

The Black Leopard

When I was first assigned to the ‘Nallathanni’ wildlife sanctuary as a Ranger, I found the mountainous setting and the cold climate a rather pleasant retreat from the hustle and bustle of the city. Tea plantations were situated along the border of the Nallathanni forest, with tea plucking being the major source of income for the residents of the area – workers would start plucking tea leaves at the crack of dawn and would go on until dusk, when it was finally time to head home.

The abundance of people also meant the abundance of dogs, domesticated as well as strays. Along with the obvious benefits incurred by having man’s best friend close to one’s side, this also comes at a heavy price – the attention of the Sri Lankan leopard. Although leopards aren’t the only wild predators in the area, which is also home to fishing cats and rusty-spotted cats, leopards pose the most dangerous threat. The big cats of the forest cannot resist the easy prey of a dog, whose size and speed are no match for the jungle’s apex predator.

It is not uncommon to hear stories of people having to ward off leopards to rescue their beloved pets, with some situations involving a physical altercation with the beast. As expected, the people harbored an aversion to the leopards and continuously set up traps, which us wildlife officials had to disarm due to the high frequency of animals sustaining severe injuries from crudely built traps. Therefore, we thought it was high time we conducted several awareness programs in the area, educating the populace on leopards and how to protect themselves without hurting these beautiful creatures. A few uneventful days following the completion of an awareness session, we received a report of a sighting of a rare black leopard in the area. We promptly alerted the veterinary unit of the Department and got acquainted with Dr. Malaka, who had been studying the leopard and had a keener awareness of its comings and goings. As soon as news of the next confirmed sighting hit, we were all planned and prepped to go.

Then, as fate would have it, the COVID-19 pandemic hit Sri Lanka two months into 2020, and the consequent health protocols warranted strict restrictions to the number of people working in the Department. With limited staff, our task of tuning into news of the elusive black leopard was made very difficult. But despite the quarantine protocols, far from the urban setting, life for the villagers continued as it always has, with the daily task of tea harvesting going on with seldom interruptions. With the residents frustrated with the slow

response from authorities to their plight, there were those who were always on the lookout to trap the rare feline, and it became a race against time as to who would get their hands on the big cat first. This tense period went on, until the 20th of May at around 9.45 am. when we heard what we were dreading to hear. The black leopard was finally caught.

Immediately, we were on our way to the scene and arrived thirty minutes later to see a crowd huddled together. Hastily calling the onlookers to disperse, I waded through the crowd to lay eyes upon the spectacle only to have my worst fears confirmed. It was a rather pitiful situation to witness. The trap had ensnared the cat's neck, and it was roaring in fear and anguish and desperation; flailing helplessly with the snare stubbornly showing no sign of even the slightest budge – it seemed the more it struggled, the more pathetic its predicament became. The chokehold got tighter and tighter, as evidenced by its raspy breaths, and bulging terror-stricken eyes. The snare cut deeper into its skin, giving its black coat a maroon tinge. The metallic odor of blood stung the air, and its pleading cries drowned out all external noise.

With great trepidation and the utmost care, we managed to reach out towards the now tiring beast, and with the aid of a long, sturdy tree branch, managed to lodge it in a secure position to hold the animal down just long enough for us to reach down and loosen the snare's grip to drive another wedge between the wire and neck. It seemed to take forever, but with great effort, we managed to apply the necessary leverage to finally free-up the neck and lessen the burden on the creature. By the time we were done, the Head Ranger, Mr. Siyasinghe, had arrived on the scene along with Dr. Malaka and another veterinary surgeon, Dr. Akalanka, and several aides. With no time to lose, the veterinarians went to work on the leopard immediately by anaesthetizing the beast so that we can safely remove the entire trap to liberate the now motionless cat.

By the time we managed to load the animal into a crate to be moved for further treatment, it was well into the afternoon. With the animal in a secure location, the necessary remedies were administered and by around 9.00 pm. the veterinarians were satisfied with the situation and deemed the big cat to be in a stable condition. The leopard was again moved to the 'Udawalawe' veterinary unit for further treatment. Only time could now tell just how well the leopard responded to the medication. With continuous care, the cat was able to cling to life for four days, before finally succumbing to its wounds. The reason for death was declared to be from a hemorrhage it suffered while ensnared in the trap.

I, along with all my colleagues was upset with the situation. The entire visceral ordeal is still engrained in me, and I doubt the memory of it will leave anytime soon. Being a true and tested Ranger, it is still hard to come to terms with the fact that despite our best efforts, we still fell short of saving the life of one of Sri Lanka's most precious creatures. Even though we never found the perpetrators responsible for the cruel trap, the authorities are still on the lookout and the case is still open. As wildlife officials on the frontline in the human-animal conflict, we hope to arrive at a solution to appease both the frustrated residents protecting themselves and the animals driven to forage near human settlements because their territory is continuously being receded due to human activity.

To look back at the history of the Sri Lankan leopard is to look back at the history of Sri Lanka. With documented instances of leopards even being adopted as pets by Sri Lankan royalty, it truly is amazing to reflect on how our stories are entwined.

Prabhash Aruna Karunathilake



Mr. Prabhash Aruna Karunathilake was appointed to the service of the Department of Wildlife and Forest Conservation on 02.06.2003 as an Apprentice Animal Keeper. He reported to Yala National Park for employment and worked there until 2008. He has also worked at the Gampaha Assistant Director's Office and Yala National Park and he reported for duty in 2014 as a Site Assistant at the Moragolla National Park.

Prabhash Aruna Karunathilake was promoted to Ranger of the Nallathanni area in 2017 and returned to work there. He has completed quarterly residential training at the Giritale Training Center conducted by the Department of Wildlife and the Wildlife Management course at the Open University of Sri Lanka. He also holds a Diploma in Landscaping and a Diploma in Civil Engineering from Belihuloya University.

He is a loving father of three sons. His wife Charika Tennakoon works as a Development Officer at the Gannoruwa National Resource Center of the Department of Agriculture. They are currently residing at H 129, Mawela, Hindula.

Adams Peak Wilderness Reserve

Devotees sing devotional songs and climb Samangira to worship the left Siripathula of the Lord Buddha. Foreigners also flock to Sripada Mountain to see the magnificent sunrise and the beauty of the magnificent mountains. The Central Highlands of Sri Lanka are the latest World Heritage Site in Sri Lanka. On 31st July 2010, the World Heritage Committee declared the Adams Peak Reserve as a World Heritage Site. This is the first World Heritage Site to be declared in Sri Lanka 22 years after the Sinharaja Forest Reserve was declared in 1988.



Adams Peak Wilderness Reserve

The Adams Peak Nature Reserve (Samanala) covers an area of 22,380 hectares and was declared as a sanctuary by the British Government on 25th October 1940. Subsequently, due to the importance of the sanctuary, the Adams Peak Nature Reserve Sanctuary was established in 2007 considering the need for conservation. 12979 hectares (32448 acres) selected by the government have been declared as Nature Reserves. Accordingly, the courtyard at the top of Mountain where Sri Pada Padma (height 2243 m / 7360 ft.), which is revered by local and foreign pilgrims as a place of worship, common places such as the mountain track system of devotees etc. belong to the Adams Peak Nature Reserve Sanctuary.

Cone Shaped Adams Peak is the third highest mountain in Sri Lanka, is a sacred place situated in the middle of Ratnapura and Nuwara Eliya Districts dating back more than 2500-year history of Sinhala Buddhists.

The Siripada Range entirely belongs to the Adams Peak Nature Reserve and its Eastern boundary is connected to the Horton Plains National Park in the Pidurutalagala Range in the Central Highlands. This nature reserve covers the Sabaragamuwa and Central Provinces and belongs to the Nuwara Eliya, Kegalle and Ratnapura Districts. The reserved area belongs to

Ambagamuwa, Deraniyagala, Ratnapura, Imbulpe, Balangoda and Kuruwita Divisional Secretariats areas. 4897 hectares (12243 acres) of the reserve belong to the Nuwara Eliya District and 17483 hectares (43707 acres) belong to the Ratnapura District. Meanwhile, a 1:50000 map examination shows that the reserve extends beyond the boundaries of the Kegalle district.

The Adams Peak is a highly sensitive high water catchment area with dense forest cover which is considered as a mountain forest. The three rivers Kalu, Walawe and Kelani originate directly from this forest and 295 small waterfalls connected to these rivers originate from the springs of the area. Mohini Falls, Laxapana, Yaka Adu Falls, Mapanana Falls, Murray Falls, Gatmore Falls, Deeyan Falls, Alupola Falls are the waterfalls cascade down from various places in the Siripa Range.

The Samanala Range receives an average annual rainfall of 5,000 mm during the six months of the year and the highest rainfall is received during the Southwest monsoon months of May-June-July. Due to the low rainfall during the Northeast monsoon from December to January and February, the Sri Pada pilgrimage season begins with the Unduvap Poya and continues until the Vesak Poya. During the southwest monsoon season, heavy mist is observed in the Samanala Range and during this period very cold weather is reported from the area and the Sri Pada compound. The average annual temperature is 15 degrees Celsius. But in May - June - July, the temperature can drop to 5–10 degrees.

This Siripa Samanala Reserve, which belongs to the wet zone mountain ecosystem, is also home to a number of specialized flora. Due to its high humidity orchid species and many species of green algae and rare medicinal plants have been reported on rocky as well as wet ground. This group of plants adds beauty to the forest.



Bird nest fern



Maha hadaya



Ground orchid



Iru raja



Mesuwa spp.na

It is possible that the Samanala Range got its name from the presence of many species of butterflies in the forest. Many people say that butterfly's worship Sripa (Lord Buddha's Foot Print) because of the variety of butterflies that can be seen with the onset of Sripa season. Great bird father Papilia sri lanka birdwing (*Troides darsius*), Indian red admiral (*Vanessa indica*) Butterflies as well as insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals. Animals such as in dry zone parks are not easily seen here. The largest common mammal found here is the common langur (*Semnopithecus entellus*).

Birds are the most endangered species reported from the Samanala Range. 160 species of birds have been recorded here and 25 out of 34 endemic birds have been identified at the Samanola Siripa site. It showcases the important diversity of wild birds, including endemic birds, migratory birds and migratory birds. Sri Lanka yellow eared Balbul (*Pycnonotus Penicillatus*), Sir Lanka White eye (*Zosterops ceylonensis*), Sir Lanka Hanging parrot (*Loriculus beryllinus*), Emerald collared parakeet (*Psittacula calthropae*) are some of the most commonly seen birds. One of the most striking phenomena is that birds often tend to act as collective herds in search of food. Such a swarm often consists of the Great Drongo and the Oranger-billed Babbler (*Turdoides rufescens*). The Great Drongo, which takes the lead in such a flock, is known as a violent bird, and the Oranger-billed Babbler as a noisy bird.



Black eagle



Blue magpie



Orange breasted flycatcher



Yellow fronted barbet

The number of elephants living in the wet zone forests of Sri Lanka is limited and it is estimated that about 10 to 11 Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*) roam the Samanala rainforest Range. Elephants which have become endangered in the Wet Zone It can be can be observed at the Samanala Range. Many other mammals, such as the Wild Boar (*Sus scrofa*) is another common four-legged animal found here but is difficult to find at the Siripa site. Leopard (*Panthera pardus kotiya*) Fishing Cat (*Prionailurus viverrinus*), Grizzled giant Squirrel (*Ratufa macroura*), Sambar (*Rusa unicorn*), Toque Macaque (*Macaca sinica*), Common Mongoose (*Herpestes edwardsil*), Jungle cat (*Felis chaus*) and spotted cat (*Felis rubginosa*) also survive here.

The wetland region is home to a number of unique amphibian and reptile species that can be observed at this Range, as well as 21 species of amphibians. About 38 species of reptiles and reptiles are recorded here. Blyth earth snake (*Rhinophis blythii*), Boie's rough-sided snake (*Aspidura brachyorrhos*), Common Roughside (*Aspidura trachyprocta*), Sri Lankan Kangaroo lizard (*Otocryptis wiegmanni*), Rough horn lizard (*Ceratophora aspera*), Cal Garden Lotes, Common Garden Lizard (*Calotes Versicolor*), Hump norsed Lizard (*Lyiocephalus scutatus*) are prominent among these reptiles.



Sri Lankan Kangaroo lizard

Endangered fish species such as Cherry barb (*Puntius titteya*), Black ruby barb (*Puntius nigrofasciatus*) are found in the Samanala sanctuary. The Department of Conservation carries out various conservation activities to protect such environmental assets.

In the past, firewood from nearby forests was used for cooking in food stalls, but today the use of firewood has been significantly reduced due to the intervention of the Wildlife Department. Only gas is used for cooking in the shops above the Sitha Gangula. It is the result of a successful program implemented by the relevant sectors. Unauthorized entry into the Samanala Nature Reserve of the Department of Wildlife Conservation, damaging its flora and fauna, and polluting the ecosystem are illegal activities under the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance.

Among the many lands in the hills that have been cleared with the inception of plantation crops Siripada Wilderness Range was able to protect itself unharmed. No matter how beautiful the past, the future of the Siripa site is uncertain. According to a survey conducted by the World Conservation Union (IUCN), many rare species of plants and animals are threatened with extinction due to environmental pollution in the foothills. Among them are 14 endemic bird species (IUCN).

Therefore, the Department of Wildlife Conservation is currently carrying out the task of conserving such an ecosystem with a unique biodiversity and the Department is committed to bequeath such ecosystems to future generations.

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சமனல இயற்கை ஒதுக்கம் தொடர்பான விளக்கத்தில் காணப்படும் மரங்களின் பெயர்ப் பட்டியல்

List of trees in the Adams Peak Wilderness Reserve document

Sinhala Names	Tamil Names	English Names	Botanical Name
උඩවැඩියා විශේෂ	ஓக்கிட் வகைகள்	Orchid species	
ඇල්ගී විශේෂ	பாசி வகைகள்	Algae species	
බිම් උඩවැඩියා	தரை ஓக்கிட்	Ground orckid	<i>Spathoglottis plicata</i>
ඉරු රාජ	இரு ராஜ	Iru raja	<i>Zeuxine regia</i>
මහ හැඩියා	மஹ ஹெடயா	Maha hadaya	<i>Huperzia phlegmaria</i>
නා විශේෂ	நாக வகை	Mesuwa spp.na	
කුරුළු කුඩු මීවන	குருவிக்கூடு கலன்றாவரம்	Bird nest fern	<i>Asplenium nidus</i>

සමනල සොබාව රක්ෂිතය පිළිබඳව විස්තරයේ ඇති සතුන්ගේ නම් ලැයිස්තුව

சமனல இயற்கை ஒதுக்கம் தொடர்பான விளக்கத்தில் காணப்படும் விலங்குகளின் பெயர்ப் பட்டியல்

List of animals in the Adams Peak Wilderness Reserve document

Sinhala name	Tamil name	English name	Scientific name
අලියා	ஆசிய யானை	Asian elephant	<i>Elephas maximus</i>
කොටියා	புலி	Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus kotiya</i>
හඳුන් දිවියා	மீன்பிடிப் பூனை	Fishing cat	<i>Prionailurus viverrinus</i>
වල් ඌරා	காட்டுப் பன்றி	Wild boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>
දඬු ලේනා	பழுப்பு மலை அணில்	Grizzled giant squirrel	<i>Ratufa macroura</i>
ගෝනා	மரை	Sambar	<i>Rusa unicolor</i>
රිලවා	செங்குரங்கு	Toque macaque	<i>Macaca sinica</i>
වල් බළලා	காட்டுப்பூனை	Jungle cat	<i>Felis chaus</i>
කොළ දිවියා	துரும்பன் பூனை	Rusty- spotted cat	<i>Felis rubiginosa</i>
ශ්‍රී ලංකා අළු වඳුරා	இலங்கை சாம்பற் குரங்கு	Common langur	<i>Semnopithecus entellus</i>
මුගටියා	இந்திய சாம்பல் கீரிப்பிள்ளை	Common mongoose	<i>Herpestes edwardsii</i>
පිතකන් කොණ්ඩියා	மஞ்சள் காதுள்ள புல்புல்	Sri lanka yellow eared balbul	<i>Pycnonotus penicillatus</i>
සිතැසියා	இலங்கை வெள்ளைக் கண்	Sri Lanka white eye	<i>Zosterops ceylonensis</i>
ගිරාමලින්තා	இலங்கை தொங்கும் கிளி	Sri Lanka hanging parrot	<i>Loriculus beryllinus</i>
අළුගිරවා	லேயார்டின் கிளி	Emerald collared parakeet	<i>Psittacula calthropae</i>
රතු දෙමළිව්වා	ஆரஞ்சு படியாக வாயாடி	Oranger-billed babbler	<i>Turdoides rufescens</i>

Sinhala name	Tamil name	English name	Scientific name
මහ කවුඩා	துடுப்பு வால் கரிச்சான்	Greater racket tailed drongo	<i>Dicrurus paradiseus</i>
කළුකුස්සා	கருங்கழுகு	Black eagle	<i>Ictinaetus malaiensis</i>
කැහිබෙල්ලා	இலங்கை நீலச் செவ்வலகன்	Blue magpie	<i>Urocissa ornata</i>
ටිකල් නිල් මැසිමරා	செம்மஞ்சள் மார்பக ப்ளைகேச்சர்	Tickell's blue flycatcher	<i>Cyornis tickelliae</i>
මූකලන් කොට්ටෝරුවා	மஞ்சள் நிற பர்பர்ட்	Yellow fronted barbet	<i>Megalaima flavifrons</i>
මහ කුරුලු පිය පැපිලියා	இலங்கை அழகி	Sri lanka birdwing	<i>Troides darsius</i>
ඉන්දියානු රතු අඳිරොල්	இந்திய சிவப்பு அட்மிரல்	Indian red admiral	<i>Vanessa indica</i>
රළුඅංකටුස්සා	இலங்கை கருங்காலி பல்லி	Sri Lankan Kangaroo lizard	<i>Otocryptis wiegmanni</i>
කහමුව අංකටුස්සා	முரட்டு மூக்கு கொம்புப் பல்லி	Rough horn lizard	<i>Ceratophora aspera</i>
පළා කටුස්සා	பொதுவான பச்சை வனப் பல்லி	Green garden lizard	<i>Calotes calotes</i>
ගරා කටුස්සා	பொதுவான தோட்டப்பல்லி	Common garden lizard	<i>Calotes versicolor</i>
කරමල් බෝදිලිමා	ஹம்ப் மூக்குப் பல்லி	Hump norsed Lizard	<i>Lyiocephalus scutatus</i>
බලශිත්ගේ පෘථිවි සර්පයා	பிளைத் பூமிப் பாம்பு	Blyth earth snake	<i>Rhinophis blythii</i>
ලේමැඩිල්ලා	பாயின் கரடுமுரடான பாம்பு	Boie's rough-sided snake	<i>Aspidura brachyorrhos</i>
දළවමැඩිල්ලා	தலவமெடில்லா	Common rough-sided snake	<i>Aspidura trachyprocta</i>
ලේ තිත්තයා	லே தித்தயா	Cherry barb	<i>Puntius titteya</i>
බුලත්භපයා	புலத்ஹபயா	Black ruby barb	<i>Puntius nigrofasciatus</i>

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