

SRI LANKA

WHALES AND ELEPHANTS

April 2008 Trip Summary

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Background

Blue Whales are the largest animals that have ever lived. I have studied whales and dolphins in the Maldives for many years, and, not unnaturally, have a particular interest in Blue Whales. Blue Whales occur in the Maldives from November to May with peaks in abundance in Dec and April. Are they migrating to other areas, and if so where are they going? My research has led me to believe that some of these Blue Whales are passing through Maldives to and from the east coast of Sri Lanka. If that is the case they should occur off the south coast of Sri Lanka in Dec-January and April. In April 2007 I went to check this out, and saw Blue Whales on four out of four days, plus Sperm whales, Spinner Dolphins, Striped Dolphins and Common Bottlenose Dolphins. In April 2008 I returned for longer.

4 April 2008

Morning flight from Malé to Sri Lanka. Pleased to be met by Wije, my regular driver, for the taxi ride down to Galle. Our timing was not great as we hit the school run in Colombo, but the drive down the coast road is always full of interest. The roadside was busy with people, while White-breasted Kingfishers and Drongos adorned the telegraph lines. Checked into the rather special Lighthouse Hotel and Spa, my home for the next two weeks.

9 to 22 April 2008

14 days whale watching off the south coast. I went out with the Mirissa Water Sports boat *Spirit of Dondra* every morning from 9 to 22 April 2008. At 54ø long the boat has shade, a toilet and a very friendly crew, making her ideal for day trips. My cetacean sightings are summarized in the table below.

Blue Whales were by far the most commonly encountered species, with sightings on all 14 out of 14 days (and an average of over 6 whales per day). This makes the south coast of Sri Lanka one of the very best places to see Blue Whales in the whole world. Many of the whales were single, but I also encounter small groups of 3-4, and had numerous superb photo opportunities. Although I believe that most of these Blue Whales are on migration, many of those seen during my trips out were not obviously travelling westward. Rather, they were repeatedly diving in localized areas, presumably feeding. So perhaps they are on passage, but having found food off the south coast are quite happy to loiter as long as the food remains. And that of course

means that they are present off the south coast for very much longer than if they were simply on passage.

Sperm whales were also present, with pods being seen on five occasions. We were able to spend hours with them as they slowly meandered on their way. While Blue Whales were seen over the continental shelf and slope, Sperm Whales tended to occur a bit further offshore, in the shipping lanes. And this gives a clue as to why there are so many whales here. A glance at any chart of the Indian Ocean shows that Dondra Head is the southern-most point not only of Sri Lanka, but also of the entire Indian subcontinent. Any ship wanting to pass between east and west has to pass by Dondra. And so too does any cetacean. Furthermore, off Dondra the continental slope comes within less than 3 nautical miles of the coast. With the seasonally changing monsoon currents producing seasonally changing blooms of plankton; with the land masses of India and Sri Lanka acting like an inverted funnel to channel cetacean movements; and with deep water so close to shore, it is perhaps not surprising that the southern tip of Sri Lanka is such an amazing cetacean hotspot.

Cetacean sightings during April 2008

Species		Sightings	Individuals
Blue Whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>	63	88
Probable Blue Whale		3	3
Bryde's Whale	<i>Balaenoptera edeni</i>	1	1
Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>	5	48
Dwarf Sperm Whale	<i>Kogia sima</i>	2	8
Beaked Whale	Ziphiidae	1	2
Unidentified Whale		3	3
Spinner Dolphin	<i>Stenella longirostris</i>	6	910
Probable Spinner Dolphin		2	240
Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoabla</i>	1	10
Indo-pacific Bottlenose	<i>Tursiops aduncus</i>	1	4
Unidentified Dolphin		7	130
Total		95	1447

Seabirds were equally enthralling, and my seabird observations are summarized in the table below. Whiskered Terns, many in their smart breeding plumage, were common around the harbour. While these and several of the other Terns were mostly seen close to shore, some of the more interesting species were seen a few miles off.

Shearwaters were seen in reasonable numbers. Most Shearwaters (38) were seen on or after 19 April. Some of these birds were definitely, and most were probably, Flesh-footed Shearwaters. They were nearly all heading west, presumably on their annual migration across the Indian Ocean from SW Australia to the upwelling areas of the Arabian Sea. In addition to the Flesh-footeds, one bird was positively identified as a Wedge-tailed Shearwater, and another, which passed very close to our boat, was a Sooty Shearwater.

Seabird sightings during April 2008

Species		ID Definite	ID Probable
Wedge-tailed Shearwater	<i>Puffinus pacificus</i>	1	3
Flesh-footed Shearwater	<i>Puffinus carneipes</i>	6	10
Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>	1	
UNID Shearwater	<i>Puffinus</i> sp.	-	29
Pomarine Skua	<i>Stercorarius pomarinus</i>	53	28
Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	1	2
Bridled Tern	<i>Sterna anaethetus</i>	1000s	-
Sooty Tern	<i>Sterna fuscata</i>	1	-
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	20	-
Little Tern	<i>Sterna albifrons</i>	7	-
Saundersø Tern	<i>Sterna saundersi</i>	3	-
Little/Saundersø Tern	<i>Sterna</i> sp.	-	9
Great Crested Tern	<i>Sterna bergii</i>	4	-
Lesser Crested Tern	<i>Sterna bengalensis</i>	4	-
UNID Crested Tern	<i>Sterna</i> sp.	-	1
Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>	30+	-
White-winged Tern	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>	156	-
Black Noddy	<i>Anous minutus</i>	13	-
UNID Noddy	<i>Anous</i> sp.	-	4

Pomarine Skuas were relatively common, and also relatively easy to identify since more than half were in breeding plumage with full tail extensions (≠spoonsø). All Pomarine Skuas seen were heading eastward, towards the Bay of Bengal. This was in marked contrast to most other birds, which were heading west.

While nearly all the Skuas seen were identified as Pomarine (or probable Pomarine) Skuas, three birds were thought to be Arctic Skuas. Two could not be identified with absolute certainty, but one showed classic tail projection and colouration of an adult pale phase bird, and was positively identified as Arctic.

The commonest seabird seen was the Bridled Tern. Hundreds were seen most days, with many in feeding flocks of 30-400 individuals. Most were heading westwards. There is relatively well-known southward migration of Bridled Terns along the west coast of Sri Lanka, peaking in August-September. Perhaps these April birds are part of the return migration. The smallest numbers of Bridled Terns (10s rather than 100s) were seen on 14-19 April inclusive. Intriguingly, these were the exact days on which the largest numbers of Pomarine Skuas were recorded. Coincidence? Or might the presence of relatively large numbers of Pomarine Skuas have driven the Bridled Terns further offshore?

Among the ≠whiteø terns, the commonest was the White-winged Tern. Most were either moulting into, or already in, their beautiful breeding plumage. This made them easy to identify, which is not always the case for birds in non-breeding plumage.

Nearly all the White-winged Terns seen were heading westward, and were presumably on passage towards their central Eurasian breeding grounds. Most sightings were of single birds or small loose flocks, but 100+ were seen in one extraordinary feeding flock with Bridled Terns.

Other marine wildlife seen included flying fish and tuna, Manta Rays (three times), giant ocean Sunfish (twice), Loggerhead and Green Turtles, and the charismatic Sea Skater.

Afternoons and evenings back at the Lighthouse Hotel provided time to relax, to use the pool, and to enjoy the excellent dining. Rose-ringed Parakeets roost in the palm trees near the beach, with chattering masses congregating every evening. After dark, Fireflies twinkled around the grounds. The Hotel is just outside Galle. The old town nestles within the walls of a 17th century Dutch fort, and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Two afternoon visits gave chances to wander round the old battlements and admire the town, which is slowly being restored.

23 April 2008

A welcome rest day. In the afternoon visited two areas of rainforest near Galle: Kottawa and Hiyare. At Kottawa the dense forest provided a wonderfully atmospheric setting for a short walk. Animal highlights included Toque Macaque, Hump-nosed Lizard, Kangaroo Lizard and Giant Millipede. At Hiyare, the rainforest is more open, and there are expansive views over a reservoir. It was early evening by the time we arrived, and two species of bat were out in numbers hawking for insects over the water and reservoir margins. As the light faded Eagle Owl and Chestnut-backed Owlet joined the growing chorus of frog calls.

24 April 2008

Checkout of the Lighthouse Hotel and depart from Galle. Stop for tea with friends in Weligama. Visit the Weherehena Temple, with the tallest Buddha statue in Sri Lanka. Views over paddy fields and trees from the top revealed Cattle Egret, Paddybird, Black-headed Ibis, Black-winged Stilt and Crested Treeswift. Move on to Dondra Head for a quick close-up view of the famous lighthouse, which we have been seeing every day from the sea; Red-billed Tropicbird. Onwards via Tangalle, after which the land becomes flatter and swampier; Great Egrets, Pheasant-tailed Jacana; Purple Swamphen, Darter, Openbill Stork, Painted Stork. Arrive at Centauria Hotel, Embilipitya. Stroll around grounds: Stork-billed Kingfisher, Ceylon Swallow, Brown-headed Barbet, Malabar Pied Hornbill and Shikra.

25 April 2008

Morning visit to Udawalawe National Park. Transfer to open-top jeep at park gates. Wonderful safari, with good views of Jackal, Spotted Deer, Mongoose and Land Monitor. 50 species of bird recorded, with birds of prey being especially abundant, and excellent views of Crested Serpent Eagle, Changeable Hawk Eagle and Black-shouldered Kite. But best of all were the Elephants, with a confiding family group of four (including a tiny baby) being the undoubted highlight. Elephants are all but guaranteed at Udawalawe, and they certainly did not let us down this time. Drive on to Colombo, via Ratnapura. Check into the excellent TransAsia Hotel.

26 April 2008

Visits to Talangama wetland and Bodinagala rainforest, both outside Colombo. Talangama is home to a wonderful range of wetland birds as well as butterflies and dragonflies. Also saw two Water Monitors and the endangered western race Purple Leaf Monkey. Bodinagala was particularly good for forest damselflies and butterflies (including Clipper, Bluebottle and the stupendous Caerulean Blue). Although birds were hard to see we did hear a good variety, including Black-naped Monarch, Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, Yellow-fronted Barbet and Yellow-throated Bulbul. Birds that we did see included Ashy Woodswallow and Chestnut-headed Bee-eater.

Sri Lanka Birdlist April 2008

The main purpose of this visit was to see whales, but Sri Lanka is such a fabulous birding location that it is impossible not to see good numbers of birds with little effort. I recorded 102 species, of which six were Sri Lankan endemics (*).

Barred Buttonquail	Crested Serpent Eagle
Peacock	Shikra
Lesser Whistling-duck	Changeable Hawk Eagle
Greater Flameback	Common Kestrel
Brown-headed Barbet	Little Grebe
*Yellow-fronted Barbet (H)	Red-billed Tropicbird
Coppersmith Barbet (H)	Darter
Malabar Pied Hornbill	Little Cormorant
Indian Roller	Indian Cormorant
Common Kingfisher	Great Cormorant
Stork-billed Kingfisher	Little Egret
White-breasted Kingfisher	Great Egret
Green Bee-eater	Intermediate Egret
Blue-tailed Bee-eater	Cattle Egret
Chestnut-headed Bee-eater	Indian Pond Heron
Pied Cuckoo	Grey Heron
Asian Koel	Little Heron
Sirkeer	Black-headed Ibis
Greater Coucal	Spot-billed Pelican
*Ceylon Hanging Parrot	Painted Stork
Alexandrine Parakeet	Openbill Stork
Rose-ringed Parakeet	Wedge-tailed Shearwater
Indian Swiftlet	Flesh-footed Shearwater
Palm Swift	Short-tailed Shearwater
House Swift	Brown Shrike
Crested Treeswift	Philippine Brown Shrike
Eagle Owl (H)	House Crow
*Chestnut-backed Owlet (H)	Jungle Crow
Green Imperial Pigeon	Ashy Woodswallow
Spotted Dove	Black-hooded Oriole
Emerald Dove	White-bellied Drongo
Pompadour Green Pigeon	Black-naped Monarch (H)
White-breasted Waterhen	Oriental Magpie Robin
Purple Swamphen	Indian Robin
Moorhen	Common Myna
Common Sandpiper	*Sri Lankan Hill Myna

Black-winged Stilt
Pheasant-tailed Jacana
Red-wattled Lapwing
Pomarine Skua
Arctic Skua
Lesser Crested Tern
Great Crested Tern
Common Tern
Little Tern
Saundersø Tern
Whiskered Tern
White-winged Tern
Sooty Tern
Bridled Tern
Black Noddy
Black-shouldered Kite

Barn Swallow
*Ceylon Swallow
Black-headed Bulbul
Red-vented Bulbul
Yellow-throated Bulbul
Grey-breasted Prinia
Ashy Prinia
Yellow-billed Babbler
*Leggeø Flowerpecker
Purple-rumped Sunbird
House Sparrow
Baya Weaver
Scaly-breasted Munia
Black-headed Munia

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