

# Is Sri Lanka the best all-round wildlife destination in the world?

**Gehan de Silva Wijeyeratne** explains why Sri Lanka can make this bold claim

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Can Sri Lanka make the bold claim that it is the best all-round wildlife destination in the world? The evidence at present is that it certainly has a strong claim if the criteria are based on seeing highly desired charismatic animals, especially large ones, as well as high bio-diversity, with very good encounter rates, in a long-haul holiday time frame, at an affordable cost, for both land and marine wildlife.

However, it is only recently that enough building blocks to make such a claim have been sufficiently established. The views in the article on what makes a good all-round wildlife destination are based on the needs of wildlife film crews, wildlife writers and photographers and specialist wildlife travellers who wish to pack in a lot of story-worthy wildlife viewing, filming and photography into short time frames. Sri Lanka's claim to be the best all-round wildlife destination rests on the fact that no other country is so good for a combination of having large terrestrial (especially 'Big Game') animals, is outstanding for marine mammals, has a huge bio-diversity with a high proportion of endemic species, all set within a compact area of varied landscapes with good tourism infrastructure and a high encounter rate to make it possible to see much of the target species within an affordable two week holiday.


Let's consider these factors in turn: Sri Lanka has become established as one of the top whale watching destinations in the world. Its offerings include the biggest animal ever found on the planet, the Blue Whale and the largest toothed predator in the world, the Sperm Whale.



Starting in May 2008, it was publicized as the best for Blue Whales in the world. In 2012 (Sunday Times, 5th August 2012) it was established that the island provides the best chance of encountering a super-pod (an aggregation of pods) of Sperm Whales on a commercial whale watch.

Given that these are the two most written about species of whale and dolphins which intrigue people the most, Sri Lanka occupies a top slot in the 'must visit' destinations for whale watchers and documentary film crews. Sri Lanka offers the best chance of encountering a Blue Whale and a Sperm Whale on the same sailing, Swamy (Koneswaram) Rock in the north-east in Trincomalee is the best shore-based observation point for Blue Whales; the island has a 9 to 10 month window for Blue Whales and Mirissa in the south and Trincomalee have seasonal encounter rates for Blue Whale at an astonishing 90 per cent. In the seas off the Kalpitiya Peninsula, Sperm Whale super-pods may be only a 15 minute boat ride away and super-pods of Spinner Dolphins are encountered regularly.

As explained in a previous article (Sunday Times, 18 October 2010) Sri Lanka is the best for big game safaris outside Africa. Starting in 2001, it has been branded as probably the best (and certainly the most affordable) in the world for seeing Leopards, the best for Sloth Bears and Uda Walawe National Park is the only location with guaranteed sightings of wild elephants on a game drive throughout the year. Ask anyone which country has the highest annually recurring concentration of wild elephants and they will expect it to be a country in Africa.



Sri Lanka is the best for big game safaris outside Africa.

But it is in Sri Lanka, at the annually recurring Elephant Gathering in Minneriya and Kaudulla National Parks. Unusual, given that small to medium sized islands of its size don't usually have large mammals. But Sri Lanka boasts several species of large animals thanks to a geological history as a continental island with recurring land connections to mainland India, the last being as recent as 10,000 years ago at the end of the Pleistocene epoch. Island subspecies are prone to both dwarfism and gigantism and this is seen in Sri Lanka with its leopards which are the largest of the subspecies of extant leopards. Islands can be wonderful incubators for speciation through evolutionary processes and Sri Lanka is spectacular. It has 33 species of endemic birds in an island less than 65,610 square kilometres. In the lowland rainforest of Sinharaja, half the trees you see are found only in Sri Lanka. The island has an astonishing 350 species of reptiles and amphibians. The tree frogs in the genus *Pseudophilautus* have evolved a process known as direct development which leap-frogs the tadpole stage, eliminating the dependency on bodies of water, with young frogs developing directly in the eggs.



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This has led to an evolutionary radiation with some 50 new endemic tree-frog species being described in the 2000s. Sri Lanka also has frogs that bury their eggs in mud to reduce predation, without laying them in the water as many other amphibians do. A high proportion of endemics are also seen in many other groups including the dragonflies; where over half the 120 species are endemic. All 20 species described so far in the Forest Damsels (Family: Platystictidae) are endemic. The radiation of Forest Damsels in Sri Lanka is not seen on the Asian mainland. In the impressive family of Clubtails (Family: Gomphidae) 13 of the 14 hitherto described species are endemic.



The high endemism in Sri Lanka is explained by it being a continental island (as opposed to an oceanic island) with a wet zone in the South-west which is climatically distinct from the rest of the island.

A sufficiently long 'isolation' from mainland India and the rest of the island, would have allowed speciation to take place.

Endemism is seen in other groups varying from land snails (over 80 per cent endemic) through to all of the vertebrate groups (birds, mammals, fish, reptiles and amphibians), although the proportions are not so high in birds (33 endemics) and mammals (21 endemics).





As mentioned earlier, Sri Lanka is the best place in the world to see some of the most desired animals in the world. But also not just to see them as an individual animal but as part of a wildlife spectacle such as the Elephant Gathering, Super-pods of Sperm Whales, the Sinharaja Bird Wave or the Butturuwa Muggers Crocodile concentration. The Sinharaja Bird Wave is the largest and most stable for viewing and the longest studied bird wave in the world. Butturuwa Wewa in Yala National Park may seasonally hold the highest concentration of Marsh Crocodiles (Muggers), the second largest reptile in the world.

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Furthermore, the endemic species split further into endemic sub-species. A mountainous core and two diagonally blowing monsoons have created distinct climatic zones, large differences which one would normally expect to witness across a much larger land mass.

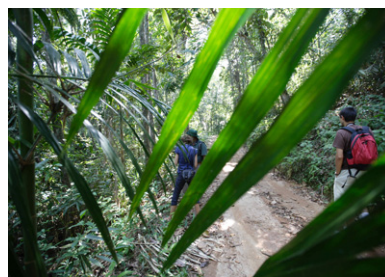
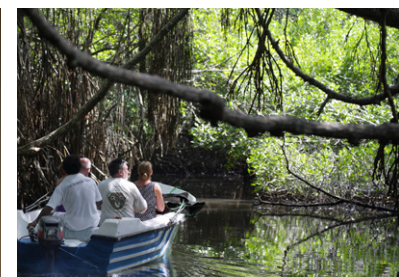
This has resulted in even seemingly highly vagile animals such as Palm-civets and 'the made for television' primates showing distinct geographical races or sub-species. An example being the Bear Monkey; the shaggy haired highland race of the endemic Purple-faced Leaf Monkey. Meanwhile, its endangered Western race still raids suburban gardens in the bustling metropolis of Colombo. On the edge of the capital city, these monkeys together with other endemics such as the Yellow-striped Mouse-deer still occurs in the Talangama Wetland together with non-endemic but enigmatic carnivores such as the Fishing Cat.

Sri Lanka scores highly amongst the groups that are popular with wildlife tourists. In order of desirability, for land-based tourists, I would rank the vertebrate and invertebrate animals and plants in the order of; Mammals, Birds, Butterflies, Plants, Dragonflies, Reptiles and Fish. Sri Lanka has a high number of species in each of them. But it is not just the number of species or endemic species that makes a destination special for wildlife tourists: it is the presence of especially charismatic or desirable species and the Three Es (Encounter Rate, Encounter Zone and Encounter Time/Season) which determine whether a target species can be seen.

Some countries may be good for large terrestrial animals but not for marine wildlife. A few countries may offer both, but to see them could involve travelling large distances, a great deal of time as well as money. No country offers so much land and marine wildlife as Sri Lanka in so compact a space and with a tourism infrastructure spanning from luxurious boutique hotels to homesteads. This offers both the affluent traveller and backpacker an opportunity to see a wide array of spectacular wildlife within two weeks.

It also is important to clarify what is not being claimed. Sri Lanka cannot claim to be the top destination for Big Game Safaris. Countries in East Africa and Southern Africa will be better. Sri Lanka also cannot claim to be the most biodiverse in terms of species. Countries which encompass larger tropical land masses such as Brazil, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Borneo, Madagascar etc. will have more species. Countries which include large tropical islands which have been isolated for a long time will also be more species rich in endemics.

However, note that in terms of species and endemic species per unit area, Sri Lanka ranks high for the key groups of species that wildlife travellers are interested in.



In 1999, when I lead authored 'A Birdwatcher's Guide to Sri Lanka' published by the Oriental Bird Club, I would have hesitated to claim anything more than Sri Lanka being a very good destination for wildlife. Between then and 2012, a raft of internationally big stories on wildlife has come out of Sri Lanka both in terms of wildlife tourism and bio-diversity exploration.



After the breaking of the big whale watching stories starting in May 2008 in particular, I have been exploring the claim that Sri Lanka is the best all-round wildlife tourism destination by sounding out many professional wildlife tour operators and tour leaders who operate internationally. I compiled the big wildlife stories into a forthcoming book 'Wild Sri Lanka', to be published by the British publisher John Beaufoy Publishing, and subsequently summarised the key facts into a series of three media briefs which were used at the World Travel Market in November 2012. One of the leading international wildlife tour operators, the UK-based Wildlife Worldwide who read them invited me to write the guest expert column in their first newsletter in 2013. This is part of a suite of feedback I have received that Sri Lanka does indeed have a strong claim that it is the best all-round wildlife destination in the world.

In this article I have focussed on the presence and ease of viewing a wide spectrum of desirable wildlife as the criteria for ranking a country as a wildlife destination. It has been about a country's underlying wildlife. It needs to be borne in mind that wildlife tourism is also about the quality of the experience with many factors involved including the natural history knowledge and professionalism of the service providers, interpretation, visitor and site management, responsible wildlife viewing, travel safety, internet connectivity, ease of entry, minimal red tape for film crews, etc. Note that a guided nature walk at the London Wetland Centre may offer a better 'experience' than a badly handled Leopard or Blue Whale encounter.

These wider factors are outside the scope of this article. However, there are many good examples around the world which Sri Lanka can adopt where needed to monetise its wildlife and align conservation with an economic growth agenda.



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*<http://www.sundaytimes.lk/130113/plus/a-winner-in-the-wilds-28039.html>*

*This article postulates that for specialist wildlife holidays, Sri Lanka has a strong claim to be the best all-round wildlife destination in the world for its combination of Big Game, Marine Wildlife including Blue and Sperm Whales, bio-diversity, diverse landscapes and compactness and affordability. Gehan de Silva Wijeyeratne can be found on LinkedIn, Facebook and Flickr. He has been responsible for breaking and branding many of the internationally significant wildlife stories from Sri Lanka.*

*Images: (c) Gehan de Silva Wijeyeratne*

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