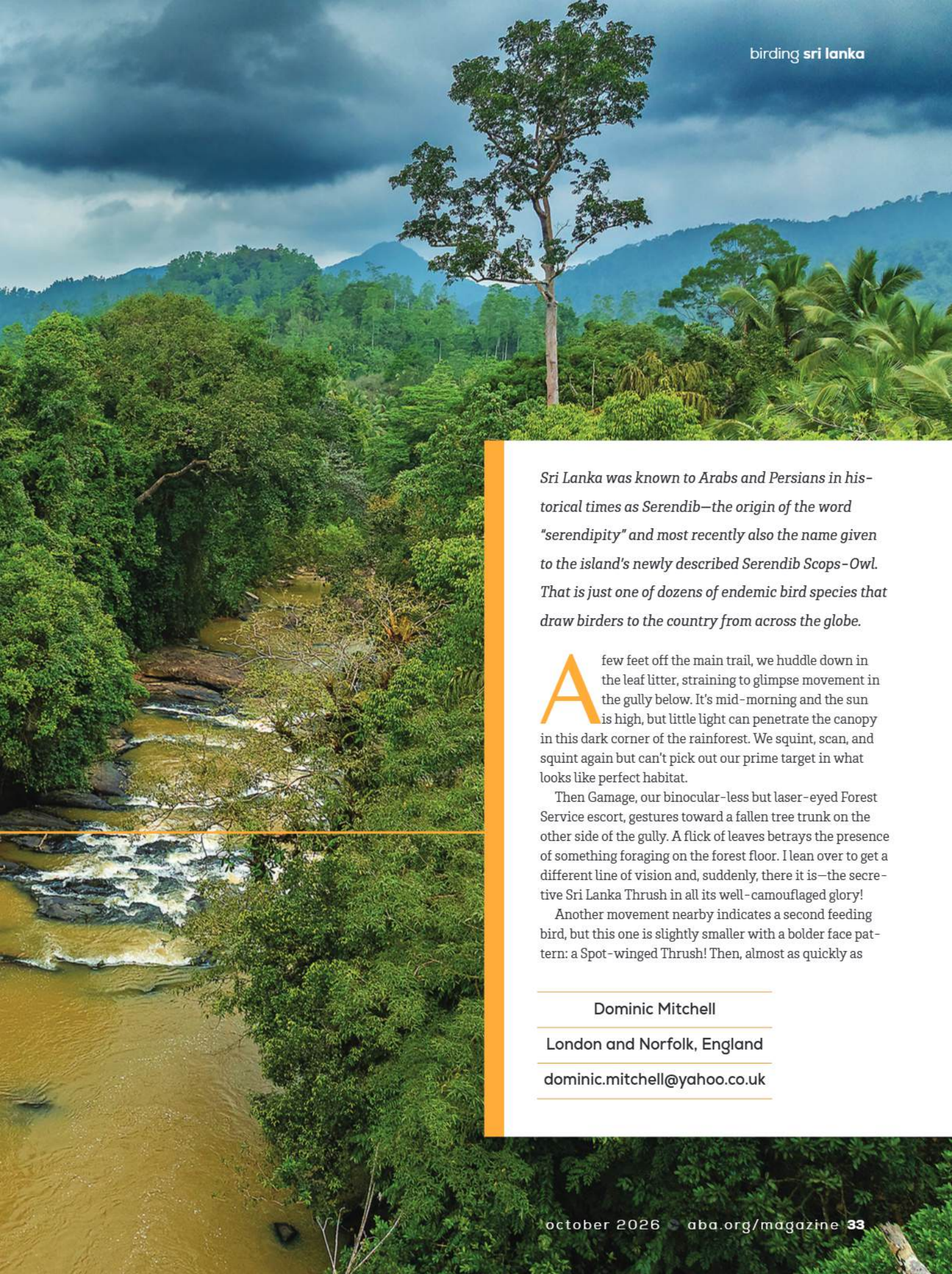
Serendipitous Birding in Sri Lanka



• The dense Sinharaja Rainforest in Sri Lanka. *Photo © Goran Safrek.*



Sri Lanka was known to Arabs and Persians in historical times as Serendib—the origin of the word "serendipity" and most recently also the name given to the island's newly described Serendib Scops-Owl. That is just one of dozens of endemic bird species that draw birders to the country from across the globe.

A few feet off the main trail, we huddle down in the leaf litter, straining to glimpse movement in the gully below. It's mid-morning and the sun is high, but little light can penetrate the canopy in this dark corner of the rainforest. We squint, scan, and squint again but can't pick out our prime target in what looks like perfect habitat.

Then Gamage, our binocular-less but laser-eyed Forest Service escort, gestures toward a fallen tree trunk on the other side of the gully. A flick of leaves betrays the presence of something foraging on the forest floor. I lean over to get a different line of vision and, suddenly, there it is—the secretive Sri Lanka Thrush in all its well-camouflaged glory!

Another movement nearby indicates a second feeding bird, but this one is slightly smaller with a bolder face pattern: a Spot-winged Thrush! Then, almost as quickly as

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they appeared, these two shy endemic relatives ghost away back into the undergrowth, and we resume our hike through this incredible wilderness—one of my favorite birding locations in South Asia.

Endemics central

This is Sinharaja Rainforest, the jewel in Sri Lanka's well-adorned crown of natural wonders. A National Wilderness Area, Biosphere Reserve and UNESCO World Heritage site, Sinharaja is home to an extraordinary diversity of fauna and flora, among which birds are a standout feature. The single most important area of tropical humid evergreen forest remaining in the country, it is home to most of the island's impressive array of endemic birds, as well as 64% of its 217 endemic trees and woody climbers, and half of all its endemic mammal and butterfly species.

Protected from logging, much of the forest has remained unchanged for millennia, and it is the beating heart of Sri Lanka's wet zone: the rainfall catchment ecosystem which prevails in the southwest of the island. Most of the considerable volume of precipitation occurs during the southwest monsoon (May–July) and the northeast monsoon (November–January). For obvious practical reasons, birding outside these periods is best, and the second half of the northern winter is arguably the optimum time, when overwintering migrant birds that breed farther north in Asia are a feature alongside the endemics.

I first visited Sri Lanka just over a quarter of a century ago, when the national checklist recognized 26 bird species as endemic to the country (Wijesinghe 1994) and also noted that "Some authors [recognize] only 20... endemics". How cautious that now seems to have been: In this age of avian taxonomic revolution, the number has risen notably. While the local bird field guide (Warakagoda et al. 2012) puts the number at 27, the general wildlife guide (de Silva Wijeyeratne 2024) says 34. Meanwhile, BirdLife International (2025) recognizes 30, and eBird (as of June 2025) lists no fewer than 35.

TOP: ● **Local and somewhat uncommon but with distinctive facial markings, the endemic Spot-winged Thrush is restricted to the wet zone in southwestern Sri Lanka. Sinharaja Rainforest, Sri Lanka. 15 Feb 2025.** ***Photo © Dominic Mitchell.***

BOTTOM: ● **Breeding in the northwest Himalayas and with part of its range in inaccessible and disputed territory, Kashmir Flycatcher is nowhere common but certainly easier to see in Sri Lanka, where it winters. Victoria Park. Nuwara Eliya, Sri Lanka. 10 Feb 2025.** ***Photo © Dominic Mitchell.***





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

- Brown Shrike is another species which breeds farther north in Asia and migrates south to winter in warmer climes, including in Sri Lanka, where it can even be found in city parks and along roadsides. Victoria Park. Nuwara Eliya, Sri Lanka. 10 Feb 2025. *Photo © Dominic Mitchell.*
- Dawn colours at Horton Plains, an upland plateau which has expansive views towards Sri Pada, or Adam's Peak—at 7,359 ft (2,243 m) the eighth highest mountain in Sri Lanka. 11 Feb 2025. *Photo © Dominic Mitchell.*
- Thinly distributed in Sri Lankas's high hills, including Horton Plains, where this photo was taken, the subtly beautiful Sri Lanka Whistling-thrush is a must-see endemic on every visiting birder's wish list. 11 Feb 2025. *Photo © Dominic Mitchell.*



That so many endemics are concentrated in and around Sinharaja is both convenient and a challenge. If you're lucky, a significant portion of them can be found within two or three days along the single main trail, where we enjoyed those thrushes. But seeing all of your target species well within the limited periods of early morning and late afternoon, when bird activity is greatest and the heat is less intense, is no easy feat.

Mysterious noise

Nighttime excursions are also likely to be essential for Sri Lanka Frogmouth (not a country endemic, despite its name) and the enigmatic Serendib Scops-Owl. And therein lies a story.

When I first visited Sri Lanka in 1999, this owl was unknown to Western science. But my guide on that trip, Deepal Warakagoda, had first heard an unfamiliar vocalization in the forest at





ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT:

- Shy and elusive but widespread as a winter visitor across much of the country, Indian Pitta is the sole representative of its family on the island. Treehouse Chalets, Sri Lanka. 12 Feb 2025. *Photo © Dominic Mitchell.*
- Mammals are occasionally also a feature of birding tours to Sri Lanka, and none are more conspicuous than Asian Elephants—especially in national parks such as Bundala and Yala. This photograph was taken in the former. 12 Feb 2025. *Photo © Dominic Mitchell.*
- A male Sri Lanka Frogmouth, well camouflaged among branches, incubates his nest. Sinharaja Rainforest, Sri Lanka. 15 Feb 2025. *Photo © Dominic Mitchell.*
- Sri Lanka Gray Hornbill is one of 35 bird species endemic to the country. That number may increase with further research in the field, museums, and genetics laboratories. Sinharaja Rainforest, Sri Lanka. 15 Feb 2025. *Photo © Dominic Mitchell.*

Sinharaja back in February of 1995. He subsequently managed to record the sound and became convinced it came from an owl (Warakagoda 2006). Other experts agreed. These included Pamela Rasmussen, now at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, who was working on South Asian birds at the time.

It wasn't until six years after first hearing his quarry, however, that Warakagoda was finally able to see the bird. It then took another three years of nocturnal field work and research until, together with Rasmussen, the species was formally described.

Interestingly, it's not the only endemic small owl on the island. Inhabiting the same wet-zone forests, but with a wider distribution and significantly larger population, is Chestnut-backed Owlet. This species may occasionally be encountered by day, when I have seen it well, but is also described as crepuscular. Sadly, both are in decline. The IUCN Red List classifies Serendib Scops-Owl as Endangered and Chestnut-backed Owlet as Near Threatened.

Birding routes

For all of Sinharaja's importance—not least for the rare glimpse it gives of a primeval ecosystem that has vanished from vast swathes of the tropics—there are other must-see sites in Sri Lanka that any visiting birder will want to take in. With endemic birds a key focus and all of them occurring in the wet zone in the southwest, this section of the island will likely dominate any birding itinerary. But there are many excellent sites in the dry zone, too. Here are found most of the country's 26 national parks, and some of them are within relatively easy striking distance of the southwest.





Visitors are likely to start out and finish at the capital, Colombo, which is located a third of the way up the west coast and is home to the country's international airport. From there, many options are then possible. For example, a circular route could head either south towards Sinharaja, continuing counter-clockwise and turning inland, or east into the highlands before heading south to the coast and returning via Sinharaja.

It was this latter route that Hazel Green and I followed on my most recent visit in 2025. With a morning arrival in Colombo, there was time to acclimatize in the capital and get an early taste of its birds. These included Brown-headed Barbet and the endemic Red-backed Woodpecker at Viharamahadevi Park, and Painted Stork and Yellow Bittern at Thalangama Lake.

The next morning, local guide Jayath Wijenayake drove us east to Kitulgala, where we began to explore more extensive habitats along river valleys, forest edge, and tea plantations. In the grounds of the Moksha Hotel, new trip birds started to come thick and fast. They included species such as Crested Goshawk, Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, and the endemic island population of Square-tailed Bulbul. Nearby, further endemics included Sri Lanka Junglefowl, Sri Lanka Green-Pigeon,

BELOW: • Among the larger raptor species of the island, White-bellied Sea-Eagles can occasionally be encountered hunting in wetlands or soaring over higher ground. Lunugamvehera National Park, Sri Lanka. 13 Feb 2025. *Photo © Dominic Mitchell.*



Sri Lanka Gray Hornbill, and Sri Lanka Hanging-Parrot.

Eastward from Kitulgala, the road starts to wind uphill past tea plantations towards the central hills and ultimately reaches Nuwara Eliya. This picturesque city with a temperate climate and colonial-era buildings has become a key birding stop. Victoria Park on its south side is particularly famed for its exciting range of birds.

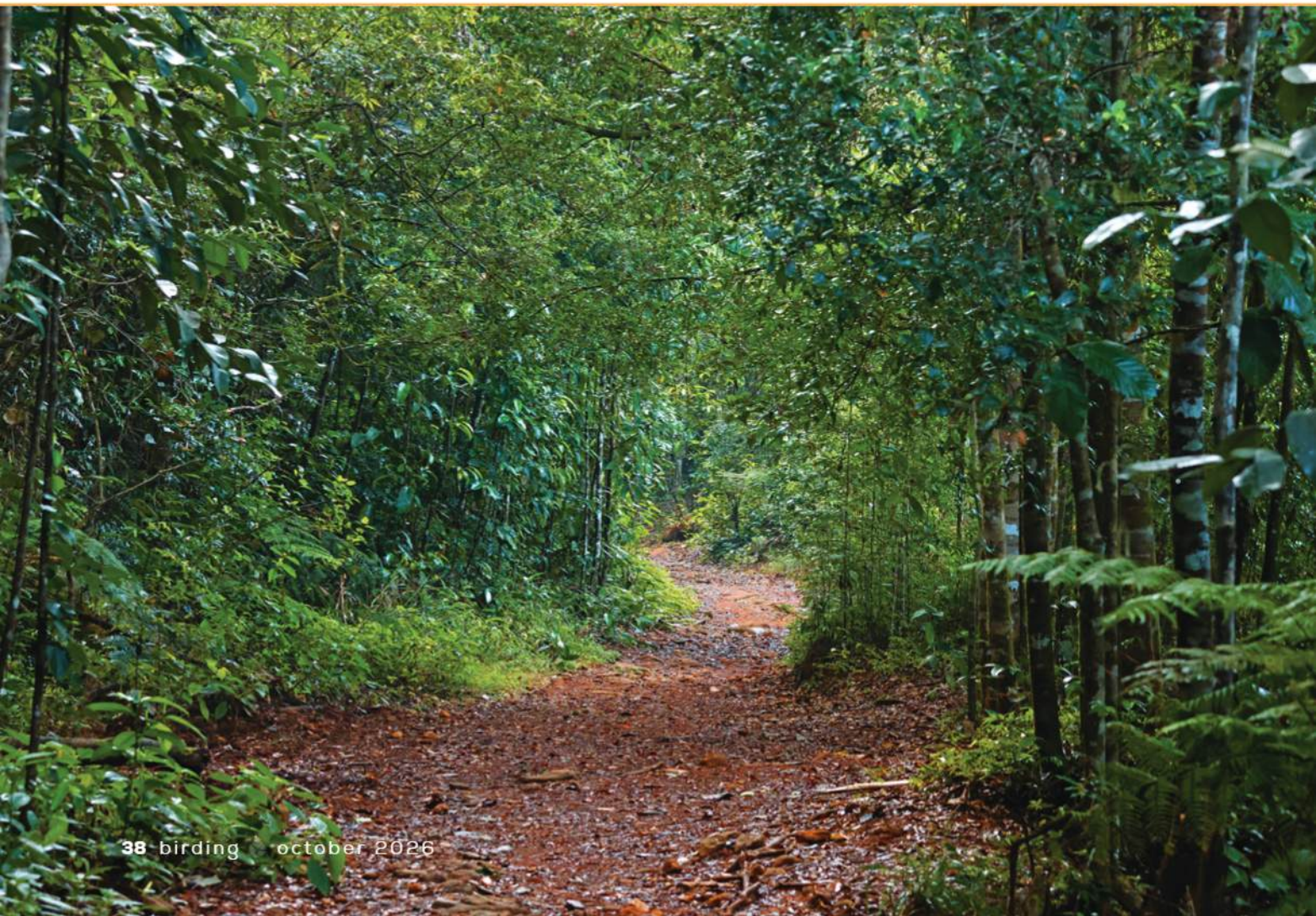
During my latest visit, the park produced the beautiful Kashmir Flycatcher, a range-restricted species which breeds in the northwestern Himalayas and is a scarce winterer in parts of southern India and Sri Lanka. We had superb views of two males, along with a supporting cast of Sri Lanka White-eye, Forest Wagtail, Brown Shrike, Indian Blue Robin, and Blyth's Reed-Warbler and Green Warbler. Frustratingly, though, I missed the key target of Indian Pitta that others glimpsed.

Mountain high

South of Nuwara Eliya lies Horton Plains, an otherworldly upland plateau of grassland and woodland—a must-visit stop on any itinerary. Groups of Sambar Deer add a safari-like dimension to the experience, while the views across to the 7,359-ft. (2,243-m) Adam's Peak are captivating. But endemic birds are likely to be the priority. These include Hill Swallow, Sri Lanka Bush-Warbler, Dull-blue Flycatcher, and Sri Lanka Whistling-thrush—all of which can be difficult to locate elsewhere. Mammal watchers can, with incredible luck, also glimpse a Leopard. We got even luckier on our journey up to Horton Plains when a Rusty-spotted Cat, the world's smallest feline, appeared in the headlights.

We were travelling from Beliluhoya and stayed at a well-located and harmoniously-designed new development in a hillside forest. Treehouse Chalets is off the usual tourist route but, with eye-level canopy viewing and a suite of birds and mammals to match, has a unique charm. The species list is set to grow with the recent appointment of Pavan Thilina Bopitiya Gamage as the property's naturalist. Sharp-eyed and extremely knowledgeable, he offered insight and field skills that proved crucial as we explored the trails. Highlights here were a pair of Sri Lanka Spurfowl, a beautifully vocal Sri Lanka Shama, and, making up for the big miss at Nuwara Eliya, to-die-for views of an Indian Pitta out in the open. The standout mammal encounter at this location was not the troop of Toque Macaques that regularly sat around our balcony, but instead an Indian Giant Flying-Squirrel staring back at us from the canopy.

Treehouse Chalets is a relative newcomer to the list of lodging options on the Sri Lanka birding circuit, but its plans to establish links with conser-



vation and research organizations to maximize the property's potential and fully catalog its biodiversity seem set to put the location on the map.

Coastward bound

After Beliluhoya, we descended from the hills and continued our route southward to the coast. We were leaving the wet zone behind to explore the drier habitats of Yala and Bundala national parks, as well as the surrounding region. The mix of thornforest, savannah, and scrub interspersed with rice paddies, lakes, and coastal lagoons offers a new range of species.

The volume and diversity of birds in this region was impressive indeed. Among the legions of egrets and cormorants at Tissa Lake, we picked out our first Asian Openbills and Oriental Darters of the trip, while Red-wattled Lapwings, Indian Pond-Herons, and Black-headed Ibises became staple







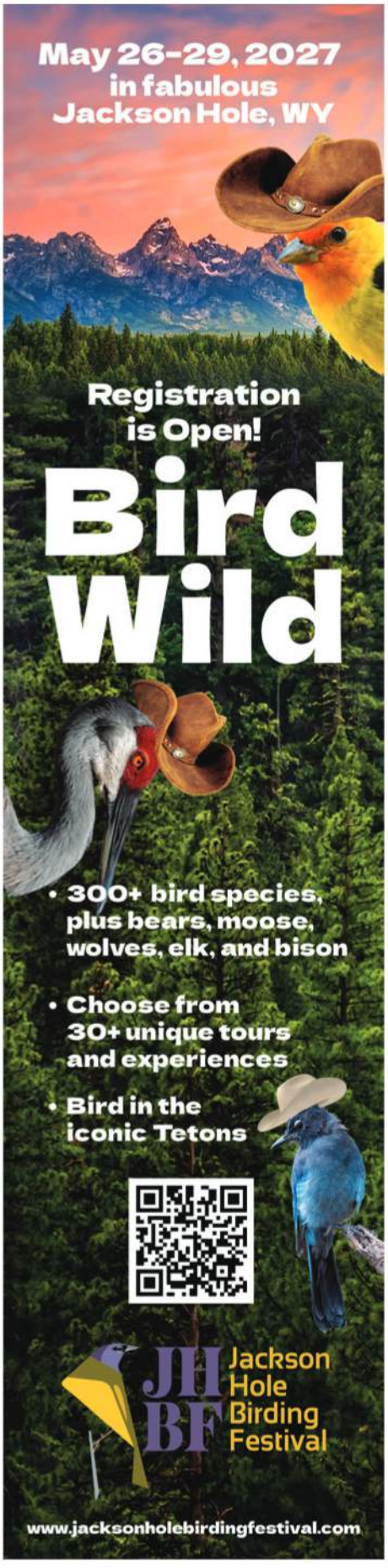
RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM:

- Another uncommon species, also restricted to the wet zone, is Sri Lanka Blue-Magpie. It is surely one of the most spectacular of the country's endemic birds. This individual was photographed at the famed location of Martin's Lodge in Sinharaja. 16 Feb 2025. *Photo © Dominic Mitchell.*

- Sri Lanka continues to surprise ornithologists. Serendib Scops-Owl, shown here near Kudawa, was described to science as recently as 2004. What else remains to be discovered in the rainforests and mountains of this remarkable island? 16 Feb 2025. *Photo © Dominic Mitchell.*

- The endemic Sri Lanka Spurfowl is uncommon, very elusive, and more likely to be heard than seen. But with patience, views can occasionally be had on forest trails and in clearings, such as here at Sinharaja. 16 Feb 2025. *Photo © Dominic Mitchell.*

LEFT: - Shown here is the main trail at Sinharaja Rainforest, the beating heart of Sri Lanka's wet zone and the single most important site for avian diversity in the country. 15 Feb 2025. *Photo © Dominic Mitchell.*



roadside birds. As we started to explore more remote, undisturbed wet areas, new trip birds included Lesser Whistling-duck, Great Thick-knee, Yellow-wattled Lapwing, Tibetan Sand-Plover, Pin-tailed Snipe, and Gull-billed and Whiskered terns. Showy male Indian Peafowl, sometimes in full tail-spreading display mode, seemed incongruous as they strutted through dry scrub—yet this is very much their natural habitat.

Other species we encountered here ranged from Crested Treeswift, Jerdon's Bushlark, and Indian Robin to Orange-breasted Green-Pigeon, Malabar Pied-Hornbill, and dazzlingly iridescent Asian Green and Blue-tailed bee-eaters. Brahminy Kites patrolled overhead, Pheasant-tailed Jaçanas darted across lilypads, and parties of Rose-colored and Brahminy starlings squabbled noisily in the bushes. A side-trip to Lunugamvehera National Park produced a similar range of species but added Grey-headed and White-bellied sea-eagles, and Changeable Hawk-Eagle. Tired from a long day in the sun, we returned to our well-appointed tented camp at Ceylon Wild Safaris and, after consuming curry and cold beer, fell asleep to the sound of singing Indian Nightjars.

Our final morning near the coast was a last opportunity to enjoy some of the many species that had made this place so special—mammals as well as birds. We had some exceptional encounters with Asian Elephants from our safari jeep. These included a mother and calf wallowing close by in a small pool to keep cool. Other non-avian animals providing frequent interest ranged from Indian Gray Mongoose and Tufted Gray Langur to Bengal Monitor and Mugger Crocodile.

An excellent farewell birding session at a particularly productive wetland in Bundala National Park produced hundreds of shorebirds. Black-winged Stilt, Little Stint, Tibetan Sand-Plover, and Marsh Sandpiper were the most numerous. It was here that I also had my first encounter with an unfamiliar plover recently proposed as a new species, "Hanuman Plover". This taxon, restricted to Sri Lanka and the southern tip of India, is currently treated as the *seebohmi* subspecies of Kentish Plover, but it differs in size, plumage, and molt; it is thought to have diverged from other members of that species 1.19 million years ago (Niroshan et al. 2023). Differences are relatively subtle in the field, but thanks to Pavan's keen eyes and local knowledge, we managed to see two of them well.

The last leg

Bidding farewell to Bundala and Yala, we continued our journey towards Sinharaja Rainforest. There, the many highlights included not just the encounter with Sri Lanka and Spot-winged thrushes but exceptional views of the secretive Sri Lanka Spurfowl, a rare daytime encounter with Sri Lanka Frogmouth at a nest, and Crimson-backed Flameback, Layard's Parakeet, and Sri Lanka Hanging-Parrot, among a great many other endemics.

Our base was Martin's Lodge, a must-stay birding stopover on the edge of the main forest. I first visited this famed accommodation back in 1999 when it was the smaller and more basic (but still very birdy) Martin's Bungalow. This time around, the birds were just as diverse and as close as I remembered. Sri Lanka Blue-Magpies and Sri Lanka Gray Hornbills investigated food scraps put out by the lodge's owners, Sri Lanka Drongos and Orange Minivets patrolled the canopy, and Velvet-fronted Nuthatches climbed up and down tree trunks just yards from the dining area.

Not for the first time, I was woken at night by Pavan banging on my door. It was past midnight, but he and Jayath had been out in the forest near the lodge looking for Serendib Scops-Owl, a species that had so far eluded me. I joined them to continue the search. Despite two birds singing close to the path, they remained stubbornly hidden behind foliage.

As we left the immediate vicinity of Sinharaja the following morning, Pavan and Jayath put Plan B into action.

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At a nearby village, we met up with local guide K.D. Warnarathna Ranjith and set off on a steep trail up a forested hillside. It was a short but challenging ascent through thick undergrowth until, suddenly, I was told to get down. "Look!", exclaimed Pavan. Just a few feet above the ground, partly obscured by a tangle of branches but peering out with its big yellow eyes, was a pocket-sized, cinnamon-hued owl. At last, I was face-to-face with Serendib Scops-Owl, a bird unknown to science just over 20 years ago. I could not have wished for a finer finale to my latest trip to this incredible island.

Acknowledgements

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