

SRI LANKA BIRDING REPORT: NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2010

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Introduction Sri Lanka is a popular destination for birders. Twenty five or so years after our last long trips to Asia (twice to Malaysia), it was time to go back and now-peaceful Sri Lanka offered a good introduction to the wider Indian Subcontinent as well as some endemics. We broke with our usual independent approach and looked for a guided trip. Our preference for a guide/organiser based in Sri Lanka (putting more money into the local economy) threw up Birdwing Nature Holidays with Amila Saldago, promising an equal emphasis on endemics, 'night birds' and other wildlife, across a range of habitats, from rainforest to saltpans, in both the wet (SW) and dry (SE) zones.

Timing Choice of season is inevitably a compromise. If you like the sun and want to minimise the risk of rain and leeches while having a good chance of finding birds, then late January, February and early March are best. Otherwise November to early January are also good for birds, including migrants from the north and the start of breeding, but will likely involve at least some umbrella-birding. Our late November – early December trip had one afternoon completely lost to a torrential storm, and about half of the days had some rain. The post-rain conspicuousness of many birds, however, probably compensates for the slightly reduced birding time in the wetter months, so trip-lists are more or less constant throughout the 'winter'. Advice about the best times to visit differs between sources (and can include May and September), but unless you are largely focused on seeing just the endemics, the presence of migrants will likely encourage a visit between November and March – when the endemics are equally findable and the likes of Pied Thrush, Indian Blue Robin and the waders are around, and are too good to miss! Accommodation is quieter earlier in the 'winter' season, so this may be another factor if you want to meet/avoid other tour parties.

Costings The cost was US\$2300 per head for a 14 day tour for two, out of Colombo Airport, all inclusive, apart from bar drinks and tips. Larger parties go at a somewhat lower rate. Vicki and I fancied a bit of settling-in time as well and stumbled on the excellent (for quality and value) Ging Oya Lodge, Waikkala, near the airport (www.gingoya.com, e-mail info@gingoya.com), where we spent 4 days pre-trip. We found over 60 species, including Black capped Kingfisher, within a 10 minute walk of the hotel and its gardens, themselves close to the sea.

Itinerary The itinerary followed a well-trodden path with Amila and Camillus (driver) dealing with all the practicalities. Amila specialises in the mainly forest-dwelling endemics and 'night birds' and this was reflected in us seeing all 33 endemics plus 10 'night-birds'. The accommodation ranged across eco-lodges at the forest boundary to hotels on the edge of town, from clean-basic to very spruce, with mostly excellent Sri Lankan food. Western-type food was available if required. It was pretty well what we would have chosen ourselves as independent travellers, but was better located, and invariably set within good birding gardens or with birding views during meals (hard to find from Lonely Planet!).

The itinerary had 3 main phases – 1. Getting to know Sri Lankan birds and finding the wet-zone forest endemics, 2. Lowland dry-zone species and wetlands, 3. Montane forest endemics. Amila had sites (and backups) for all the key species, and in addition to finding difficult species he was happy to coach newcomers to Subcontinent-birding with his wide knowledge of calls and songs. There was also enough time, plus Amila's knowledge, to be able to sort out even brief views of the local mammals, butterflies and key forest plants – although we missed out on Leopard.

Itinerary (and cumulative species totals in brackets, plus selected sightings)

17 November; Early AM arrival at Colombo; **Ging Oya Lodge**, Wattana, to 19 November (+62) Black-capped Kingfisher

20 – 23 November; **Kitulgala Forest Reserve** (+60=122) Green-billed Coucal, Orange-billed Babbler, Mountain Hawk-eagle, Sri Lanka Spurfowl, Red-faced Malkoha, Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, Drongo Cuckoo.

23 – 26 November; **Sinharaja Biosphere Reserve** (+38=160) Plum-headed Parakeet, Sri Lanka Frogmouth, Ashy-headed Laughingthrush, Rufous-bellied Eagle, Serendip Scops Owl, Sri Lanka Scaly Thrush, Sri Lanka Magpie.

26 – 27 November; **Uda Walawe National Park** and **Tissamaharama** ('Tissa') area (+32=192) Indian Nightjar, Brahminy Starling, Slaty-breasted Rail, Blyth's Pipit, Cinnamon, Bittern, Jungle Owlet, Brown Fish Owl.

28 November; **Bundala National Park** and **Yala NP** (+38=230) Greater Sand Plover, Broad-billed Sandpiper, Marshall's Iora, Sirkeer Malkoha.

29 November; **Bundala NP** and **Tissa** area (+1=231) Blue-faced Malkoha.

30 November; **Tissa**, **Lunugamwewera Forest**, **Surrey Estate** and **Nuwara Eliya** (+5=236) Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush, Sri Lanka Wood Pigeon, Hill Myna.

1 December; **Nuwara Eliya**, including Botanic Gardens (+12=248) Pied Thrush, Yellow-eared Bulbul, Indian Blue Robin, Sri Lanka Bush-warbler, Kashmir Flycatcher, Dull-blue Flycatcher.

2 December; **Nuwara Eliya** and **Kandy** for Udawattakele Forest Sanctuary (+1=249) Brown Wood-owl.

3 December; **Kandy**, **Negombo** beach and late PM Departure (+3=252) Brown-headed Gull, Brown Hawk-owl, Ashy Woodswallow.

Books We took John Harrison's Field Guide (a 2nd Edition is due in early 2011), which was compact and excellent for field reference. Independent travellers and those leaving the main birding routes will need more, however, particularly P.C.Rasmussen and J.C. Anderton's (2005) Ripley Guide 'Birds of South Asia' (with its two, 'field' and 'reference', volumes). Thankfully, we could borrow Amila's copy, otherwise the many recent taxonomic changes (and proposed changes) after Harrison would have been puzzling (i.e. he lists 27 endemics, whereas Rasmussen & Anderton argue for 33) and his 1st edition text is very terse when getting to know a largely unfamiliar bird community.

Security and health Sri Lankans were friendly and helpful and we felt at ease everywhere, in forest and town; only once were we approached for money, although more often for sweets. A little care should ensure you come back with what you take – unlike some of the world's best birding locations. No malarial prophylactics are needed in the south west, nor any other non-routine injections. We had zero health problems in 3 weeks, perhaps because we relied on Sri Lankan food? The temperature was ideal – neither too hot nor ever cold, even in the mountains. Even so, don't forget a (compact) umbrella!

Conclusions We highly recommend Amila Salgado as a guide, organiser and birding companion (e-mail = amila@birdwingnature.com; www.birdwingnature.com), able to turn his hand to all conspicuous nature, identify most of it immediately, by sight and sound, as well as being informative

about the Sri Lankan environment, ecology, conservation, history, culture, society, sport, and more or less everything else! Tuning-in to new rainforest birds takes me a week or two, and while the majority of the endemics will be encountered somewhere on our route, there is a core of easily-missed species for which a guide is very helpful on a short trip when cold searching is the default option. Amongst the endemics; spurfowl, wood pigeon, Serendip scops owl, whistling thrush, and (in our case, though apparently not always) scaly thrush are elusive or need good luck. Or a very long trip! Finally, Sri Lanka is a place where new species arrive at a rate where they can be thoroughly enjoyed; most are easy to find but they do not appear at a bewildering rate. So, we returned home able to recall nearly all of our wildlife encounters (including 252 bird species, 20 mammals, 43 larger butterflies). Southern Sri Lanka is an ideal locality for a first (or 1-2 week) rainforest experience and the country's relatively short list of just over 400 species suggests there are plenty of new migrants and possibly a resident or two still to be discovered. After all, the Serendip Scops Owl was first described only in 2004; so recently, that the published descriptions are not yet accurate. Look out for the 'ears'!

Systematic list (follows Harrison, J. 1999, *A Field Guide to the Birds of Sri Lanka*, 1st Edition, 2009 reprint, Oxford University Press). Square brackets indicate species heard only, or seen too briefly to confirm identification. Round brackets enclose alternative or recently updated names, mostly following Rasmussen and Anderton (2005). **Sri Lanka endemics (after R&A 2005) are in bold.**

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Little Cormorant *Phalacrocorax niger*

Indian Cormorant *Phalacrocorax fuscicollis*

Oriental Darter *Anhinga melanogaster*

Spot-billed Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus*

Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

Intermediate Egret *Mesophoyx intermedia* (*Egretta intermedia*)

Great Egret *Casmerodius albus* (*Egretta alba*)

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* (*Egretta garzetta*)

Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*

Indian Pond Heron *Ardeola grayii*

Striated Heron *Butoroides striatus*

Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*

Yellow Bittern *Ixobrychus sinensis*

Cinnamon Bittern *Ixobrychus cinnamomeus*

Black Bittern *Ixobrychus flavicollis*

Painted Stork *Mycteria leucocephala*
Asian Openbill *Anastomus oscitans*
Woolly-necked Stork *Ciconia episcopus*
Black-headed Ibis *Threskiornis melanocephalus*
Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*
Lesser Whistling-duck *Dendrocygna javanica*
Cotton Pygmy-goose *Nettapus coromandelianus*
Garganey *Anas querquedula*
Oriental Honey-buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus*
Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* (Himalayan Buzzard *B. refectus*)
Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus*
Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*
Rufous-bellied Eagle *Hieraaetus kienerii* (Rufous-bellied Hawk Eagle)
Crested Goshawk *Accipiter trivirgatus*
Besra *Accipiter virgatus*
Shikra *Accipiter badius*
Black-winged Kite *Elanus caeruleus*
Crested Serpent Eagle *Spilornis cheela*
Black Eagle *Ictinaetus malayensis*
Mountain Hawk Eagle *Spizaetus nipalensis* (Legge's Hawk Eagle *Nizaetus kelaati*)
Changeable Hawk Eagle *Spizaetus cirrhatus* (Crested Hawk Eagle *S. c. ceylonensis*)
White-bellied Fish Eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster* (White-bellied Sea Eagle)
Grey-headed Fish Eagle *Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus*
[Booted Eagle *Hieraaetus pennatus*]
[Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*]
Barred Buttonquail *Turnix suscitator leggei*
Sri Lanka Spurfowl *Galloperdix bicalcarata*
Sri Lanka Junglefowl *Gallus lafayettii*

Indian Peafowl *Pavo cristatus*
Slaty-breasted Rail *Rallus striatus*
White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus*
Watercock *Gallicrex cinerea*
Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*
Purple Swamphen *Porphyrio porphyrio*
Pheasant-tailed Jacana *Hydrophasianus chirurgus*
Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*
Eurasian Thick-knee *Burhinus oedicnemus*
Great Thick-knee *Esacus recurvirostris*
Small Pratincole *Glareola maldivarum*
Yellow-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus melabaricus*
Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus*
Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva*
Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*
Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*
Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*
Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*
Mongolian Plover *Charadrius mongolus* (Lesser Sand Plover)
Great Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaultii*
Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* (Eastern Black tailed Godwit *Limosa melanuroides*)
Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus phaeopus*
[Curlew *Numenius arquata*]
Common Redshank *Tringa tetanus*
Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*
Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis*
Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*
Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*

Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus*
Common Sandpiper *Tringa hypoleucos*
Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*
Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*
Pintail Snipe *Gallinago megala*
Great Knot *Calidris tenuirostris*
Sanderling *Calidris alba*
Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*
Temminck's Stint *Calidris temminckii*
Little Stint *Calidris minuta*
[Long-toed Stint *Calidris subminuta*]
Broad-billed Sandpiper *Limicola falcinellus*
Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus*
Brown-headed Gull *Larus brunnicephalus*
Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia*
Great Crested Tern *Thalasseus bergii velox*
Lesser Crested Tern *Thalasseus bengalensis*
Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica*
Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*
Little Tern *Sterna albifrons*
Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybridus*
White-winged Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*
Rock Pigeon *Columba livia*
Sri Lanka Wood Pigeon *Columba torringtoni*
Spotted Dove *Streptopelia chinensis ceylonensis*
[Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*]
Emerald Dove *Chalcophaps indica robinsoni*
Orange-breasted Green Pigeon *Treron bicincta leggei*

Pompadour Green Pigeon *Treron p. pompadora* (**Sri Lanka Green Pigeon *T. pompadora***)

Green Imperial Pigeon *Ducula aenea*

Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot *Loriculus beryllinus*

Alexandrine Parrot *Psittacula eupatria*

Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri*

Plum-headed Parakeet *Psittacula cyanocephala*

Layard's Parakeet *Psittacula calthropae*

Red-faced Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus pyrrhocephalus*

Blue-faced Malkoha *Rhopodytes viridirostris*

Asian Koel *Eudynamys scolopacea*

Sirkeer Malkoha *Taccocua leschenaultii*

Green-billed Coucal *Centropus chlororhynchus*

Greater Coucal *Centropus sinensis* (Southern Coucal *C. parroti*)

Pied Cuckoo *Oxylophus jacobinus* (Jacobin Cuckoo)

Common Hawk Cuckoo *Cuculus varius ciceliae*

Plaintive Cuckoo *Cacomantis merulinus* (Grey-bellied Cuckoo *C. passerinus*)

Drongo Cuckoo *Surniculus lugubris* (Fork-tailed Drongo *S. dicruroides*)

Collared Scops Owl *Otus bakkamoena* (Indian Scops Owl)

Serendib Scops Owl *Otus thilohoffmanii*

Brown Hawk Owl *Ninox scutulata*

Jungle Owlet *Glaucidium radiatum*

Chestnut-backed Owlet *Glaucidium castanonotum*

[Spot-bellied Eagle Owl *Bubo nipalensis blighi*]

Brown Fish Owl *Bubo zeylonensis zylonensis* (Ketupa z. z.)

Brown Wood Owl *Strix leptogrammica ochrogenys*

Sri Lanka Frogmouth *Batrachostomus moniliger*

Indian Nightjar *Caprimulgus asiaticus eidos* (Little Indian Nightjar)

Jerdon's Nightjar *Caprimulgus atripennis*

Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill *Tockus gingalensis*

Malabar Pied Hornbill *Antracoceros coronatus*

House Crow *Corvus splendens*

Large-billed Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos* (Jungle Crow *C. levaillantii*)

Malabar Trogon *Harpactes fasciatus*

Stork-billed Kingfisher *Halcyon capensis*

White-throated Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrensis*

Black-capped Kingfisher *Halcyon pileata*

Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher *Ceyx erithacus* (Black-backed Pygmy Kingfisher)

Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*

Pied Kingfisher *Ceryle rudis*

Little Green Bee-eater *Merops orientalis ceylonicus*

Chestnut-headed Bee-eater *Merops apiaster*

Blue-tailed Bee-eater *Merops philippinus*

Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis*

Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops*

Coppersmith Barbet *Megalaima haemocephala*

Crimson-fronted **Barbet *Megalaima r. rubicapilla* (Sri Lanka Small Barbet *M. rubicapillus*)**

Brown-headed Barbet *Megalaima zeylandica*

Yellow-fronted Barbet *Megalaima flavifrons*

Brown-capped Woodpecker *Picoides moluccensis* (Indian Pygmy W. *Dendrocopus nanus*)

Yellow-crowned Woodpecker *Picoides maharattensis* (Yellow-fronted Pied Woodpecker)

Lesser Yellownape *Picus chlorophus*

Rufous Woodpecker *Celeus brachyurus*

Black-rumped Flameback *Dinopium benghalense psarodes* (Red-backed woodpecker)

Greater Flameback *Chrysocolaptes lucidus* (**Crimson-backed Flameback *C. stricklandi***)

Rufous-winged Lark *Mirafra assamica* (Jerdon's Bush-lark *M. affinis*)

Oriental Skylark *Alauda gulgula*

Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark *Eremopterix grisea* (Ashy-crowned Finch-lark)
Forest Wagtail *Dendronanthus indicus*
Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava simillima* (Siberian Yellow Wagtail)
Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*
White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*
Richard's Pipit *Anthus richardi*
Paddyfield Pipit *Anthus rufulus*
Blyth's Pipit *Anthus godlewskii*
Grey-rumped Treeswift *Hemiprocne longipennis* (Crested Treeswift *H. coronata*)
Asian Palm Swift *Cypsiurus balasiensis*
Brown-backed Needletail *Hirundapus giganteus* (Brown-throated N.)
Little Swift *Apus affinis*
Indian Swiftlet *Aerodramus unicolor*
Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*
Hill Swallow *Hirundo tahitica domicola* (*H. domicola*)
Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica* (**Sri Lanka Swallow *Hirundo hyperythra***)
Common Woodshrike *Tephrodornis pondicerianus* (**Sri Lanka Woodshrike *T. affinis***)
Large Cuckooshrike *Coracina macei layardi*
Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike *Hemipus picatus*
Small Minivet *Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*
Flame Minivet *Pericrocotus flammeus* (Orange Minivet)
Black-headed Cuckoo-shrike *Coracina melanoptera*
Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus cristatus*
Ashy Woodswallow *Artamus fuscus*
Black-headed Yellow Bulbul ***Pycnonotus melanicterus* (Black-capped Bulbul)**
Red-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer*
Yellow-eared Bulbul *Pycnonotus penicillatus*
White-browed Bulbul *Pycnonotus luteolus*

Yellow-browed Bulbul *Hypsipetes indicus* (*Iole indica*)

Black Bulbul *Hypsipetes leucocephalus* (Square-tailed B. B. *H. ganeesa*)

Common Iora *Aegithina tiphia*

White-tailed Iora *Aegithina nigrolutea* (Marshall's Iora)

Jerdon's Leafbird *Chloropis aurifrons*

Golden-fronted Leafbird *Chloropis aurifrons*

Black-hooded Oriole *Oriolus ceylonensis*

Indian Blue Robin *Erithacus brunneus* (*Luscinia brunnea*)

White-rumped Shama *Copsychus malabaricus leggei*

Oriental Magpie Robin *Copsychus saularis*

Pied Bushchat *Saxicola caprata*

Black-backed Robin *Saxicoloides fulicata leucoptera* (Indian Robin)

Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush *Myophonus blighi*

Pied Thrush *Zoothera wardii*

Spot-winged Thrush *Zoothera spiloptera*

Scaly Thrush *Zoothera dauma imbricata* (**Sri Lanka Scaly Thrush *Z. imbricata***)

Eurasian Blackbird *Turdus merula* (Indian Blackbird *T. simillimus*)

Indian Pitta *Pitta brachyura*

Brown-capped Babbler *Pellorneum fuscicapillum* (*P. fuscicapillum*)

Indian Scimitar Babbler *Pomatorhinus horsfieldi melanurus* (**Sri Lanka S. B. *P. melanurus***)

Dark-fronted Babbler *Rhopocichla atriceps*

Tawny-bellied Babbler *Dumetia hyperythra phillipsi*

Yellow-eyed Babbler *Chrysomma sinense nasale*

Orange-billed Babbler *Turdoides rufescens*

Yellow-billed Babbler *Turdoides affinis taprobanus*

Ashy-headed Laughingthrush *Garrulax cinereifrons*

Sri Lanka Bush-warbler *Bradypterus palliseri* (*Claphrorinis palliseri*)

Blyth's Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum*

Clamorous Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus meridionalis* (Indian R. W. *A. brunnescans*)

Zitting Cisticola *Cisticola juncidis*

Grey-breasted Prinia *Prinia hodgsonii leggei*

Plain Prinia *Prinia subflava insularis*

Ashy Prinia *Prinia socialis brevicaudata*

Jungle Prinia *Prinia sylvatica valida*

Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius sutorius*

Bright-green Warbler *Phylloscopus nitidus* (Green Warbler)

Large-billed Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus magnirostris*

Black-naped Monarch *Hypothymus azurea ceylonensis*

Asian Paradise-flycatcher *Terpsiphone paradisi*

White-browed Fantail *Rhipidura aureola*

Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher *Culicicapa ceylonensis*

Kashmir Flycatcher *Ficedula subrubra*

Dull-blue Flycatcher *Eumyias sordida*

Brown-breasted Flycatcher *Muscicapa muttui*

Asian Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa daurica*

Tickell's Blue Flycatcher *Niltava tickelliae jerdoni* (*Cyornis tickelliae*)

Great Tit *Parus major*

Velvet-fronted Nuthatch *Sitta frontalis*

Pale-billed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum erythrorynchos ceylonense*

Thick-billed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum agile zeylonicum*

White-throated Flowerpecker *Dicaeum vincens* (**Legge's Flowerpecker *D. vincens***)

Purple-rumped Sunbird *Nectarinia zeylonica zeylonica*

Long-billed Sunbird *Nectarinia lotenia lotenia* (Loten's S. *Cinnyris lotensis*)

Purple Sunbird *Nectarinia asiatica* (*Cinnyris asiatica*)

Oriental White-eye *Zosterops palpebrosa*

Sri Lanka White-eye *Zosterops ceylonensis*

White-throated Silverbill *Lonchura malabarica* (Indian S. *Euodice malabarica*)

White-rumped Munia *Lonchura striata*

Scaly-breasted Munia *Lonchura punctulata*

Black-throated Munia *Lonchura kelaarti kelaarti*

Black-headed Munia *Lonchura malacca* (Tricoloured Munia)

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Streaked Weaver *Ploceus manyar*

Baya Weaver *Ploceus philippinus*

Greater Racket-tailed Drongo *Dicrurus paradiseus* (**Sri Lanka Crested D. *Dicrurus lophorinus***)

White-bellied Drongo *Dicrurus caerulescens leucopygialis*

Sri Lanka Magpie ***Urocissa ornate* (Sri Lanka Blue Magpie)**

Brahminy Starling *Sturnus pagodarum* (B. Myna *Temenuchus pagodarum*)

White-faced Starling *Sturnus senex* (***Sturnia albofrontata***)

Sri Lanka Myna ***Gracula ptilogenys***

Hill Myna *Gracula religiosa* (Lesser Hill Myna *G. indica*)

Common Myna *Acridotheres melanosturnus*