



'We find 40 elephants ambling along'

In little-visited Gal Oya National Park, Abigail Butcher sees the benefits of a new approach to conservation

I'm padding through the jungle, big vines tumbling from branches overhead and leaves creating a soft path beneath my bare feet. I shouldn't really be walking without shoes; it breaks every rule in the health and safety book, but it feels natural and earthy.



Gal Oya Lodge, above and inset below right, in eastern Sri Lanka

The undulating path we are following dives abruptly between two towering grey boulders upon which a leopard was recently sighted. Sadly, he's not there today and we creep through, emerging from the dim light on to the soft sand bed of the Gal Oya river in eastern Sri Lanka, reduced to a relative trickle during the current dry season.

"Come - over here," says Damien, my guide, in a loud whisper as we scramble up another huge boulder. Gal Oya means "rocky river" and it's like Jurassic Park. I feel so small and insignificant. Damien hands me a pair of binoculars and gestures to look over the grassy bank in front on to the shores of the vast Gal Oya Lake - the largest in the country - stretching endlessly in front of us.

"What do you see?" he asks softly, eyes twinkling. I see elephants and count three or four, assuming they are the young males we have seen over the past few days, ostracised from the main herd during their teenage years.

"Look again," Damien urges, his grin widening with delight at what he has found for me - a herd of 30, perhaps 40 elephants and calves of various sizes ambling along, carelessly and gloriously wild.

This is what I have come to see and my heart beats hard in my chest as I watch them meandering on the shore, spraying themselves with water and snatching tufts of grasses with delightfully inquisitive trunks. I watch for what seems like hours until a quick glance at the time shows that, at 4.30pm, it is not long until dark. Night falls rapidly here in the

tropics and we must be out of Gal Oya National Park by 6pm.

As we make our way back along the path and Damien stops to point out a green forest lizard, a flame-backed woodpecker and yet more grey langur monkeys swinging excitedly overhead. He smiles when I mistake a group of stout and spiky cypads for pineapples, patiently explaining that they are, in fact, living fossils that grow less than an inch per year.

The Gal Oya park comprises 100



sq miles (259 sq km) of lake and forest in the east of Sri Lanka - a peaceful, secluded wildlife paradise that remains almost entirely untouched thanks to its remote location. It took seven hours to drive here from Colombo but the journey was worth it. Gal Oya Lodge, where I am staying and where Damien is head naturalist, specialises in environmentally responsible tourism.

It works closely with Tears for Tigers Travel, a British company that provides safari experiences in partnership with conservation groups which educate clients on the threats to local wildlife and ways of preserving their natural habitat.

For the past three days I've been learning just that: exploring the local area and 20 acres of private forest that surround the lodge. One morning we head out just after sunrise, watching tiny bush quails and barred button quails go about their business. Damien explains the bird and mammal life in intricate detail.

Damien cares passionately about his surroundings, studying dragon flies and running a snake awareness programme in an attempt to halt the unnecessary killing of harmless serpents by villagers - conservation work encouraged by his employers, Tim Edwards and Sangyay Choegyay.

Tim and Sangyay grew up in Nepal and opened the now nine-room Gal Oya Lodge in August 2014, constructing each of the rooms from locally sourced, natural materials and often incorporating trees into the open-air living areas to minimise impact on the environment. There is no air conditioning and water is heated with solar power.

"We're aware of our responsibility," says Tim, "and we make a lot of effort



FOUR SPECIES TO LOOK OUT FOR

Flame-striped jungle squirrel
Protected by law, these little grey-striped squirrels are a species of rodents found in the central highlands of Sri Lanka.

Golden palm civet
This is the only one of four endemic species of civet in

White-spotted and Yellow-striped mouse-deer
These incredibly rare and only recently discovered species of mouse-deer, also known as chevrotain, are found only in the Sri Lankan Highlands.

Purple-faced langur
This shy, long-tailed, dark brown monkey can be found in canopy forests in Sri Lanka's mountains and in the south-western wet zones such as the Horton Plains National Park and Sinharaja Forest Reserve.



A golden palm civet, above; Sri Lankan mouse-deer, right; and a langur, far right

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in engaging with the local community and teaching them the importance of conservation. One of the first things we did was hire local poachers, not only to give them an alternative income but also to make a direct impact on that section of the community. They have unparalleled knowledge of the surrounding jungles and have been an invaluable source of expertise."

Teaching the community about the importance of conservation is vital if Sri Lanka's rich and diverse flora and fauna is to remain intact. The country has one of the highest proportions of endemic species in the world (see panel below), but urbanisation, tourism and human intervention by farming are taking their toll.

The influx of tourists that began in 2009 after the civil war ended surged to a new high in 2016 - reaching more than two million. Many are flocking to national parks to see Sri Lanka's wildlife, and Yala National Park - the closest park to Colombo, with the highest concentration of leopards per square mile in the world - has seen a similar surge in visitor numbers.

This popularity has come at a price. Talk to the more sympathetic operators in the 378 sq mile (979 sq km) park and you'll hear stories of elephants attacking safari jeeps and leopards being run over. After years of war and the effects of the 2004 tsunami, locals are keen to capitalise on this soaring revenue stream and are offering safaris to tourists.

Competition is high, and the situation can best be described as chaos. "Yala is split into five areas or 'blocks', with most heading to block one, which can take an hour to get into at peak viewing time (sunrise). During my visit to block one I am horrified to see 20 or so jeeps jostling for pole position as a (usually nocturnal) sloth bear slowly crosses a rough dirt road. Drivers communicate by mobile phone, tipping each other off when there is a good sighting. In his effort to reach the bear before other jeeps, our driver hurtles at 30 miles (50km) per hour (six miles [10km] per hour faster than the speed limit) past a water hole where elephants are swimming, flamingos wading and buffaloes wallowing. The poor bear, when we finally spy him through the fug of exhaust fumes, is so lifeless and accustomed to the traffic and crowds that we might as well be in a zoo.

On our way back to the hotel that night, the same driver rounds a bend too fast and hits a dog - a story I later relate to Dee Jayantha, a Sri Lankan vet, who buries her head in her hands. Dee is head of the Sri Lankan branch of Eleמותion Foundation, a non-profit organisation founded to improve the lives of Asian elephants. Eleמותion is



Gal Oya National Park, left; and Yala National Park, above

Essentials

Tears for Tigers Travel (01825 719536; experience-wildlife.com) is offering a 10-day trip to Sri Lanka from £2,014 per person. Includes two nights at Uga Residence in Colombo, three nights at Gal Oya Lodge, two nights in Udaawalawe, two nights at Kulu Safari, Wilpattu, plus transfers, guiding and some meals, but not international air travel. **Sri Lankan Airlines** (sri.lankan.com) flies from London Heathrow to Colombo with fares from £484. **Red Savannah** (01242 787800; redsavannah.com) has 10 nights in Sri Lanka from £4,195 per person, including return flight with Sri Lankan Airlines from London Heathrow to Colombo, with transfers. Includes a night in Galle at Fort Bazaar, three nights at Chena Huts, three nights at Gal Oya Lodge and three nights at Leopard Trails.

fighting to protect Sri Lanka's rapidly changing ecosystem and improve the often conflicting relationship between humans and elephants - as well as the government to promote blocks two, three, four and five to tourists. When I visit block five, I find it a complete contrast to the brush and overcrowded block one. While a leopard sighting still eludes me, I have up-close-and-personal encounters with a herd of elephant, buffaloes and a multitude of eagles from the grey-headed fish eagle to the serpent eagle, sitting statuesque on the branch of an ebony tree. We spot palm squirrels scampering around and the scratch marks of a leopard on a neralt tree.

Aside from Yala block five and Gal Oya, Tears for Tigers takes clients to Udaawalawe National Park, a mix of abandoned teak plantations, scrub and grassland most akin to an African safari and home to elephants. There's also Wilpattu in the north-west, Sri Lanka's largest and oldest national park, which was closed for years during the war. Wilpattu is home to leopards, bears and elephants along with the rare mouse-deer and offers a quieter experience than Yala.

In contrast, Gal Oya remains relatively unexplored with very few safari operators. Those that do take tourists into the park continue to put the wildlife's welfare first - and as long as Damien remains in place at the Gal Oya Lodge, it will be in good hands.

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