

Birding at POKUNUTHENNA

Outback of Udawalawe

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The Field Ornithology Group of Sri Lanka (FOGSL), during its 40 years of prestigious existence has taken pride in exploring Sri Lanka's undiscovered wildernesses, observing and recording data on bird diversity. Monthly field visits to various birding "hot spots" in Sri Lanka have become a highly sought after event among avid birders seeking an intense birding experience as well as less serious nature enthusiasts looking for a tranquil experience in the wild. FOGSL's field visit in June 2016 to a brand new destination - Pokunuthenna, perked up interest and excitement among the birding community. The visit was coordinated by Ashoka Ranjeewa – a FOGSL member who is engaged in research on human elephant conflict at Pokunuthenna for the last three years.

Pokunuthanna is a rural village in the remote countryside of Monaragala District

The three day trip started from Colombo University premises at 6.45 am and our twenty member team lead by Professor Sarath Kotagama reached the destination around 3.00 pm via Udawalawe and Hambegamuwa. Sixteen kilometres after Hambegamuwa we turned left at Dahaiyagala to Damwelordaya temple and from there onwards it was seven kilometres of pristine countryside. We reached our abode "Pokunuthenna Eco Resort" filled with rustic charm and spread over a four acre land overlooking water, after travelling approximately 230 kilometres from Colombo.

Pokunuthanna is a rural village in the remote countryside of Monaragala District, the closest towns being Thanamalvila and Balangoda. The village is situated in a flask shaped area

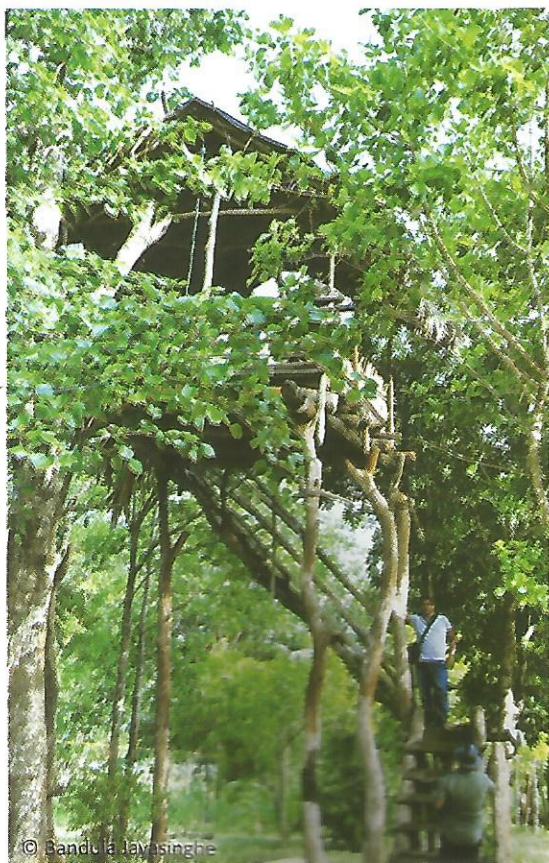
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bordered by the Udawalawa National Park and the Dahaiyagala Sanctuary on three sides and the other side continuing with civilization. Dahaiyagala Sanctuary acts as a natural wildlife corridor between Udawalawe National Park and Bogahapattiya Forest making it a high priority conservation area. Being surrounded by two protected areas, the village boasts of high biological diversity not only birds but also mammals such as elephants, leopards, spotted deer, mouse deer, wild boar, jungle cats, palm civets etc and many species of amphibians; reptiles (including crocodiles), butterflies and dragonflies.

Pokunuthenna – or land of water, true to its name is a basin of flat land containing many small tanks (wewas) such as Pokunuthenna wewa, Thiyambarayaya wewa, Pothupitiya wewa, Ranawarapalassa wewa, Dingimada wewa, Dambeara wewa etc. Pokunuthenna wewa is the largest in the area and is located within Dahaiyagala Sanctuary. The Haputale-Beragala mountain range stands guard majestically at a distance. About hundred families inhabit this small hamlet. The earliest settlers were the families displaced by the declaration of Udawalawe National Park in early 1970s who were relocated to the area.



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We got an eye full of Indian Nightjars resting on the ground as well as on electric wires.



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After a late lunch of Kos, Pol-Sambol, Karawala and vegetables, we set-up three camping tents for six persons. There was space for four in a charming tree house built on a huge 'Kolon tree' and the rest had dormitory-style accommodation. We were asked not to venture alone outside after nightfall by Ajith Sandanayake who owns the resort as elephants roam through the village at night.

In the evening, we leisurely watched birds at the back yard of the resort bordered by Thiyambarayaya wewa and observed many forest and water birds such as Malabar Pied Hornbill, Indian Roller, Coppersmith Barbet, White-Browed Bulbul, Plain Prinia, Ashy Prinia, Grey Breasted Prinia, Common Iora, Small Minivet, Little Green Bee Eater, Brown Capped Pigmy Woodpecker, Lesser Sri Lanka Flameback, Crested Serpent Eagle, Stork Billed Kingfisher, Common Kingfisher, Pied Kingfisher, White-Bellied Sea Eagle, Little Cormorant, Indian Cormorant, Oriental Darter, Grey Heron, Purple Heron and many more. Ajith is planning to build two family cottages close to the water so that one could observe birds from the comfort of the upper deck as well.

A presentation themed "Towards Zero Carbon" on Global Warming was made by Professor Kotagama before dinner. While having dinner we observed the street lights in faraway Beragala-Haputale mountain range. After a simple meal of rice and curry we relaxed on the veranda in total darkness. We were fascinated by the star-studded night sky as it presented us the whole Galaxy of stars. The cacophony of nocturnal creatures broke the dense silence of the night with the "marble on glass" call of Indian Nightjar dominating. The more avid birders ventured in to the darkness in a group following the calls of Brown Fish Owl and Indian Nightjar. Even though we were not fortunate to see the Brown Fish Owl, we got an eye full of Indian Nightjars resting on the ground as well as on electric wires. Night time birding at Pokunuthenna always carries the risk



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of coming face to face with elephants, and had to be done with extra caution with an experienced person who knew the area thoroughly and keeping inside private electric fences as much as possible.

We got up to the calls of Indian Peafowl at dawn. After a cup of tea, we went on a short early morning birding tour on the banks of Thiyambarayaya wewa. One bank of the bund was fully occupied by a colony of Baya weavers and Streaked weavers busily making their nests. It was a fascinating sight to watch the “master of nest making” – the Baya Weaver in action as they made their hanging nests on thorny trees at the edge of the bank, while the Streaked Weavers were busy with their ball like nests on the reed beds just below.

We returned to our base for a hearty breakfast and headed out again for the day. We started along the electric fence of Dahaiyagala Sanctuary, observing the birds in the tall grassland and scrub jungle, heading towards the cultivated and inhabited areas on a much rugged terrain. We had to cross several streams, sometimes only a rickety old log connecting the two banks. Crossing these waters was quite an adventure and a test of balance, a slight miss step causing a fall into the water or mud below. Somehow with lots of panting, groaning, falling in water and help from each other and sometimes scrambling on all fours our team was able to move forward observing the serenity of ethereal water bodies, intermittent forest patches, slash and burn cultivations and home gardens scattered through the village. The lush green carpets of paddy fields were a sight for sore eyes, the cool breeze coming through the paddy fields comforting us. The diverse vegetation offered the opportunity to observe birds of different ecological niches under the expert guidance of Professor Kotagama and

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The proximity to the Protected Area and its wildlife has brought mixed blessings to the villagers.

the help of Mr. Indrika Pradeepa, whose eagle eye rarely missed a bird.

While observing the birds and the breath taking views we were able to have a glimpse of the villagers’ lives. The villagers depend solely on agriculture for their survival and even though lacking in formal education and material comfort, they are rich in life experience and hospitality with an ability to appreciate simple pleasures of life. Daub and wattle houses with few cement and brick ones in between were situated far apart from each other separated by large stretches of agriculture. The humble dwellings contained one room and a kitchen, the paddy harvest taking up most of the room.

The proximity to the Protected Area and its wildlife has brought mixed blessings to the villagers. On the one hand the village is endowed with exquisite natural beauty with picturesque and bucolic landscape, refreshing water bodies, clean air and a plethora of wildlife. On the other hand, it is a constant struggle to survive; public services like transport, schooling, and medical facilities that we take for granted being



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rudimentary and the struggle for co-existence with wild life giving rise to severe form of human wildlife conflict. The villagers are at continuous war with elephants to protect their crops and live in constant fear of their lives. Even though the village is separated from the Protected Areas from an electric fence erected by the Department of Wildlife Conservation, elephants break the fences and roam freely in the villages at night, raiding crops. Most villagers have erected locally made private electric fences surrounding their home gardens. Still the struggle between the humans and elephants continues.

Each night before dinner we recorded daily bird sightings. In three days we sighted over hundred species of birds, some highlights being Black Eagle, Oriental Honey Buzzard, Black Shouldered Kite, Tawny Bellied Babbler, Yellow Eyed Babbler, Plum Headed Parakeet, Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot, Alexandrine Parakeet, Blue-Faced Malkoha, Black-headed Cuckoo-shrike, Bar-Winged Fly-Catcher Shrike, Common Wood-Shrike, Orange Breasted Green Pigeon, Sri Lanka Green Pigeon, Oriental White Eye and Indian Nightjar.



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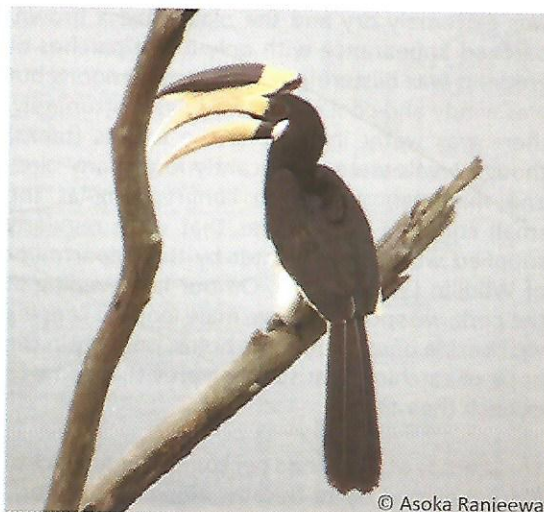
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After a short birding session in the morning of the last day, Professor Kotagama and Ashoka conducted an awareness programme for the villagers on the value of biodiversity, elephants and the importance of their conservation, focussing on Human Elephant Conflict. After lunch we broke camp and started our journey back which lasted a tedious ten hours on the Poson Poya day. Stuck in noisy traffic we already missed the quiet serenity of the past two days.

Pokunuthenna is the ideal place to escape stresses of city life and wind down. It is also a perfect location to watch dry zone birds, our sighting of over 100 species of birds during such a short time bearing witness. As an area with high biological diversity still unexposed to impacts of tourism, immense responsibility falls on the shoulders of travellers to respect the culture, people and the unspoiled environment when exploring such an untarnished destination.



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