Full Detailed Itinerary - Sri Lanka: Ceylon Sojourn

Day 1: Arrival in Colombo; to Kitulgala

After arriving in Sri Lanka's capital, Colombo, we'll make a short trip to some local marshes near the airport where in addition to many common Sri Lankan birds there is a chance to see Black and Yellow Bitterns. After a couple of hours on site, we'll leave for Kitulgala in Sri Lanka's Wet Zone, a drive of two and a half hours. We'll spend the next two nights at Kitulgala. *PLEASE NOTE: As most international flights arrive in the middle of the night, and the tour starts early in the morning of this day; some people prefer to arrive a day early and spend the night in Colombo, in order to recover from their flight. If you would like a night in Colombo before the start of the tour, please let us know and we will be happy to help arrange this, although please be aware this will be at extra cost, as this has not been included in the tour fee. After a break and some lunch, we will begin our birding exploration of the area, with a visit to some of the plantation covered hills close to our hotel, which provide easy birding, and offer some of the easier endemics like Yellow-fronted and Crimson-fronted Barbets, Sri Lanka Hanging-Parrot, Sri Lanka Green Pigeon, and Layard's Parakeet. This is also a good raptor viewing area, with Black Eagle, Oriental Honey-Buzzard, and Rufous-bellied Eagle all occurring at the site.

Day 2: Kitulgala

Famous as the place where the 1957 Alec Guiness movie "Bridge On the River Kwai" was filmed, it is also rightly famed amongst Asian birders as a rich hunting ground for many "Ceylon" (the old British colonial name for Sri Lanka) endemics. Kitulgala actually comprises a mosaic of habitats, with endemic birds and other wildlife found in each; around the village gardens and lightly wooded areas provide rich hunting grounds for birds like Indian Pitta, Loten's Sunbird, and Golden-fronted Leafbird, and a slew of endemics like Sri Lanka Junglefowl (the national bird of Sri Lanka), Sri Lanka Gray Hornbill, the elusive Green-billed Coucal (in areas of Dwarf Bamboo), Chestnut-backed Owlet, Spot-winged Thrush, Black-capped Bulbul, White-throated (Legge's) Flowerpecker, and Brown-capped and Orange-billed Babblers. These areas may also yield Sri Lanka's national mammal, the massive Grizzled Giant Squirrel.

Day 3: Kitulgala to Sinharaja

After some final birding around Kitulgala, chasing whatever we still need; we shall head to Sinharaja, one of the most famous bird parks in all of Sri Lanka, which holds magnificent areas of pristine tall virgin forest, mixed with gardens and rich, old secondary forest. We may arrive in time to search the gardens and wooded hills close to the lodge in the afternoon, for Plum-headed Parakeets, Black-hooded Cuckooshrike, and further, good chances at endemic species like Crimson-fronted Barbet and Sri Lanka Hanging-Parrot. Three nights will be spent in a simple but excellent birder's lodge, just outside the reserve, which offers some of the best, most authentic, and traditional Sri Lankan food of the tour.

Days 4 – 5: Sinharaja

Known as the "Kingdom of the Lion" this forest area is a world-renowned biodiversity hotspot, being a designated biosphere reserve and also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This is the number one site in the country for Sri Lankan endemic birds, with all but one or two species occurring, plus plenty of other wildlife

besides. With two full days in the area, we will focus on some of the species that are either not possible at Kitulgala, or are much rarer there, like Sri Lanka Blue Magpie, Red-faced Malkoha, Crimson-backed Flameback, Ashy-headed Laughingthrush, Sri Lanka Scimitar-Babbler, Sri Lanka Myna, White-faced Starling, and the rare and difficult Sri Lanka Thrush (often the toughest of all the birds to see on this trip), while also arguably our best chances at birds like the recently described Serendib Scops-Owl, Green-billed Coucal, and Sri Lanka Drongo. This area also offers the best shot at Sri Lanka Frogmouth, which are frequently found, in pairs, dozing during the daytime. Keep a close eye on the surrounding hills may also yield raptors like the scarce Legge's Hawk-Eagle, Rufous-bellied Eagle, or Changeable Hawk-Eagle.

Day 6: Sinharaja to Udawalawe

After some final birding trying to track down any gaps in our list at Sinharaja, we head into the Dry Zone and Udawalawe National Park, where we will overnight. On the first leg of the trip we will have birded (at times), within lush, dense, rainforest; however, in this area we will be birding open grasslands, wetlands and stunted dry woodland and scrub, of a completely different nature to that experienced before. During the afternoon, we will be visiting some areas just outside Udawalawe National Park, for a mix of songbirds and waterbirds. The waterbirds are likely to include Spot-billed Pelican and Painted Stork, while in the surrounding scrub and woodland we may find White-tailed (Marshall's) Iora, Sri Lanka Woodshrike, or Yellow-eyed Babbler. While birding, other animals may also get a look in again, like Asian Elephant.

Day 7: Udawalawe NP to Tissamaharama

We will spend the morning on board a jeep, as we take a game drive inside Udawalawe National Park. This will be the first of three game drives of the tour, by jeep, in three different parks of southeast Sri Lanka (Udawalawe, Yala, and Bundala). Udawalawe is famed for its large concentration of Asian Elephants in particular, and we are likely to see some herds of these as we stop in on the mosaic of habitats found inside the park borders. Indian Rollers are likely to feature for the first time, and we will be, especially, on the lookout for two species of malkoha: Sirkeer and Blue-faced Malkohas. Like all three of the parks to be visited in the coming days, these are likely to offer the most relaxing and easy birding of the tour, with much of this being done from the specially adapted jeeps for game drives, which affords excellent bird and game viewing, as well as photography for those carrying cameras on the tour; getting extreme close-ups of birds like Blue-tailed and Asian Green Bee-eaters, Painted Storks and Asian Openbills, and perhaps even a roosting Brown Fish-Owl, is not only possible, but likely! Other possible birds inside the park include Barred Buttonquail, the rare Orange-headed Thrush, our first chance at Forest Wagtail, Lesser Adjutant and Asian Woolly-necked Stork. Aside from the avian fare, animals like Gray Tufted Langur, Toque Macaque, and Ruddy Mongoose may also feature too.

Day 8: Yala NP

Yala is Sri Lanka's premier game-viewing park, and one of the most popular wilderness areas on the island. The reason for this? In a word: Leopards. Yala holds the highest density of Leopards anywhere on the planet; the absence of other large cats, present where they occur in Africa for example, means that Leopards occur there in extraordinary quantities, never matched in Africa, ironically where they are better known from. We will have a full day in the park at Yala, and in doing so, have a reasonable chance of running into this must-see cat, with sightings occurring on most days at Yala. Indeed, the park is a mammal hotspot, with some days yielding more than ten species of mammal; other possibilities are Chital (Spotted Deer-the main prey item of the Leopard), Sambar, Golden Jackal, and Wild Asian Water Buffalo. Yala is also a scenic park with prominent rocky outcrops making for a wild and wonderful landscape in which to do our birding and game viewing. Birding wise, we have a shot at Small Pratincole, Orange-breasted Green

Pigeon, Pied and Gray-bellied Cuckoos, Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark, Sri Lankan Shama, and even male Indian Peafowls, or “peacocks” in the throes of full display. At dusk, we will return to Tissa for the night. After dinner, we may take a short drive to look for Jungle Owlet or Indian Scops-Owl, in the neighborhood of our hotel. *PLEASE NOTE: Sometimes the order here is switched around, with day 9 and 10 being done in the opposite order (i.e. Yala would then be done on day 10, not 9 as listed here). This is usually decided at the time by the Tropical Birding tour leader, based on local information, weather and so forth.

Day 9: Tissamaharama and Bundala NP

In the morning we’ll stick close to our hotel, birding the edge of one of the big “tanks” (or reservoirs), which provides good birding of its own. Our primary target will be the scarce, local, Sri Lankan race of White-naped Woodpecker in the trees surrounding this huge lake, which may also hold Jungle Owlet and Jerdon’s Leafbird, among others. While, on the tank itself, we have a chance to find the rare Watercock, Black and Yellow Bitterns, or Cotton Pygmy-Goose. There is also a huge roost of Indian Flying-Foxes (a huge, fruit-eating bat species) that make for great photos in this area too. We’ll return to our near hotel for lunch, before take an afternoon game drive, the last of the tour, in Bundala National Park, an internationally recognised RAMSAR site for its significance as a hotspot for migratory waterbirds. Among the possibilities among the shorebird horde include Small Pratincole, Red-necked Phalarope, Eurasian Curlew, Kentish, Little Ringed and Common Ringed Plovers, Curlew Sandpiper, and Little Stint. As we head out of the park around dusk, we will get more chances for two nightjar species (Jerdon’s and Indian), if needed.

Day 10: Tissamaharama to the Hill Country

After some final time around Tissa, searching for any missing birds like Greater Painted-Snipe or Ruddy-breasted Crake, we will travel out of the Dry Zone, and ascend into the Central Highlands of Sri Lanka. En-route to the “city of light”, Nuwara Eliya, (where we’ll spend the next two nights), we enter into some truly scenic areas, including Rawana Falls, with its attendant crowds snapping photos, and attendant Toque Macaques raiding the tourists! Nuwara Eliya is in the heart of “Tea Country”, the Hill Country, where the finest Ceylon Tea is produced and exported to the world under well-known brand names like Lipton, Dilma, and PG Tips. The city is also nicknamed “Little England”, as the crop-covered hills and climate suggest that country. Indeed, the sharp rise in altitude (to nearly 2000m/6560ft), will be accompanied by a likely change in the weather, which may resemble the cooler climate and rainy habits of an English summer! In the afternoon, we shall bird the hills behind the city, for some of our final remaining endemic birds of the tour; Sri Lanka White-eyes adorn almost all of the flocks in the area, and we also have our first shot at the stunning Yellow-eared Bulbul, the rare Sri Lanka Whistling-Thrush (actually a flycatcher), and tough-to-see Sri Lanka Bush-Warbler. We will also get further chances at Sri Lanka Thrush and Legge’s Hawk-Eagle in this area too, along with Indian Blue Robin and Gray-headed Canary-Flycatcher.

Day 11: Horton Plains NP

This day will be in marked contrast to all other experienced on the tour. While much of the trip is spent in the steamy lowland jungles of the Wet Zone, or the open hot grasslands and wooded areas of the Dry Zone, this day will see us visit the highest site of the tour, in Horton Plains National Park, which offers the very best landscapes in the country. Birding this area, we will be among cloudforests and Rhododendron-covered hillsides, completely unlike anything seen before on this trip. While will be some major avian targets still waiting for us on this day, it may be as popular for the scenery, as it is for the birds. Several deep ravines cut through the hillsides, and they have become a popular pilgrimage for local and international tourists; the deepest of these is known as the “World’s End”, while the smaller of the two is nicknamed the “Mini World’s End”. The trail to these is swathed in beautiful, wet dwarf forest, and grasslands, which are home to the

endemic race of Indian Blackbird (a possible future split as an endemic species), Hill Swallows, and the Sri Lanka Woodpigeon. Other areas of the park offer chances at two of the more difficult of the 35 endemic species on the island; Sri Lanka Bush-Warbler and Sri Lanka Whistling-Thrush, as well as the endemic, and poorly-named, Dull-blue Flycatcher. The area is also a good stake-out for a hardy endemic reptile, the Black-lipped Lizard, which can often be found too. In the afternoon We will arrive back in Nuwara Eliya in time to explore the ornamental grounds of Victoria Park, a great place to pick up two key species that spend the northern winter in Sri Lanka, the boldly-marked Pied Thrush and striking Kashmir Flycatcher.

Day 12: Nuwara Eliya to Kandy

The final leg of the tour will see us move into another site in the Hill Country, the scenic city of Kandy, which borders a large lake. However, before reaching Kandy, there will be time to visit a factory for one of Sri Lanka's most famous exports, tea. Sri Lanka, or Ceylon, as it was formerly known when under British rule, is world famous, as the producer of some of the finest teas in the World, colloquially known as "Ceylon Tea", although there are, of course, a wide variety among these. A short stop will be made at a factory, right along our route, to see how the famous Ceylon Tea is produced, and to taste test some of this, and also to purchase these teas, which are usually reserved only for export, and are therefore not widely available in-country. Hill Swallows also feature regularly around the factory, which is located in the hill country. Kandy is revered amongst Sri Lankans as their cultural heartland, and is the location of the "Temple of the Tooth", where the actual tooth of the Buddha is said to be housed in a tomb. Kandy was the former capital, before the British, in their former colonial grip on the country, moved it to Colombo. However, in the hearts of most Sri Lankans, Kandy is still their capital, culturally at least. On the edge of this wonderful city lies the rainforest of Udawattakele, which offers up further, final, chances at species like Crimson-backed Flameback, Brown-capped Babbler, Sri Lankan Shama, Black-backed Dwarf-Kingfisher, and even the local race of the rare Spot-bellied Eagle-Owl (or Forest Eagle-Owl), although luck is always needed to see the latter. It is also a great spot for Brown Wood-Owl, with a single bird regularly found day roosting at the site.

Day 13: Kandy Hills and Departure

We will spend our final morning birding Udawattakele or visiting some of the cultural wonders of Kandy, such as the "Temple of the Tooth". Then we drive a few hours back to Colombo to connect with our international departure flights. *PLEASE NOTE: As most international flights leave in the middle of the night, and our arrival in Colombo is likely to be late in the afternoon, there is likely to be a long wait at the airport. However, if you would like day use of a local hotel room, please let us know and we can arrange that for you. Please be aware this though will be at extra cost, as this is not included in the tour fee.

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