

Birding Trip Report

Sri Lanka, (Sinharaja National Forest) 24-25 January 2014



National Bird: the Sri Lanka Jungle fowl

As a respite from bird species-poor Maldives, I flew to Sri Lanka for a weekend of targeted birding with the aim of seeing some of Sri Lanka's endemics. My google research indicated that **Sinharaja National Forest** might be a good bet, (hosting as it does some 90% of the country's key species).

The trip was a great success and I could only add to the many accolades that Sri Lanka receives as a friendly, comfortable and relatively easy birding destination. In two day's birdwatching, I managed to see 23 out of 28 confirmed endemics and a total of 53 lifers (indicated in bold below). Recent taxonomical research may raise the number of recognized endemics to 32.

Logistics: I flew from Male to Colombo on Korean Air (US\$202 return) with a Thursday afternoon departure, arriving at 17:40. I had pre-arranged a taxi with Roshan Vaas of Tuskers Tours (vaastuskerstravels@gmail.com +94 777555879) from Bandaranaike Int'l Airport to take me directly to Sinharaja (five hours, Sri Lanka Rupees 22,000 return (US\$173)). My pleasant, if not somewhat speed head driver, Michael, stayed at the lodgings at Blue Magpie Lodge, for the return to CMB on Saturday evening. Blue Magpie is a basic, but comfortable "eco lodge" managed by the charismatic, Arun. The cost for single full-board accommodation was US\$90 per night. Arun arranged jeep transport (my driver was a great guy called Tilak) to take me up to the National Park HQ each day for SLR 3,500 (US\$27 per day). The park entrance fee was SLR 644 and the guiding service fee was a very reasonable SLR 1000 (\$7.69 per day). I was very fortunate to have the services of Ranjith Pamasir Tel: 0712790265/ 0778048239 – who in my opinion, has one of the sharpest eyes in the business and worth every rupee.

My guide book was: "**Birds of India**" Grimmett, Inskipp and Inskipp, Second Edition, Princeton (2011).



A view from Blue Magpie Lodge

Day 1

I started both mornings with a generous cooked breakfast at the Lodge at 05:30. My jeep departures to the park HQ (approx. 30 minutes) began on time at 06:00am. In the grounds of the lodge, was a flowering tree, which in the early morning crepuscule hosted:

1. **Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot (E)** - by the dozen, very common in the area and entertainingly comical to watch
2. **Legge's Flowerpecker (E)** – yellow belly (both male and female) with individuals feeding somewhat confusingly in the company of:
3. **Purple-rumped Sunbird** - (same jizz, same size (10cms) with yellow bellies).
4. Black (**Square-tailed**) Bulbul (*Hypsipetes (leucocephalus) ganeesa*) – a very common bird and a possible split (?) from the Black Bulbul commonly found throughout Asia
5. Spotted Dove – common on roadsides

Several minutes from the lodge, we parked in a wooded ravine in response to hearing the calls of the reportedly secretive and elusive:

6. **Green-billed Coucal (E)** – in all, 4-5 individuals seen with great persistence as part of a feeding party. Birds kept well hidden in vine tangles and only seen when emerging to fly from tree-to-tree. Greenish/Ivory bill clearly seen as distinct from the only other coucal in SL:

7. Greater **(Southern) Coucal** (*Centropus (sinensis) parroti*) – commonly seen in open woodland and listed in *Grimmett* as a potential split from the Greater Coucal due to subtle differences in size, colour and range.



Birding in our jeep in the tea plantations

Further up the range and in open woodland and in bare deciduous trees among the tea plantations were seen:

8. **Sri Lanka Green (Pompadour) Pigeon (E)** – almost always in mated pairs, the male with a distinct purple wing
9. **Green Imperial Pigeon** – majestic and confiding in the bare branches of taller trees
10. Brown-headed Barbet – the Sri Lanka & SW India sub-species, *Megalaima z. zeylanica*
11. **Yellow-fronted Barbet (E)** – very common with smart blue face and yellow crown
12. Common Iora
13. Dollarbird
14. White-throated Kingfisher
15. Chestnut-headed Bee-eater
16. Blue-tailed Bee-eater
17. Golden-fronted Leafbird
18. **Crimson-backed Goldenback (E)** (*Chrysocolpates (lucidus) stricklandi*) - several seen over two days of this stunning bird with bright red back and yellow bill (very different from the closely-related, Greater Goldenback)
19. **Plum-headed Parakeet** – unfortunately only brief and flying views
20. **Indian Cuckoo** – located by call, but found with difficulty. Winter migrant.
21. **Pale-billed Flowerpecker** – difficult to distinguish due to small size and frenetic activity at times

from:

- 22. **Thick-billed Flowerpecker** – very pale, almost white
- 23. **Lesser Hill Myna** (*Gracula (religiosa) indica*) – split from Common Hill Myna (?)
- 24. Brown Shrike
- 25. **Black-capped Bulbul (E)** - a striking yellow bird recently split from the Black-headed Bulbul
- 26. **Orange Minivet** – a rich orange colour in good light, clearly distinct from the larger sized *Scarlet Minivet* which I note is mistakenly listed as present at Sinharaja in some bird lists.

In low shrubbery and in tea plantations were seen:

- 27. Common Tailorbird
- 28. **Sri Lanka Spurfowl (E)** – a male and female pair were whistled into range by Ranjith. While the beautifully speckled male remained mostly under cover, the female circled us calling and several times almost came up to our feet!

Flying over open country were seen:

- 29. **Legge's Hawk Eagle**, *Nisaetus (nipalensis) kelaarti* – listed as a possible split from Mountain Hawk Eagle of the Himalayas
- 30. Asian Openbill

On arrival at the park HQ, we paid our entrance and guiding fees and were treated to excellent close views of:

- 31. **Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill (E)** – the endemic of only two species of Hornbill in Sri Lanka (the other being Malabar Pied – not seen)
- 32. **Yellow-browed Bulbul** – more of a forest bird and quite common inside the park
- 33. **Dark-fronted Babbler** – bold and cheeky. A pair attacking a giant spider seen on one occasion

We then spent several hours on the forested trails inside the park:

- 34. **Sri Lanka Blue Magpie (E)** – one of the smartest birds I've ever seen – blue and brown with red bill, eye ring and feet. Several individuals seen and some made tame by hand feeding.
- 35. Black-capped Monarch – mobbing the Blue Magpies on several occasions
- 36. **Layard's Parakeet (E)** – a subtly beautiful lilac-and-green, *Psittacula*. Several pairs seen (male with distinct red bill)
- 37. **Sri Lanka Junglefowl (E)** – the national bird of Sri Lanka. Tame individuals (all male) seen along trails.
- 38. **Large-billed Leaf-Warbler** – winter migrant
- 39. **Spot-winged Thrush (E)** – a parent feeding a fledgling – *intimately* confiding

On two occasions, we came across the bird waves for which Sinharaja is famed. These contained:

- 40. **Orange-billed (Sri Lanka Rufous) Babbler (E)** – the most common bird of the trip
- 41. **Sri Lanka Drongo (E)** - (*Dicurus (paradiseus) lophorinus*) – considered a split from Greater Racket-tailed Drongo

- 42. **Malabar Trogon** – always fabulous to see a Trogon. Both male and females seen regularly on the outer limits of feeding flocks
- 43. **Red-faced Malkoha (E)** – upwards of six seen in vine tangles and dense foliage - my favourite bird of the trip with the most extraordinary red bulging forehead and eye ring
- 44. **Chestnut-winged Cuckoo** – of impressive size. Another winter migrant from the sub-continent.
- 45. **Ashy-headed Laughing-Thrush (E)** – very restricted range endemic. Parties (up to 10) heard chortling in the lower storey under the mixed feeding flocks. Not uncommon.
- 46. Velvet-fronted Nuthatch – one seen hopping upside down with feeding flock
- 47. **Lesser Goldenback** – like a miniature Crimson-backed, the Sri Lanka sub-species, *Dinopium (benghalense) psarodes*, has a very distinct red back compared to the Indian species – another candidate for a split – and why not ?

On the way out, Ranjith suggested we go *hors piste* to check a known roosting site and voila!:

- 48. **Sri Lanka Frogmouth (E)** – a pair (female all brown and male, grey) snoozing in a horizontal posture (unlike the vertical typical of frogmouths and illustrated in Grimmett).

After leaving the park, we motored down to the Visitor's Centre to stake out the uncommon endemic:

- 49. **White-faced Starling (E)** – a single bird flew into a tree to sit close to an Orange Minivet after a wait of one hour. This bird is reputed to be becoming rarer. It is often dipped by birding groups.



Ranjith and his mother's tea bag

Driving back to the lodge, we stopped by Ranjith's family home to pick up bails of tea leaves that would go to the local cooperative for drying and processing. As we waited for the heavy sacks to be loaded:

50. Red-rumped (Sri Lanka) Swallow – a distinct sub-species, *Cecropis (daurica) hyperythra*; one individual hawking insects down low and showing a spectacular red-ochre in the late afternoon sun..

Before returning to the lodge, Tilak volunteered to show me an endemic diurnal owl that he had seen regularly on his farm. We walked about 1km along a forested road of a *pinus radiata* timber plantation while he whistled.... and lo and behold, in came the bird, hooting up a storm:

51. Chestnut-backed Owlet (E) – lovely ball of fluff which puffed out its white chin when responding

In the early evening, I birded the grounds of the lodge solo and staked out several feeding tables which were well-stocked with over-ripe fruit:

52. Brown-breasted Flycatcher – winter migrant

53. Asian Brown Flycatcher

54. Oriental Magpie Robin

55. Red-vented Bulbul

In the rice paddies adjacent to the lodge was a perched Legge's (Mountain) Hawk Eagle and:

56. Asian Palm Swift – several hawking insects in the cool of the evening

57. White-rumped Munia – six feeding happily on rice stalks

The evening meal was a delicious chicken curry served with assorted condiments. The local **Lion Lager** (served warmish in 'don't be stingy baby' 750ml bottles) went down a treat (especially after two weeks in alcohol-free Malé). My only other dinner companions were a Swedish party investigating butterflies with their local guides. They were notable in prefacing almost every phrase in loud and heavily-accented English: "In Svee-den vee" . We didn't become pals.

Day 2 (only new species listed)

Ranjith rolled his eyes when I presented him with my 'cleanup' list for the second and final day. Felicitously, we eventually scored all but two: Sri Lanka (Scaly) Thrush and recently-split, Crimson-fronted (Sri Lanka Small) Barbet of the remaining species that can realistically be seen at Sinharaja:

58. Indian Swiftlet – actually very common, careening high in the sky, but requiring guidance for positive I.D.

59. Oriental White-eye – not common, but also not the endemic Sri Lanka White-eye.

60. Sri Lanka Scimitar-babbler (E) – a handsome bird that was missing from its usual role as an integrant of feeding flocks. Only individuals seen acting rather like woodpeckers.

61. Black-hooded Oriole – only one seen in a eucalyptus plantation

62. Forest Wagtail – winter visitor seen on the road up into the park

63. Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher – a flashing, zitting yellow dot seen on two occasions by a forest stream. As Phoebe Snetsinger would have said: BVD! (Better View Desired).

64. Greenish Warbler – the second of two warblers commonly encountered at Sinharaja (the other being Large-billed).

Mid-morning, a pair of raptors was seen soaring high:

65. Crested Serpent Eagle

After a portable lunch prepared by the lodge, a significant bird-wave was encountered. New species, (in addition to many seen yesterday) were:

66. Brown-capped Babbler (E) – a discreet member of the feeding flock, but this skulker had to be eventually coaxed out of hiding by judicious use of playback (the only use in the whole trip!)

67. Lesser Yellownape – the distinct *chlorigaster* sub-species with white streaking on the head

68. Tickell's Blue Flycatcher

At 13:00, in the heat of the day, we decided to abandon our search for the Scaly Thrush* and the Barbet and leave the park and return to the Visitor's Centre to stake out a particular bird that we had dipped, (but is quite commonly seen), the endemic Hill Myna. After an hour, were seen:

69. Small Minivet – both the orange male and yellow female

70. Emerald Dove

71. White-bellied Drongo

Much to (our/my) surprise, a mobile phone call came in that the rare endemic Scops Owl had just been found by another guide in the vicinity. A bounty of \$20 was paid for the discoverer and we set off into the forest (no trail). After 30 minutes, we came across a fallen tree limb of dessicated leaves. Inside the mass of decaying foliage and roosting silently was the diminutive (17cms) and legendary (only described in 2004):

72. Serendib Scops Owl (E) – I had enormous trouble discerning the buffy bird from the surrounding brown leaves even though it was resting not 2 metres from our viewing site. I remember my friends Tom and Melissa saying it was "just like a leaf". The bird was a totally unexpected (and unearned?) bonus.

Triumphant, we returned to the Visitor's Centre to claim our last bird of the day. Not so easy....after two hours, the light fading and my car waiting to return to Colombo, we had to call it a day. As I was sullenly packing my bins, a raucous cackle; and in came our quarry:

73. Sri Lanka Hill Myna (E) - a tardy, but welcome individual delivering a farewell call in the dying rays of the sun from the apex of a tall tree.

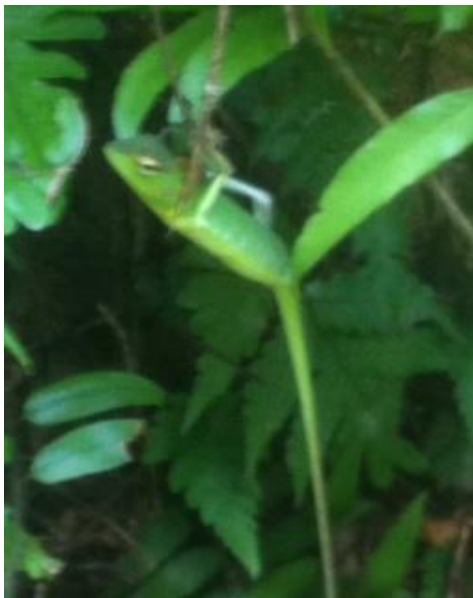
And that was the end of two really good days' birding.

* We met two other birding groups in the park that had also failed to find the Scaly Thrush. Depressingly, one earnest team had birded solidly in several parks for three weeks in Sri Lanka without finding it.

Another trip will be planned to Horton Plains at Nuwara Eliya for the higher elevation endemics: Sri Lanka Wood Pigeon, Dull-blue Flycatcher, Sri Lanka White-eye, Sri Lanka Bush Warbler, Sri Lanka Whistline Thrush and Yellow-eared Bulbul; in addition to the lamented Scaly Thrush and the Crimson-fronted Barbet. One other species, which has recently been proposed for full species status is the Sri Lanka Woodshrike (*Tephrodornis affinis*), a split from the Common Woodshrike, (*T. pondicerianus*).*



Sri Lanka Green Vine Snake



Unidentified Green Lizard (out on a limb)

* My interlocutors in various tour groups and even my own marvelous guide, Ranjith, scoffed at any mention of trying to look for the notoriously difficult Sri Lanka Bay Owl, *Phodilus (badius) assimilis*. Indeed, the common reaction was not unlike the effect of one farting while others, on nervous edge, are trying to get bins on an especially difficult skulker...so I have decided to leave this potential split out of the equation for the time-being...ok? (just so the purist doesn't decide to give me a hard time).

End Notes

In addition to good endemic birds, Sinharaja Forest is also known for its *Lepidoptera*: and we saw Sri Lanka's largest and second largest butterflies: the Common Birdwing and Blue Mormon respectively.

Reptiles seen were the improbably wiry Green Vine Snake, Keel-backed Water Snake and a number of lovely green lizards. A feature of the forest floor is the Giant Millipede (30cms). Streams played host to Walking Catfish and schools of aquarium-beautiful fish. Birding was occasionally interrupted by Giant Squirrels and the endemic Layard's Squirrel. The only danger encountered were numerous Hairy Caterpillars which abseil from trees on silken threads – one unfortunate collision resulted in welts on the arm from the irritating toxic spines....ouch.



Serendib Scops Owl Day Roost – Can you Spot the Spotted Owl?



(Appalling) i-phone photo of the Serendib Scops Owl