

Sri Lanka: A week of endemics

January 30 - February 6, 2018

Matt Daw, Ethan Kistler, Billi Krochuk, Michael McCloy, & Erin Sharkey

Written by Michael McCloy

January 30

After arriving from Kochi on Sri Lankan Airlines we had no trouble getting our VISAs on arrival in Colombo. There were no lines and minimal bureaucracy; everything in total took about five minutes and cost \$40 USD/person. Originally, we'd planned to rent a car and have Ethan drive for the duration of our stay in Sri Lanka. A logistical snafu with the rental car company caused a change in plans though, and it we decided instead it would be best to hire a driver for a week. There were several car companies with booths at the airport and we spent half an hour in haggle mode before settling on Holidays Lanka (Tourist Drivers Association). For eight days along our pre-determined birding route it would only cost us a total of \$370 USD, inclusive of tolls, driver pay and accommodation, fuel, and all other expenses. Breaking it down to \$9.25/person/day it wasn't too bad! Ethan and I even got complemented on our negotiating skills after finalizing the transaction (ha).

Our car was a huge and spacious Toyota, comparable to a 12-passenger van, with a raised roof and working AC. Our driver, Nishantha Silva, was personable and friendly. We left the airport, making a bypass around Colombo, and a couple hours later arrived near Sinharaja Forest Reserve after stops for groceries and liquor. We had planned on a homestay at P. Gutharana's house just outside the park, but since we didn't have a way to contact him in advance we simply showed up at 8:30 and hoped he had space available! Luckily, he took us in with open arms. Since he only had one room for guests (though a second one is under construction) all five of us had to pack in tight.

He's a park guide at Sinharaja and gave us some helpful bird-finding tips as well as providing us with a delicious, filling dinner- even at that late hour. Gutharana's hospitality was incredible and we were blown away by how kind he and his family were to us. For a future homestay, he's reachable by telephone at +94 771 406 887. Two Chestnut-backed Owlets were calling behind his house as a bonus- a birthday lifer for me!



Lush forest just outside Sinharaja Forest Reserve

January 31

We spent all day birding in Sinharaja Forest Reserve, arriving at the entrance gate by 06:00 to buy tickets and claim a guide (a park guide is required to walk the trails in the forest) before the throngs of locals arrived for the Full Moon holiday. SRI LANKA BLUE MAGPIE was relatively easy near the park office when we bought our tickets. Walking back to the homestay for a filling breakfast of rotis and jam we had our first CRIMSON-BACKED FLAMEBACKS. After finishing breakfast we were quickly back in the park to head off with our guide, Gamage. A very productive morning with a lot of the easier and more widespread endemics being checked off- LEGGE'S FLOWERPECKER, WHITE-HEADED STARLING, SPOT-WINGED THRUSH, RED-FACED MALKOHA, and GREEN-BILLED COUCAL being some highlights. Other noteworthy birds included BESRA and LEGGE'S HAWK-EAGLE.

Throngs of school groups and other locals were arriving by mid-afternoon because of the holiday, so that was when we decided to head back to the homestay. A rain shower began right when we left, but that didn't prevent us from finding our first LAYARD'S PARAKEETS on the walk down. After waiting out the rain over some coffee we went out birding again until dusk, checking out areas down the road near Blue Magpie Lodge in the village. Here we had SRI LANKA GREEN-PIGEON as well as a mixed-species flock of swifts (none of which were particularly uncommon) that contained INDIAN SWIFTLET, LITTLE SWIFT, ASIAN PALM-SWIFT, and CRESTED TREESWIFT in varying numbers.



Road to Sinharaja Forest Reserve

eBird checklist: <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42384493>

February 1

Today we had three main targets- Sri Lanka Spurfowl, Sri Lanka Thrush, and Serendib Scops Owl. We entered the park according to the same schedule as the day before, getting to the ticket counter early and then leaving for breakfast before returning around 7:30 and actually entering the park. When we were waiting for the ticket counter to open just before 06:00 we heard a distant SRI LANKA SPPURFOWL calling down the hill. Unfortunately, this would be our only encounter with this species over the whole trip. An unsatisfying heard-only, but better than nothing. A Rockjumper birding tour, led by Stephen Lorenz, was at the ticket counter early as well and we would encounter them other several times throughout the day along the Sinharaja trails.



A trail at Sinharaja, complete with a Rockjumper tour group

When we first caught up to their group on the trail around 08:00 one of the guides spotted a skulking SRI LANKA THRUSH, and after a bit of waiting and contorting our bodies we were all able to get a satisfactory look. Success! The next few hours were spent looking for spurfowl and our guide, Sunil, checking for Serendib Scops Owl, both with no luck. One of the highlights of the morning however was a SRI LANKA FROGMOUTH on a nest that Sunil showed us. How cool!

Shortly before we had to leave around midday Sunil spoke to a second, “unofficial” guide that was hanging out by the upper gate and they went off to search for owls. A few minutes later they returned to say that the guy had found one but wanted 3000 SLR to take us to it. A steep price and we were not expecting to encounter this sort of “price gouging”. He wouldn’t even come down to 2000. But, we came all the way across the world to see endemic birds like this and \$20 (\$4 apiece) wasn’t going to stop us- so we begrudgingly agreed. A decision that was totally worth it, the views of the roosting owl were amazing! After a few short minutes we left so as not to disturb the bird further. Between the five of us, we had over 150 leeches from this short diversion off trail- yikes! At least all the leeches here were relatively small.

After enjoying lunch at our homestay we walked down towards Blue Magpie Lodge again, eventually succeeding in hearing a SLATY-LEGGED CRAKE call. The bird called from the marshy area by the bottom of the driveway to Jensen’s Bungalows, adjacent to a small tea plantation. Afterwards we found Nishantha and left for Uduwalawa. A couple hours drive later we arrived and settled on Nature Lover’s Guesthouse for the night, which gave us two rooms for a total of 2000 SLR along with reasonably priced meals. We booked a jeep safari through the guesthouse for the next day in Udawalawe NP for 4300 SLR/person, all-inclusive including park entrance fees.

eBird checklist: <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42409412>

February 2

We left the guesthouse at 05:30 for our Jeep safari in Udawalawe National Park. After waiting in a preposterously long line of Jeeps to get tickets at the park entrance we were finally able to start birding. GRAY-BELLIED CUCKOOS were common along with JERDON'S BUSHLARKS, and 2 PIED CUCKOOS were also a nice addition. Various watering holes and the back end of the lake held a variety of waterbirds, including SPOT-BILLED PELICANS, EURASIAN SPOONBILLS, WHITE-BELLIED SEA-EAGLES, BLACK-WINGED STILTS, LESSER SAND PLOVERS, LITTLE STINTS, and numerous WHISKERED TERNS. Asian Water Buffalo and Asian Elephants we also common in these areas. Great looks at a BROWN FISH OWL later in the morning was a treat. We failed to find one of our main targets of the morning though, Sri Lanka Woodshrike.



Elephants at Udawalawe National Park

Back at the guesthouse at 10:30 we enjoyed a delicious homemade brunch. Afterwards we walked a dirt road that followed alongside a canal below, and perpendicular to, the dam of Uda Walawe Reservoir. There were numerous previous reports of Sri Lanka Woodshrike in this vicinity, and after half an hour of searching we found a group of 4 SRI LANKA WOODSHRIKES! Misses today of birds we were hoping to encounter were Sirkeer Malkoha, Malabar Pied Hornbill, and Sri Lanka Swallow.

During the afternoon we drove over 4 hours to Nuware Eliya. After grabbing dinner at a pizzeria we packed it in for the night. Night at the somewhat dingy Vintage Courtyard Hotel (4000 SLR for a room with 4 beds).



Road through Udawalawe National Parks

eBird checklists: <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42427556>

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42452353>

February 3

At first light we walked down road just below the hotel to a gully and small creek. Right away we found a pair of YELLOW-BROWED BULBULS and 2 SRI LANKA BUSH WARBLERS, two of the endemics that we needed to find in the Nuware Eliya area. Soon thereafter we drove to Victoria Park and arrived right when they opened at 07:00. Our main target here was Dull Blue Flycatcher, but two and a half hours of walking slow loops around the park did not produce. However, we did find 5 PIED THRUSHES and 2 FOREST WAGTAILS along the creek in the western part of the park. We also had several more Yellow-browed Bulbuls, quite a sharp-looking species. Apparently, Indian Pitta is a regular winter resident here as well but we did not see any during our visit.

After brunch we drove slightly east of town to the Pedro Scout Camp Road junction by Cloud Forest Cabin. The first creek crossing here just before road split to the landfill is known to have Sri Lanka Whistling-Thrush. After trying for a bit we had no luck, but walked the road downhill to the left, paralleling the creek, and turned up 3 DULL BLUE FLYCATCHERS. Otherwise it was very quiet. We then checked some pastures and marshes on the N end of Lake Gregory where we had Gray-headed Swampens, a Gray Heron, various egrets, and 2 PADDYFIELD PIPITS.

Nothing unusual though, and we were still without Sri Lanka Swallow- one of only two endemics we had left to find.

Behind our hotel was a forested stream that we were able to access via a trail through the pine forest at the top of the hill. As we followed the trail for half a kilometer, the stream became rockier and more vegetated- perfect habitat for Sri Lanka Whistling-Thrush. The trail ended at a small dam that provided a perfect spot for us to sit and wait. Before long we heard a SRI LANKA WHISTLING-THRUSH calling from the shaded undergrowth, and after some playback it came in close. Very secretive, we were only to catch brief glimpses of it as it flew back and forth across the creek between several dense tangles. We stayed for close to an hour more and watched large numbers of Indian Swiftlets feeding overhead. Dinner was at the local Pizza Hut (fastest WiFi in town) and night again at Vintage Courtyard Hotel.

eBird checklists: <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42453219>
<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42450652>
<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42452351>
<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42451605>
<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42451594>

February 4

We got up early and again walked up to the Sri Lanka Whistling-Thrush spot, where we got much better views of an individual this morning. After spending some time with the bird and enjoying the peaceful early-morning hours we walked back to the hotel, got breakfast in town, and departed for Kitulgala. The drive took four hours and thanks to Nishantha's recommendation we stopped at the scenic St. Clair's waterfall along the way.



The beautiful landscape surrounding St. Clair's Falls

Upon first arriving we checked into our accommodation at Kumbuk Sevena Adventure Camp and then went birding nearby. We walked a short distance west along the main road and then crossed the river, birding this road up for several kilometers. It was here that we were finally able to nab our final endemic, SRI LANKA SWALLOW. Three birds were feeding overhead after a brief rain shower. Two or three kilometers up this road we were also able to get eyes on a couple species that we'd only heard to date, which were CRIMSON-FRONTED BARBET and BROWN-CAPPED BABBLER.

Close to dark three of us got a rickshaw to drop us off at the monkey bridge just east of town (about 300m E of Plantation Hotel) and from there walked the two kilometers into the Makandawa Forest Reserve. Owling wasn't too productive this evening, with two SRI LANKA FROGMOUTHS the only night birds that vocalized during our hour and a half expedition.

eBird checklists: <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42473641>

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42478794>

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42507745>

February 5

We had an early start back to the monkey bridge again where we slowly birded the road up to the Makandawa forest. Once arriving, there was no one at the ticket counter (admission is normally 650 SLR/person) so we walked right in. During the early morning hours we were hoping to encounter a Sri Lanka Spurfowl on the trail but had no such luck. Overall, the forest was quiet this morning though we did have nice views of a CHESTNUT-BACKED OWLET, another species which we had heard but not seen thus far. The trails here were peaceful and serene, with no other visitors until after 09:00. When returning to the village around mid-morning Ethan and Billi had SRI LANKA HILL MYNA and ORIENTAL DWARF KINGFISHER at the entrance to the forest near the ticket counter. The rest of the day was spent relaxing and leisurely birding in the vicinity of Kumbuk Sevena Adventure Camp, west of town. All of the endemics were in the bag and we were pretty tired, so a relaxing afternoon was definitely in the cards. Dinner across town at Plantation Hotel and then night again at Kumbuk Sevena Adventure Camp.

eBird checklist: <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42507662>



A scenic view through a window in the forest near Kitulgala

February 6

We left Kitulgala at 06:30 for Negombo, stopping at a cheap local bakery for breakfast along the way. A couple brief birding stops along the Negombo Lagoon and beach produced a few new birds for the trip such as Yellow Bittern, Whimbrel, Little Tern, and Great Crested Tern but nothing unexpected.

Ethan and Billi had to fly out but Matt, Erin, and I spent several more days relaxing in the Mount Lavinia neighborhood of Colombo. One morning was spent birding close by at the Attidiya Bird Sanctuary, where a few hours walking the canals produced a plethora of wading birds including YELLOW BITTERN, CINNAMON BITTERN, BLACK BITTERN, WESTERN REEF-HERON, and PHEASANT-TAILED JACANAS as well as numerous Asian Openbills and a couple Black-winged Stilts.

eBird checklists: All Saints Church: <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42532883>

Attidaya Bird Sanctuary: <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42586229>

Sri Lanka was an easy country to travel in (especially with our own driver) and was home to friendly people, cheap prices, beautiful scenery, and high biodiversity. I think it's safe to say that at some point, we'll all be back again!

TOTAL SPECIES LIST for Sri Lanka: 182

33/33 endemics (Sri Lanka Spurfowl and Sri Lanka Wood-Pigeon heard-only)