

Sri Lanka

4–19 February 2003

Participants:

Paul Burns
Peter and Vivienne Coleman
Trevor Davies
Alison Elphinstone
Grace Hansford
Anna Marett
Michael Rowe
Barry Shaw
Brian and Christine Shaw
Joan Thompson



Sri Lanka Junglefowl

Leaders: Vaughan Ashby, Lester Perera and Deepal Warakagoda

Day 1: Overnight flight from London to Colombo

Day 2: Arrived in Colombo at about 06.00 and after meeting other members of the group left airport at about 07.00 for the three-hour journey to Sigiriya with our local leader Lester. Birding en-route gave us our first few common birds including Little Cormorant, Indian Pond-heron, Cattle, Great, Little and Intermediate Egrets, Asian Openbill, Black-headed Ibis, Pheasant-tailed Jacana, Red-wattled Lapwing, Spotted Dove, Rose-ringed Parakeet, White-throated Kingfisher and Common Myna. One stop was particularly memorable however, with excellent views of several raptors: Oriental Honey-buzzard, Black-shouldered and Brahminy Kites, Crested Serpent-eagle, Shikra and best of all, Black Eagle. Although it was the dry season the heavens opened during the latter part of our journey making us feel at home! After settling in and taking lunch, the rain eased and eventually the sun came out. Highlights of the lunch period were a snake in the swimming pool (you should have seen how quickly the swimmers got out!), Vaughan falling over on the slippery path and one of the many Grey Langur monkeys paying a visit to Vivienne in her room! In the afternoon, we visited the area surrounding the base of Sigiriya rock fortress and eventually, from a carefully chosen vantagepoint between the trees, found our quarry, the highly distinctive Shaheen Falcon eyeing the numerous Little Swifts and Asian Palm-swifts. All the time we were being 'serenaded' by several species of barbet and after carefully searching found the huge Brown-headed Barbet, the distinctive local race of Crimson-fronted Barbet and Coppersmith Barbet. Two Sri Lanka Grey Hornbills showed well in the woodland together with Golden-fronted Leafbird, Common Iora, Asian Paradise-flycatcher and Oriental White-eye whilst around the moat of the fortress we found our first Stork-billed Kingfisher, Paddyfield Pipits and White-browed Fantails. Moving on to a patchwork area of scrub and marsh, we found birds to be numerous and our list rapidly increased with Orange-breasted Green-pigeon, Crested Treeswift, Little Green and Blue-tailed Bee-eaters, Common Woodshrike, Black-headed Cuckooshrike, Small Minivet, Red-vented and White-browed Bulbuls, Oriental Magpie-robin, Indian Robin, Ashy and Plain Prinias, Asian Brown Flycatcher, Dark-fronted, Tawny-bellied and Yellow-eyed Babblers and Ashy Woodswallow but the calling Indian Cuckoo refused to show itself. As dusk started to fall, 2 Indian Peafowl came out into the open followed amazingly by 2 Brown Fish-owls. Could it get any better?, Yes, just as the light had completely gone nightjars started to call and we were treated to multiple views of both Indian and Jerdon's Nighthjars so that we could not only see the size and plumage differences but also observe the display and feeding differences

Day 3: We spent the early morning birding around the entrance to the hotel adding a couple of more endemics to our lists; Sri Lanka Junglefowl and Brown-capped Babbler. We were prevented from walking our intended track however, by reports that a herd of Asian Elephants were in the area! Several Indian Pittas took a while to show themselves to everyone but then teased us by sitting on an open branch! Chestnut-headed Bee-eater, Asian Koel and Common Tailorbird were much easier but the Blue-faced Malkohas also played hard to get. Unfortunately, the heavens then opened again and we were forced to retreat back to

the hotel for an early lunch break. After it stopped raining, the afternoon was spent around the tanks (Sri Lankan word for artificial lakes), wet grassland and bushes. The light was poor and we were initially dodging the drizzle but it was worthwhile with new waterbirds including White-breasted Waterhen, Purple (Indian) Swampphen and Lesser Whistling-duck while the distinctive local race of Red-rumped Swallow showed why it is a likely candidate for re-splitting into Sri Lanka Swallow with its totally rufous underparts. Many Pintail Snipe were seen showing their distinctive flight pattern together with close views of the soon-to-be split Jerdon's Bushlark. A fly-over Woolly-necked Stork, numerous Pompadour Green-pigeons, Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike, Blue-winged Leafbird, Jungle Prinia, Loten's Sunbird and Thick-billed Flowerpecker were all added to the list before dusk fell and it was time to move on to look for owls. Lester had chosen a regular spot for Indian Scops-owl and within a few minutes one was calling. It took a frustrating 20 minutes to track the bird down as it moved from tree to tree. The wait was well worth it however, as when Lester found it perched in a nearby tree it showed superbly for almost 15 minutes at ranges down to 10 feet and much film and video was used on it!

Day 4: After breakfast, we made the three-hour journey to Kandy stopping en-route at a site for Chestnut-backed Owlet. Unfortunately, due to recent cosmetic gardening by the owners the birds were nowhere to be found, a tidy garden is not always the perfect one for birds! The usual roadside birds were seen from the bus and we arrived in Kandy in time to check in to our hotel for lunch. Kandy is a busy, noisy town and it was quite a rude awakening from our days at Sigiriya. Amazingly however, we were to find that not long after dark the whole town closed down and there was little noise at all! The best birding of the day was saved for the afternoon, at the Udawattekele reserve close to town. Highlights here included another 3 endemics; Sri Lanka Hanging-parrot, Layard's Parakeet (for a few) and Yellow-fronted Barbet. Other good birds included Greater Flameback (of the red-backed race), Scarlet Minivet, Black and Yellow-browed Bulbuls, Large-billed Leaf-warbler, Tickell's Blue-flycatcher, Brown-breasted Flycatcher, Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, Southern Hill Myna and frustrating flight views of an Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher for a few.

Day 5: In the morning we visited a tea plantation, quite a cultural spectacle. The actual tea plantation was fairly devoid of birds but in the surrounding trees and scrub there was a good selection including our first Greater Coucal and Large Cuckoo-shrike. Parakeets screeched noisily around and eventually we managed to get good perched views of both Alexandrine and Plum-headed although Layard's remained just heard. A pair of Crested Serpent-eagles put on an excellent display, both perched and soaring and in the scrub we found, Grey-breasted Prinia, Scaly-breasted and White-rumped Munias and the local race of Great Tit. Undoubtedly the best birds here were a pair of Indian Scimitar-babblers which noisily investigated us for 10 minutes, a rare treat for a species which is normally extremely secretive. After lunch, and sadly saying farewell to Lester, we met up with Deepal, with whom we firstly visited the spectacular temple of the tooth followed by a walk around the lake where we saw Little Cormorant and Indian Shag, Little Egret and an extremely docile Spot-billed Pelican (some searched their conscience as to whether they could tick it!). Next we visited the Royal Botanical Gardens where although the birding was relaxed we still saw White-bellied Sea-eagle, Oriental Honey-buzzard, White-bellied Drongo and Loten's Sunbird. We were also treated to the spectacular sight of hundreds of fruit-bats flying around and roosting.

Day 6: Today we drove towards Nuwara Eliya in the morning, stopping at a tea plantation en-route. This stop proved to be very rewarding as we added Sri Lanka White-eye, Black-throated Munia and Hill Swallow to our lists as well as excellent views of chocolate cake! The Black-throated Munia is particular was a good bird because it is a likely future split from those in India. After checking into our hotel, we took a pre-lunch local walk through a plantation seeing two more endemics; Yellow-eared Bulbul and Dull-blue Flycatcher. As our pre-lunch walk was so rewarding we repeated it in the afternoon seeing Besra and Grey-headed Canary-flycatcher. Later in the afternoon, we drove down to Victoria Park where more quality birds in the form of several Pied Thrushes, a single Kashmir Flycatcher and Indian Swiftlets were seen. We were made to feel more at home by several Grey Wagtails and finally all got good views of a male Indian Blue Robin.

Day 7: An early morning start for our visit to Horton Plains. At first light we were waiting (in thick coats!) for the first birds to appear with Eurasian (Nilgiri) Blackbird having that honour! Two Scaly Thrushes of the endemic sub-species soon appeared shortly followed by amazing views of a pair of the ultra-secretive Sri Lanka Bush-warblers. Having no luck with the whistling-thrush however, we moved on to another site. Pied Bushchat and Zitting Cisticola were seen on the walk down the track. Almost immediately Deepal heard a whistling-thrush and soon we all were treated to superb views of a male Sri Lanka Whistling-thrush. The walk back was enlivened by Common Buzzard. We then toured several other sites on the plain seeing Common Kestrel, Alpine Swift, Hill Swallow and experiencing wonderful panoramic views close to World's End before settling down for lunch at our first site to look for the wood pigeon. Despite spending several hours here, we failed to see the wood pigeon although we had a good selection of other species; Dull-blue Flycatcher, numerous Sri Lanka White-eyes and Yellow-eared Bulbuls, Large-billed Leaf-warbler, Pale-billed Flowerpecker, Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, Grey-headed Canary-flycatcher and Great Tit. On the way back to the hotel we saw Shaheen Falcon, Common Buzzard (eating a snake) and brief views of a Black-headed Munia.

Day 8: After breakfast we made the journey to the south coast at Tissamaharama. En-route we stopped at a roost site for Brown Wood Owl but this site is the subject of a lot of disturbance by locals and only a few of the group were fortunate enough to see

the birds. Pressing on, we arrived in Tissamaharama in time for lunch. In the afternoon we birded around one of the 'tanks' seeing literally hundreds of birds. In amongst the numerous Purple (India) Swamphen we found quite a few of the more secretive Watercock together with a lone Common Moorhen! There was a large colony of Little Cormorants and Indian Shags here, watched over by an immature Grey-headed Fish-eagle. We were amazed however, to watch an adult White-bellied Sea-eagle make several passes at the colony before snatching a young cormorant. There were plenty of herons and ibis including Painted Stork, Asian Openbill, Black-headed and Glossy Ibises, Grey and Purple Herons, Black-crowned Night-heron and numerous egrets of all four species. Oriental Darter was added to the list whilst Gull-billed, Whiskered and White-winged Terns hawked over the lake. A pale phase Booted Eagle circled for some time whilst several Spot-billed Pelicans gracefully glided overhead. A Yellow Bittern was flushed from beside the path and promptly disappeared into dense cover. Fortunately, we were able to relocate the bird which, eventually showed well to everyone. Leaving the lake, we walked back to a palm grove to await the appearance of the rare White-naped Woodpecker. We kept ourselves amused watching Blue-tailed Bee-eaters and Brown-headed Barbets but the woodpeckers failed to appear. Just as we were leaving one of Deepal's fellow guides came running up to us to say that he had found the birds at a nest nearby. Quietly approaching, we were privileged to watch the two parents feeding a young bird in a hole in a palm right next to a noisy footpath! Returning to the lake, we found a couple more Yellow Bitterns before a Black Bittern flew right past us and disappeared into a small patch of vegetation (I still cannot understand how it could disappear in such a confined place!). As we were searching for it several of the group had flight views of a Cinnamon Bittern.

Day 9: In the morning we visited an area of mixed grazing/marshland with large numbers of birds. En-route, we stopped at another tank which, is a regular wintering site for the rare Black-capped Kingfisher, which obliged immediately. Several Cotton Pygmy-geese were also seen here. New species included the huge Great Thick-knee as well as its smaller Eurasian cousin, Yellow-wattled Lapwing, Pacific Golden Plover, Kentish and Little Ringed Plovers, Lesser Sandplover, Ashy-crowned Sparrow-lark, Oriental Skylark, and Yellow Wagtail of the eastern grey-headed race. The best bird was yet to come however, unfortunately it was not a rarity by European standards but it was a first for Sri Lanka; Red-throated Pipit. After lunch back at the hotel, we visited Yala National Park. En-route we stopped at a number of roadside pools see many common wintering Palearctic waders together with Garganey and Northern Pintail. After transferring to three Land Rovers, birds started to come thick and fast; Barred Buttonquail proved quite common but we had to work harder for views of Sirkeer Malkoha. Several Eurasian Spoonbill were seen but we were lucky to find one of only three Black-necked Storks in the park. Pied Cuckoo and Eurasian Hoopoe were seen well but the same could not be said for the Asian Elephants which trumpeted in the bush but refused to show anything more than various small parts of their anatomy (mainly tail and backside!). On the way back to the hotel we stopped for more excellent views of Indian Nightjar. A wonderful day with an amazing 120 species seen during it.

Day 10: This morning we made the 45 minute drive to Bondala National Park. Immediately on arriving at the park headquarters we saw our first new bird of the day; Grey-bellied Cuckoo. We boarded the same three Land Rovers and entered the park, which is less heavily vegetated than Yala. Birds were abundant in this varied habitat with the usual herons, ducks and waders as well as many landbirds. Bird highlights were Pallid Harrier, more Barred Buttonquail, a number of Pied Cuckoos, Crested Treeswift, Indian Pitta, Jungle Prinia, and Blue-faced Malkoha. The real highlight of the morning for several however, was sightings of two Indian Elephants. The second encounter being within 30 yards of a large bull blocking the road! Eventually (after one Land Rover got stuck in the mud!) we reached the sea which, although warm and inviting on a beautiful sandy beach, looked very dangerous with large waves. Here we added Greater and Lesser Crested and Common Terns. After visiting the park we made a brief stop at some saltpans where amongst thousands of common waders were a few Small Pratincoles. The afternoon was spent leisurely revisiting Tissa Tank where more excellent views of Yellow Bittern, Grey-headed Fish-eagle, Watercock and White-naped Woodpecker were obtained together with an abnormally-showy Blue-faced Malkoha.

Day 11: Our first stop today was at Karagan Lagoon where we were greeted by the sight of over 100 Greater Flamingoes. Waders were numerous here with virtually all wintering Palearctic species represented including 4 Broad-billed Sandpipers, and 2 each of Sanderling and Greater Sandplover. There were also large numbers of duck here but only comprising Garganey and Northern Pintail again. Nearby, we encountered our only 2 Pied Kingfishers of the tour. Our next stop was supposed to be a leisurely visit to some marshes and the beach. Unfortunately, the water level was very high restricting the suitable area for waders but we did still see good numbers of birds including our only Green Sandpipers of the tour. On reaching the beach we were greeted with the fabulous view of wonderful deserted palm-fringed golden sands although it was far too dangerous even to consider a paddle. Just as we were leaving we picked out a large wader flying by in the distance. It looked interesting, very interesting, a large curlew with an all brown rump. The bird appeared to land about 2-3km away with a group of other birds but try as we may, we could find the right access point to get there. It could well have been another first for Sri Lanka, a Far Eastern Curlew, but we will never know! Continuing on to Embilipitiya, we checked into our hotel and after lunch, drove to Uda Walawe National Park. Once again we boarded three Land Rovers and enjoyed a marvellous afternoon. Raptors were very conspicuous here in the open grasslands and we had excellent views of both Montagu's and Pallid Harriers as well as a Black-shouldered Kite's nest seemingly being plundered by a group of Malabar Pied Hornbills. Several Changeable Hawk-eagles were seen at extremely close range including a bird that flew only a few feet over us before crashing into the grass and catching an Ashy Prinia. We were then able to watch it dismember and eat the unfortunate prinia only a few metres away from us. A small flock of

Baya Weavers were found together with larger numbers of Indian Silverbills whilst Blyth's Pipits (a notoriously difficult species to identify unless good views are obtained) showed down to just a few metres. But it was the elephants that stole the show, we saw quite a number of them including a family group at a waterhole.

Day 12: Most of the Morning was spent driving to Ratnapora. After checking in and lunch, we visited an area of forest about 45 minutes away. After a cat and mouse game for over an hour we finally all managed to get good views of the endemic Sri Lanka Myna. Birding in the forest was difficult but the open areas proved far more rewarding with excellent views of Sri Lanka Hanging-parrot, Black-crested Bulbul and Lesser Yellownap. The Layard's Parakeet unfortunately however, didn't stay long enough for everyone to get a good view of. This was also our introduction to leeches when Vaughan decided to give an example of why everyone should wear their leech-proof socks when in the rainforest!

Day 13: An early start was necessary to get to Sineraj for some early birding. After a 2.5 hour coach journey we then transferred to Jeeps for the final half journey to Martin's Bungalows. Even whilst transferring to the Jeeps we managed our first endemic of the day, Legge's Flowerpecker. Although the name Martin's Bungalows sounds very grand they are in fact a ramshackle assortment of buildings, some with bathroom, others sharing. Although it is very basic accommodation, it is vital for a tour to stay here as it is literally on the doorstep of the best forest for endemics with the alternative being a six-hour return journey each day! Even as we got out of the Jeeps we encountered another endemic, the stunningly beautiful Sri Lanka Blue Magpie. After breakfast we took our first walk in the forest and almost immediately found our first feeding flock. Three more endemics were quickly seen; Orange-billed Babbler, Ashy-headed Laughingthrush and White-cheeked Starling, as well as two species of cuckoo, Chestnut-winged and Indian, and finally, excellent views of Layard's Parakeet. Continuing on the forest trail, we found both the endemic Spot-winged Thrush and Scaly Thrush (future split?) side by side. The next bird took us all quite some time to get good looks at but it was worth it, the extremely elusive Green-billed Coucal. After about 20 minutes of peering into thick vegetation we finally all had excellent views. What a morning, we had entered the forest still needing eleven endemics and seen seven already! After lunch we resumed our search for bird flocks. Our park guide had spotted a pigeon however, and amazingly it was the species we had missed at Horton Plains, Sri Lankan Wood Pigeon. We were able to watch and even photograph the bird from close range. Moving on, we soon located a feeding flock with a good number of species in it. After diligent searching through it we located a Red-faced Malkoha but it took a while for everyone to get good views of it. By now, it was unfortunately just starting to rain so we scurried back to the entrance station for shelter, it didn't last long but was certainly heavy! With just two endemics left to find we started immediately on the Chestnut-backed Owlet. We had heard it both yesterday and earlier today but failed to find it. Now we were very persistent and after some effort everyone eventually saw it. With the light fading we returned to the 'bungalows' to fetch the torch then immediately returned to a site just a few hundred yards away. Within a few minutes we were having superb views of a perched Sri Lanka Frogmouth, the perfect end to a perfect day.

Day 14: With just one endemic needed we put all our efforts into finding it. During our efforts we saw nearly all of the species from yesterday. Our first effort to see the Sri Lanka Spurfowl resulted in a pair coming within a few yards but refusing to reveal themselves. Our endeavours were however, interrupted by perched views of a Crested Goshawk, then an Oriental Honey-buzzard mobbing it. On reaching the research station we enjoyed further views of Sri Lanka Blue Magpie before returning towards Martin's for lunch. Our journey was interrupted again however, by an amazingly confiding male Sri Lanka Junglefowl. Unfortunately, those photographing the spurfowl missed the Mountain Hawk-eagle flying over! In the afternoon we resumed our spurfowl search with some success with 2 birds eventually seen crossing the path. Continuing on towards the research station, we had excellent views of a pair of Dollarbirds, rare birds in Sri Lanka these days. At the research station 2 more male junglefowl were very tame showing how confiding even the most secretive of birds (viz. Grey Junglefowl in Goa) can be when they aren't persecuted.

Day 15: This was mainly a travel day. Leaving Martin's at 07.45 we arrived at our lunch destination at 12.30. The highlights en-route were Sri Lanka Wood Pigeon and Sri Lanka Blue Magpie. As we entered Colombo, Deepal showed us the rice fields he used to bird as a boy and then we were treated to a city tour as we drove north right through the centre. We finally arrived at our airport hotel at 16.30 with a group total of 255 species including all the present and future endemics and speciality birds. We had even achieved a first for Sri Lanka! Birding in the hotel grounds in the evening seemed somewhat tame by the standards of the previous two weeks.

Day 16: Morning departure to airport for flight home arriving in London in evening. As a footnote, the two members of the group (Barry and Trevor) who flew home on Emirates via Abu Dhabi added another 7 species to their list. Trevor's 'long-lost' cousin met them at the airport and took them to the local golf course. There they asked for a golf buggy as they were 'considering membership' and drove around the course seeing Great Cormorant, Greylag Goose, Grey Francolin, Palm Dove, White Wagtail, Graceful Prinia and White-cheeked Bulbul. The ingenuity of birders knows no bounds where lifers are concerned!