in these images of its diverse fauna. Top left, a perfectly camouflaged Hump-nosed viper *Hypnale hypnale* lying in ambush in leaf litter; top right, Intermediate Egret *Mesophoyx intermedia* hunting frogs. Bottom left, the Sri Lanka Junglefowl *Gallus lafayetti* - as colorful as it is wary, a prized photographic trophy as it is one of Yala's most difficult camera subjects. Bottom right, a rare encounter with an adult male Sloth bear *Melursus ursinus inornatus*, endemic to the island and highly feared by all locals as it often attacks without provocation.

■ A stunning adult leopard male drinking at a rockpool after having gorged itself. Adult Spotted deer represent the main prey item of leopards in Yala National Park.

Sri Lankan leopards (*Panthera pardus kotiya*, Deraniyagala, 1956) belong to a distinct sub-species which is separate from the Indian one, and are the largest of their species in Asia. These are stunningly beautiful and extraordinarily elegant animals, their lustrous, brassy, spotted coat and languorous gracefulness a sight to behold - but Asian leopards are also exceptionally cunning, shy animals, which are usually sighted only briefly and with the utmost difficulty anywhere else given their being in constant conflict with man and in competition with the much larger tiger (African ones have to deal with lions).

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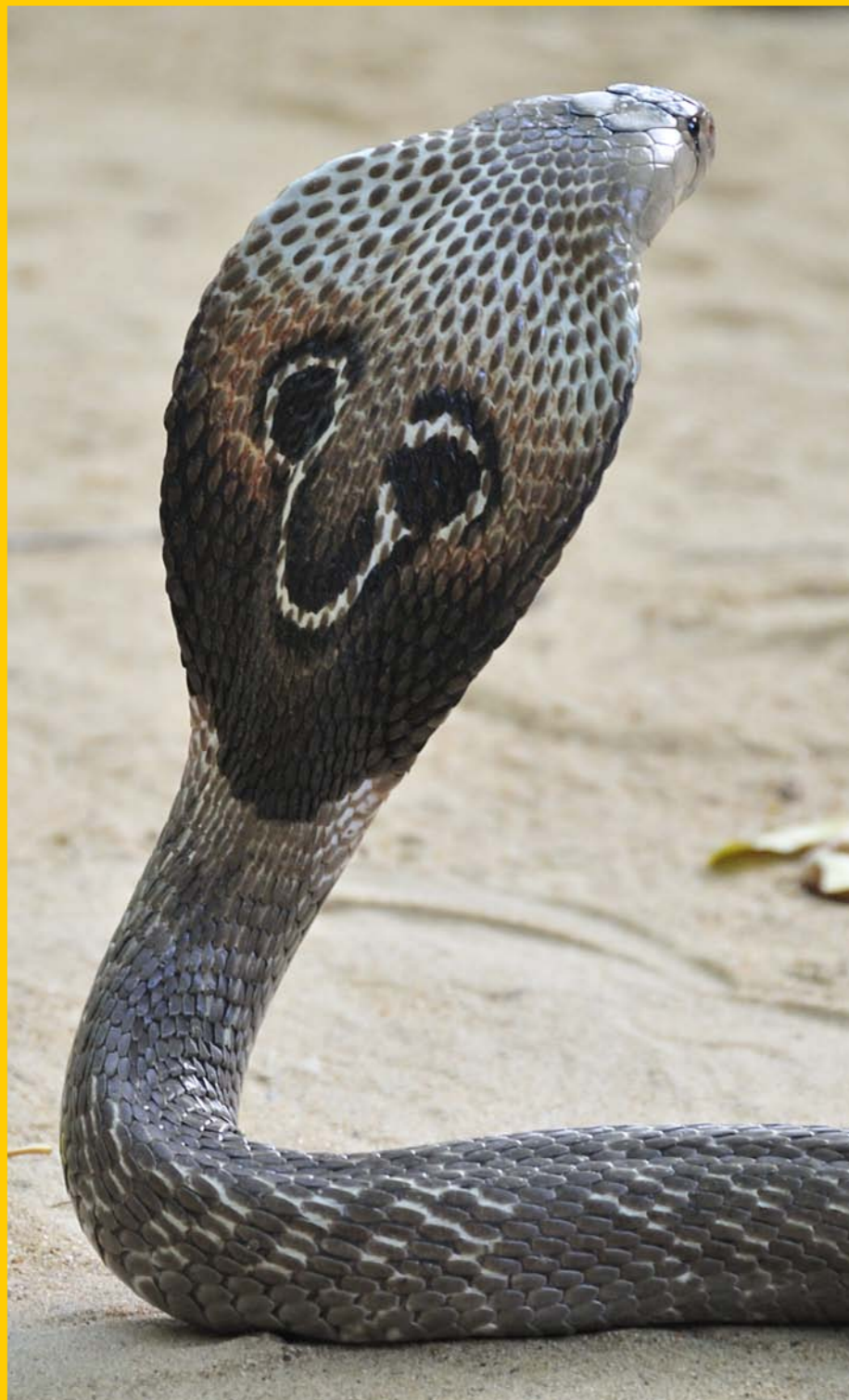
Left, Orange-breasted Green Pigeons *Treron bicincta leggei* are as beautiful as they are shy, seldom allowing a close approach. The pimbura subspecies of the Rock python *Python molurus*, above, is endemic to Sri Lanka and severely threatened by the pet trade. Adult individuals of this impressive species can reach a length of 4 meters.



A Little Cormorant ■ dries itself in the sun after having pursued its fish prey underwater. This gregarious species is common in the dry zones of the island.

Unwilling to give way, this tusker faces the car and the camera, its forward-facing ears and its searching trunk betraying unease. Asian elephants have to be approached with caution in the wild, as they have a habit of charging at the slightest provocation.





Left, a large adult Indian cobra *Naja naja* rears up, spreading its trademark hood in the unmistakable threat display when approached on a dust trail. The venomous bite of this impressive and highly dangerous species can prove rapidly deadly if let untreated. Right, a Crested Serpent Eagle *Spilornis cheela*, a forest-dwelling raptor specialized in preying on snakes and other reptiles.



The eternal battle between predator and prey



■ Its left eye scarred and possibly impaired by a past fight with a competitor, a huge leopard male looms dangerously close above the car. Luckily, accidents involving humans are almost unheard-of in Yala.

■ A typical lowland landscape in Yala: an open, scenic environment with low bushes, shallow lakes, wide grassy plains and granite mountains looming in the background.



■ A huge Marsh crocodile basks among the reeds and water lilies at a lake's edge. Once it has reached adulthood this impressive species has no natural enemies in Yala. Sri Lankan populations possibly belong to the subspecies *kimbula*.



Due to such good reasons, these stealthy predators have normally adopted strictly nocturnal habits, and are rarely observed by man, despite being not uncommon locally and occasionally inhabiting suburbs and even cities, where they prey on poultry and stray dogs.

The best chances to observe one of these elusive felines within Yala's boundaries come generally early in the morning, and then again at dusk, but the good news is that the Park offers, hands-down, what undoubtedly are the best opportunities in the world of seeing and photographing Asian leopards in the wild. Trying long and hard - and thanks to the untiring tracking by our guide Dilan Peiris, our jeep driver Priyanka and Pradip, the Park warden accompanying us daily - we have bagged a stunning twenty-two sightings (some of which exceptionally clear and one lasting well over 30 minutes) in a two-week period, which would be totally unheard-of anywhere else in the world! Long undisturbed and unmolested, the leopards of Yala are very confident, and adult males are occasionally seen walking the tracks even during the day, busy marking their range by urinating

against trees and generally scenting the area.

Young males in particular seem to have no fear of jeeps, which can lead to some excellent photographic opportunities. In this respect there are some similarities between Yala and some of the best Tiger Reserves in India: in both locations the big cats have become used to the jeeps' presence, thus enabling visitors to enjoy a frequent, privileged and quite unique view of these magnificent animals.

Besides its beautiful leopards - understandably Yala's main claim to fame worldwide - the Park boasts also a substantial population of Asian elephants (including several impressive tuskers) along with enormous herds of Spotted deer.

Sambar are often sighted, together with Wild buffalo (sadly often intergrading with large numbers of domestic buffalo, which enter freely the Park from surrounding properties and go feral), Jackal, Mongoose, Langur and hundreds of impressive, large Marsh crocodiles. Sloth bear and Pangolin are more rarely sighted but are present nonetheless - we had two sightings of Sloth bear during our stay.

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A pair of White-throated Kingfisher Halcyon smyrnensis perching by the water's edge. The individual on the left has just caught a large centipede. The bright blue flash of their wings when in flight is one of the unmistakable sights of Yala.



■ A family group of Asian elephants visiting a forest pond to drink and bathe offer us a memorable, moving spectacle as the youngest baby plays and stumbles in the mud under the watchful eyes of two adult females. Babies are cared for and looked after by mothers and aunts, as adult males live by themselves or in bachelor groups.

■ A mixed flock of Spot-billed Pelicans *Pelecanus philippensis* and Painted Storks *Mycteria leucocephala* crowds a brackish lagoon by the Indian Ocean. Such spectacular (and quite noisy) aggregations are typical of Yala's salt-sprayed, humid coastal environment.

Bird life is stunningly rich and comprises over 120 species, ranging from Lesser flamingos to Paradise flycatchers, Crested hawk eagles, Little green bee-eaters, Malabar hornbills, Green pigeons, Peacocks and many other colorful species, while reptile species commonly encountered include - besides crocodiles and large numbers of Savannah monitors - snakes such as Indian Cobra, Rock python, Hump-nosed Sri Lankan pit

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■ A Grey-headed Fish Eagle *Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus* (now that is a tongue-twisting name!) on its perch with some freshly-caught fish prey. Yala offers many opportunities to watch and document species behaviour.



■ A pair (note female peeking from behind branch) of Brown Fish Owls *Bubo zeylonensis zeylonensis*. This large endemic species - easily recognized by its yellow eyes - is often sighted in forested areas close to water.

viper and Russell's viper, these however being rather more secretive and difficult to observe.

VISITING YALA – THE RIGHT WAY

When visiting a National Park we always try whenever possible - and despite the occasional lack of comfort - to stay, live, eat and sleep within the protected area's boundaries: that's where the action is, of course, and we love the feeling of isolation and remoteness. Moreover, one is right there when the Park gates open in the very early morning, so jeep safaris start much earlier and last longer than for visitors staying outside and having to drive all the way to the gates (especially since all safari cars have to be out of the Park or back at the camp

by 6.30 pm sharp). Indeed, spending twenty-four hours a day inside a National Park is not possible everywhere, but thankfully it is in Yala, and we have chosen the most romantic option of them all - electing to spend two full weeks in **Mahoora tented camp**, a lovely option offered by Sri Lanka's highly specialized and experienced nature and wildlife travel agency **Eco Team**, who operate their own tented camps in most of the island's National Parks. Eco Team is very well organized and highly reliable - we were picked up by their driver upon our arrival at Colombo's international airport and were immediately whisked away to our final destination, a few hours away, where our private naturalist guide and very comfortable 4-wheel drive

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*A rather splendid
adult male leopard
strides down
a forest track,
its determined look
meaning business
to trespassers.
Encounters such
as this one are
Yala's pride and joy.*

The endless patrolling of the dominant male



■ A large Savannah or Land Monitor *Varanus bengalensis* basks on a tree trunk at right. This impressive species can reach 1.74 cms in length and is exceptionally common in Yala. Above, a Common Mynah *Acridotheres tristis melanosturnus* predated a frog it has just caught and killed.





In an almost mystical encounter, a lone elephant emerges silently from the forest, stops a few feet from us and starts splashing mud on itself with deliberate, ritualized motions. Suddenly we have the unmistakable feeling of being witnesses to a secret, ancient ceremony belonging to a long-lost past.

vehicle were to be at our disposal for the duration of the stay.

The tents are quite comfortable (clients can choose between luxury and standard, the former being somewhat larger and offering private toilet and shower), the staff is absolutely delightful and very efficient, the food is simply wonderful (and very abundant - ask the cook for some traditional Sri Lankan recipes!), privacy is guaranteed and the experience of dining by candlelight and under the stars on a perfectly appointed table for two by a roaring bonfire is really priceless. The exhilarating feeling

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While an Oriental Darter dries itself in the sun (left), a stately Woolly-necked Stork *Ciconia episcopus* (below) seems to be secretly smiling at itself, a touch of elegant irony gleaming in its beautiful plumage.



of being one with unspoilt, virgin nature is almost overwhelming, and camping in Yala truly offers a unique, romantic experience - despite the occasional fire ant bite, the big forest scorpions lurking around and the huge pesky tusker forcing us to vacate our tent twice in the dead of night (or maybe thanks to such little additional details too), this is how life should

always be when in the wilderness. All serious wildlife photographers interested in experiencing the nature and wildlife of Yala (and most other National Parks of Sri Lanka) are strongly advised to choose the same option – we certainly shall again, in the very near future, when returning once more to the breathtakingly beautiful Resplendent Island. ●

Painted Storks Mycteria leucocephala are very elegant, slow-strutting birds. Here one in full adult plumage is hunting for frogs, insects and other prey in shallow water.





More examples of Yala's stunning biodiversity and interesting behaviours. Top left, a rare sight as an adult Land Monitor Varanus bengalensis swallows a young Black-naped Hare Lepus nigricollis it has just caught and killed; top right, a large forest scorpion, probably belonging to the genus Isometrus, whose venomous sting is painful but rarely fatal. Bottom left, a male Peacock Pavo cristatus avoids most predators by perching above ground and keeping an alert look-out; bottom right, a Yellow-wattled Lapwing Vanellus malabaricus with a dung beetle it has just caught.

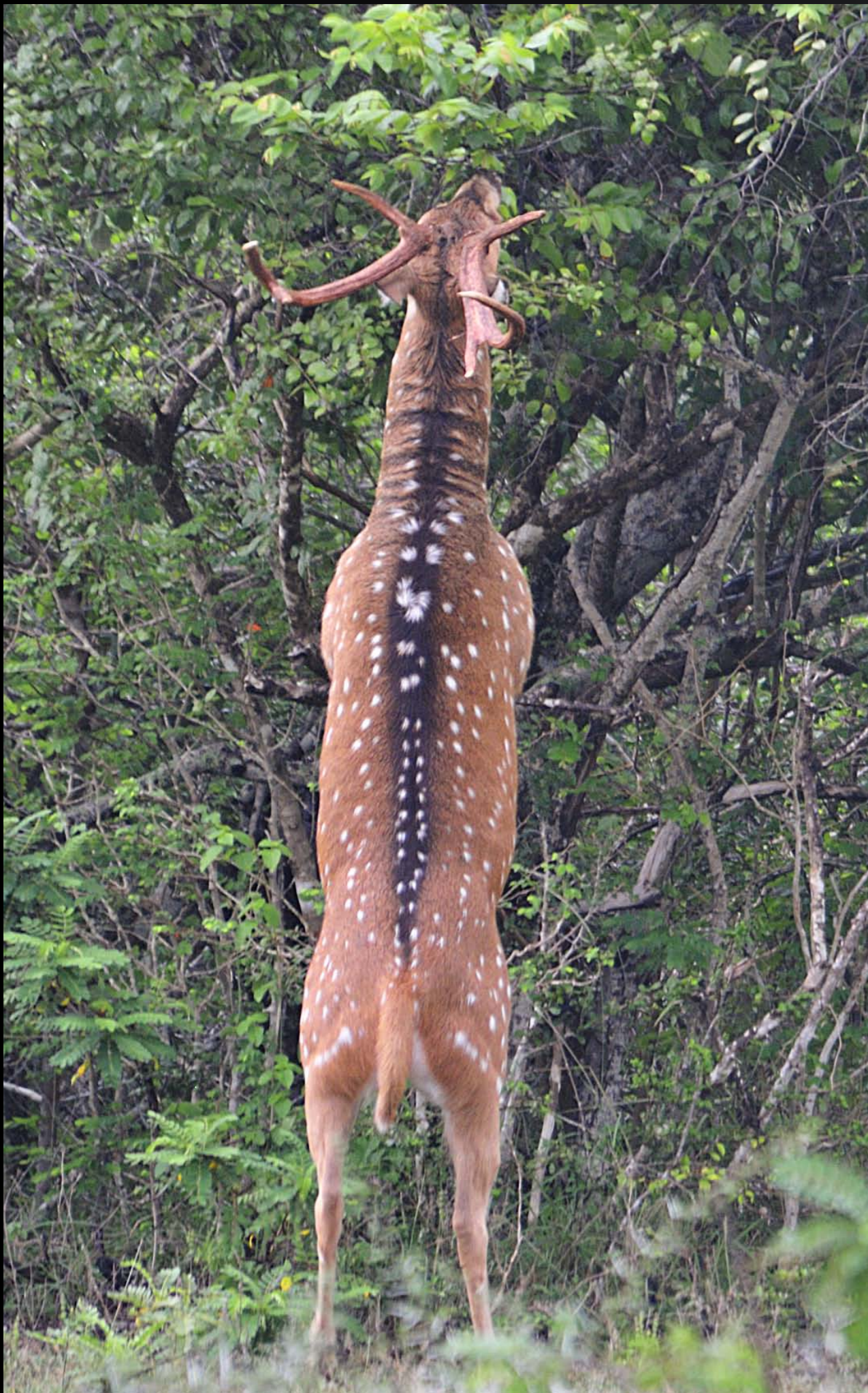
■ Stepping directly out of a Sri Lankan Jungle Book, a huge male leopard strides purposefully towards the camera, its grey-green eyes coldly meeting our awed gaze. This is the Anima Mundi, the Soul of the World, at its raw, unflinching, gut-wrenching best!



In a dazzling display of legerdemain, an Asian Openbill *Anastomus oscitans* catches water snails and swallows them one after the other after having torn them out of their shell - without even pausing to stop walking.



More mammal species from Yala, too often upstaged by the ubiquitous leopard. Far left, a Chital or Spotted deer *Axis axis* stag stands on its hind legs to catch some green succulent shoots - momentarily forgetting about predators. Top left, a wary, ever moving Golden Jackal *Canis aureus* pauses briefly to lap at a rainwater puddle. Its cautious, alert gaze never left us for a second. Bottom left, the very common but not easily photographed Grey Mongoose *Herpestes edwardsii*, a very active and perennially roving small predator.



■ It's a bit tongue-in-cheek, but we couldn't resist ending our Yala trip report with this endearing image of a big leopard looking the other way around while we are trying to stalk it in the forest. Did we actually outwit the cleverest trickster of the forest? We don't think so...

One last look back before going home

