

ANIMALS OF THE SAARC REGION

SRI LANKA

Jungle Profiles

by Dr T.S.U.de Zylva

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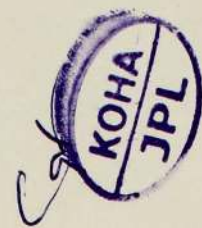
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Jungle Profiles

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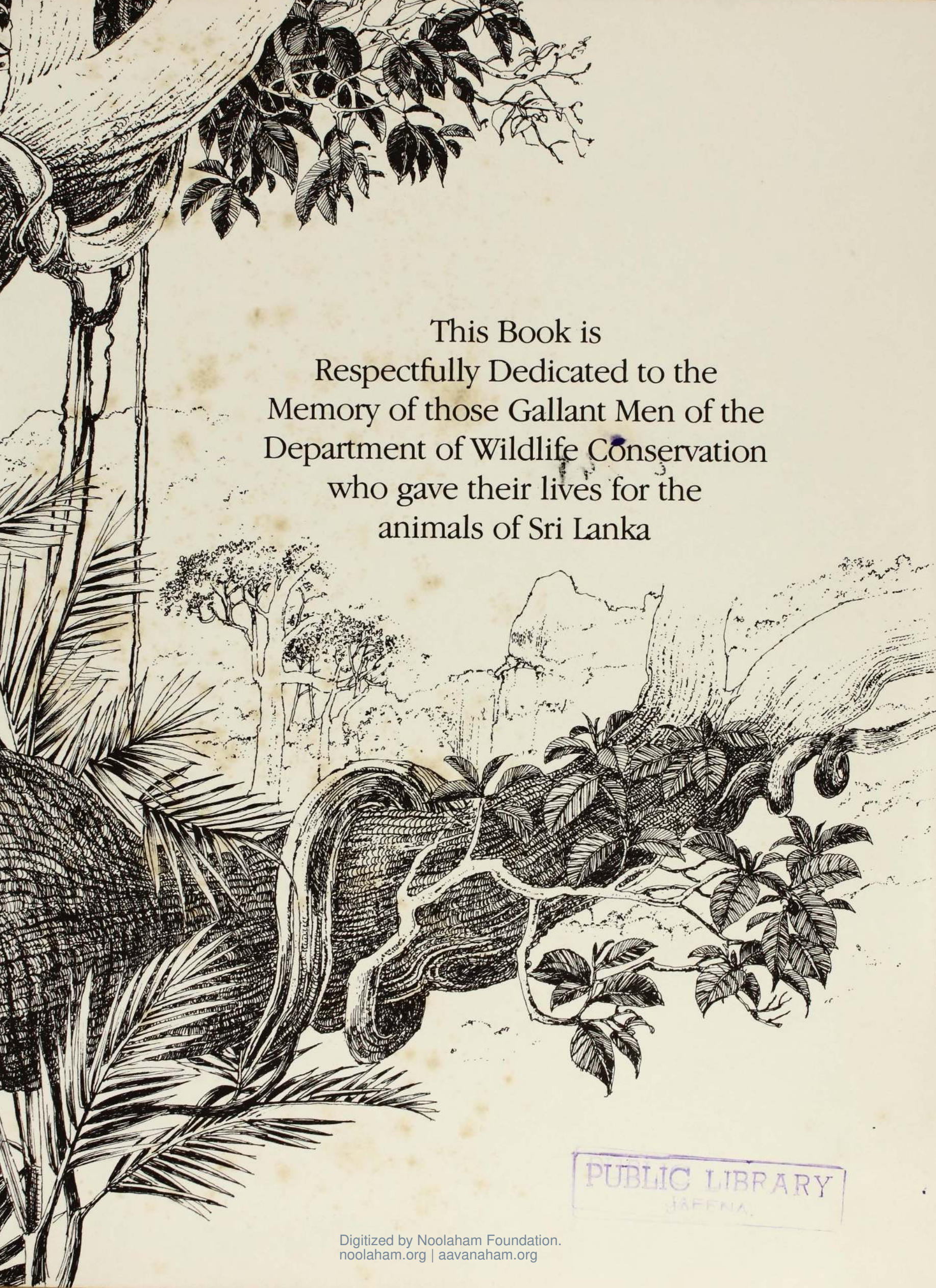


TRUMPET PUBLISHERS - SRI LANKA 1988

கோடி எண்	80241
இடுபெயர்	590.744.5953



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This Book is
Respectfully Dedicated to the
Memory of those Gallant Men of the
Department of Wildlife Conservation
who gave their lives for the
animals of Sri Lanka

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Designed and Illustrated by
Ananda Harischandra

Printed and Made by
J.F. & I. Printers, Sri Lanka

Published by
Trumpet Publishers (Pte.) Limited
A4, Perahera Mawatha, Colombo - 3.
Sri Lanka

I.S.B.N 955- 565 - 003 - 9

Foreword

To be asked to write a Foreword for a book authored by Dr. T. S. U. de Zylva, a friend who hails from my hometown Kurunegala and with whom I have been on many a field trip could be a little disconcerting especially when he wears the tag of being an outstanding photographer. Fortunately however, this assignment delights me rather than fills me with trepidation and anxiety. The main reason is that this author knows what he is writing about.

An experienced student of the behaviour of wildlife, Dr. Upen de Zylva, armed with camera and binoculars, hidden in a blind, can gain in a few hours, enough facts about his subjects to keep him thinking for a year or more and together with his wide experience in the field of photography and keen insight into the preservation of the environment, has produced a fascinating volume which constitutes not only a challenge but also an encouragement to every reader of this book.

“Anyone”, Dr. de Zylva seems to say; “who has a sharp eye and ear, is patient, and does not jump to conclusions, can learn a great deal by studying our fauna. He may even make observations of lasting value to science.”

Dr. de Zylva's previous book “Birds of Sri Lanka” has been widely acclaimed as an outstanding production. Most books on wildlife are written from the standpoint of personal observations, yet they have their limitations in that no man can personally observe more than a fraction of the habitat, behaviour and private life of any one species.

In “Jungle Profiles” Upen has attempted to record a synthesis of the more unusual of his personal observations through outstanding camera-work which enhances the commentary that accompanies each photograph. That his speciality is bird photography is made obvious by the marvellous ‘Nocturn’ and the equally superb ‘Rainbows on the River’.

Mercifully, Poottuwa of Ruhuna is still alive, thanks to the vigilance of the field staff of the Wildlife Department but I

am told that he is number one on the hit list of that despicable tribe of ivory poachers. There have been other Poottuwas (colloquial name given to elephants whose tusks meet or cross over) and they too have attracted thousands of ardent admirers but alas, they are no more; having been laid low by merciless and ruthless killers who with different motives, yet with similar intent, snuffed out in cold blood, several stalwarts of the Wildlife Department.

Dr. de Zylva in his ‘Author's Note’ laments the disappearing wilderness – in essence, due to neglect and indifference. Biologists, environmentalists, conservation organisations both government and non-governmental, and lovers of our wilderness, have long expressed their deep concern over the possibility of our environment deteriorating beyond the limits of tolerance. Many, especially the policy-makers, have paid scant regard to such warnings.

The conservation movement in Sri Lanka is often judged in terms of ‘battles won’ or ‘battles lost’. Important and vital issues are often portrayed in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them’; ‘security of jobs’ and ‘vested interests’ versus ‘the environment’. The idea that we are all intrinsically part of the problem is left largely to the domain of the genuine lovers of our wilderness and to those with a conscience. The final decisions regardless, are made by rare specimens of the human species who regard themselves as ‘the men who matter’.

I would like to allay some of the doubts expressed by Dr. de Zylva in his ‘Author's Note’ and reveal the positive steps taken by the Department of Wildlife Conservation. The Department has recommended that –

Horton Plains Nature Reserve be upgraded to the status of a National Park.

The creation of the Lunugamwehera National Park in the immediate watershed of the reservoir. This would provide the establishment of jungle corridors to permit migration of fauna especially the elephants, extending through Uda-



Walawe, Lunugamwehera and Ruhuna National Parks.

Positive steps are being taken to link Horton Plains with the Peak Wilderness Sanctuary and the whole, to be upgraded to the status of a National Park.

Legislation is already underway to declare twelve thousand acres within the Cultural Triangle at Sigiriya, a sanctuary, to be administered by the Department of Wildlife Conservation. This move was initiated by the Director-General Cultural Triangle. Hopefully, these objectives will be achieved by the end of the year 1988.

As pointed out by Dr. de Zylva, history bears out that wild-life and nature conservation had been an integral part of this country's social and cultural heritage from ancient times. A rock inscription dating back in time has been discovered by our archaeologists quoting the Buddha as having stated thus: "The forest is a peculiar organism of unlimited kindness and benevolence that makes no demand for its sustenance and extends generously the products of its life's activity; it affords protection to all beings, offering shade even to the axeman who destroys it."

There is much work to be done in order to gain the knowledge we need to help preserve our environment. It is therefore imperative that we move towards proper management of our natural resources so that the greatest benefits are thereby produced for the present generation whilst maintaining the requirement to meet the potential needs of future generations. This principle also aligns itself with the concept of Human Rights ingrained in the Constitution of Sri Lanka. Today's actions in part, will determine the prosperity of future generations, their quality of life, and even their right to life itself. Most of us, be it wittingly or often unwittingly could be supporting the activities we disapprove of, by lending encouragement to actions that may be counter-productive to the main cause.

Finally, I salute Dr. de Zylva for his noble gesture in dedicating "Jungle Profiles" to the field staff of the Department of Wildlife Conservation who have paid the supreme sacrifice for the cause of conservation.

Major General Mano Madawela (Rtd) VSV
Director,
Department of Wildlife Conservation.

Author's Note

For thousands of years, all over the world, mankind has persecuted his lesser brethren who were meant to be his companions in the wild. Animals were either slaughtered mercilessly or banished from their homes, consequent to vast tracks of their forest domains being felled and opened up. The situation has not been different even in Buddhist Lanka, where in the hey-day of its ancient civilization, kings decreed that birds and animals should be protected and forests set apart for them. Right now, we are witnessing the unprecedented destruction of our jungles and natural habitats and a roaring illicit trade in wildlife and wildlife products. If the present trend continues it will not be long before we see the last of our wildlife.

The truth is that we in Sri Lanka have now entered the age of conservation. Only now at this late stage are we developing some consciousness of past negligence and wastefulness. One fortunate outcome of all this, is the realization that sufficient forest cover is imperative for a country that is committed to an agricultural economy. This is common knowledge today and even the average schoolchild knows that forests protect the soils from erosion, regulate the atmosphere, maintain water flow and prevent the formation of deserts. Cognisance of these stark facts has no doubt, already alerted the country's administrators and they are in the process of setting aside forest reserves. Whilst implementing these plans however, they should not lose sight of the fact that these same reserves will also have to provide a last refuge for the dwindling wildlife of Sri Lanka. To be practical therefore, these reserves must be interconnected and must be of such an extent that animals can live there in relative peace and not be compelled to lead restrained lives in restricted habitats.

It was concern for the future of wildlife that prompted me to put together in book-form, this selection of vivid pictures of animals and birds, photographed in a state of natural grace. I thought this might be an effective way of pleading their cause and also convincing people that this natural heritage is something worth protecting, and that these creatures, if treated with reasonable respect, can be interest-

ing and desirable companions in the wild. It is not my intention to discuss their planned conservation, but to stress the aesthetic pleasure that can be derived from their continued presence.

The roster of big-game animals in Sri Lanka may not be as awesome as that in East Africa or as impressive as in the adjoining sub-continent of India, but the possibility of sighting a rich diversity of animals and birds in a much smaller area, makes up for this.

The photographs in this book depict only a random selection of animals and birds from the National Parks and other forested areas of the low-country dry-zone of Sri Lanka. It is not a representative line-up of our fauna. The pictures have been selected on the basis of their aesthetic appeal, with the hope that they will stimulate a feeling for wildlife in people who have hitherto not been so inclined. The accompanying text merely details facts and observations that will provide an insight into the habits of our wild companions.

I have resorted to anthropomorphisms here and there in this volume. I trust the scientifically-oriented readers will bear with me because this has been done to enliven the text and make it more enjoyable to the average reader.

Thumbing through these pages, the reader will travel into the very heart of our country's priceless but endangered heritage. He will discover pristine jungle retreats and get an intimate look at the daily happenings in the wilds. That is what this book is all about; it is a tribute to the teeming wealth of wildlife – concentrated in a small space of twenty-five thousand square miles.

Dr. T.S.U. de Zylva.

10, Dambulla Road,
Kurunegala.
Sri Lanka.

Acknowledgement

The portfolio of photo graphs in this volume would have been smaller and less inclusive, and the text probably less enjoyable, had it not been for the competent and willing assistance of several friends.

Firstly, I must thank my friends in the Department of Wildlife Conservation, all of them keen and knowledgeable jungle men, who often accompanied me and made possible some of the more striking pictures that are reproduced in this book. I shall now set out to list them in the order in which I befriended them Late Percy de Alwis, Oliver Goonatilleke, Shirley Perera, Childers Jayawardena, Desmond White and M.M.D. Perera. They were all Game Rangers when I first came to know them, but almost every one of them ended up as an Assistant Director or a Park Warden. Among the Game Guards, I often enlisted the able assistance of M.A. Malhamy, the late D. A. Ranasinghe, the late H. H. Bandara, P.G.H. Appuhamy, W. L. A. Piyadasa, Subasinghe, S. Abraham and A. W. Hendrick Appuhamy.

All the above mentioned names have now become legendary among wildlife lovers, who have been frequenting our National Parks during the last two or three decades. Most of them are still actively engaged in the protection and conservation of wildlife.

In my endeavour to perfect the technique of wildlife photography, I have sought advice from my good friend and 'Guru', Mr. K. B. Arulanandam. His severe almost ruthless criticism of my photographs has constantly kept me on my

toes. However, for many years, Arul has been urging me to illustrate a book on wildlife. I must take this opportunity to thank him for advice and assistance given unstintingly.

Dieter Zingel, my German friend from Wiesbaden and his charming wife Hilla, have been our guests on many occasions. The highlight of every one of their trips to this country, was invariably a jungle safari. I took time off to show them around, and benefited immensely from the good luck they brought me. Their help and encouragement paved the way for this book. To both of them I extend my sincere thanks.

My sincere appreciation to Mrs. Eileen de Silva for reading through the typescript, making corrections and tidying-up the text. Eileen, her husband Aloy and I, spent many a delightful evening at their residence beside the Kurunegala lake, revamping some of the passages and discussing wildlife in general.

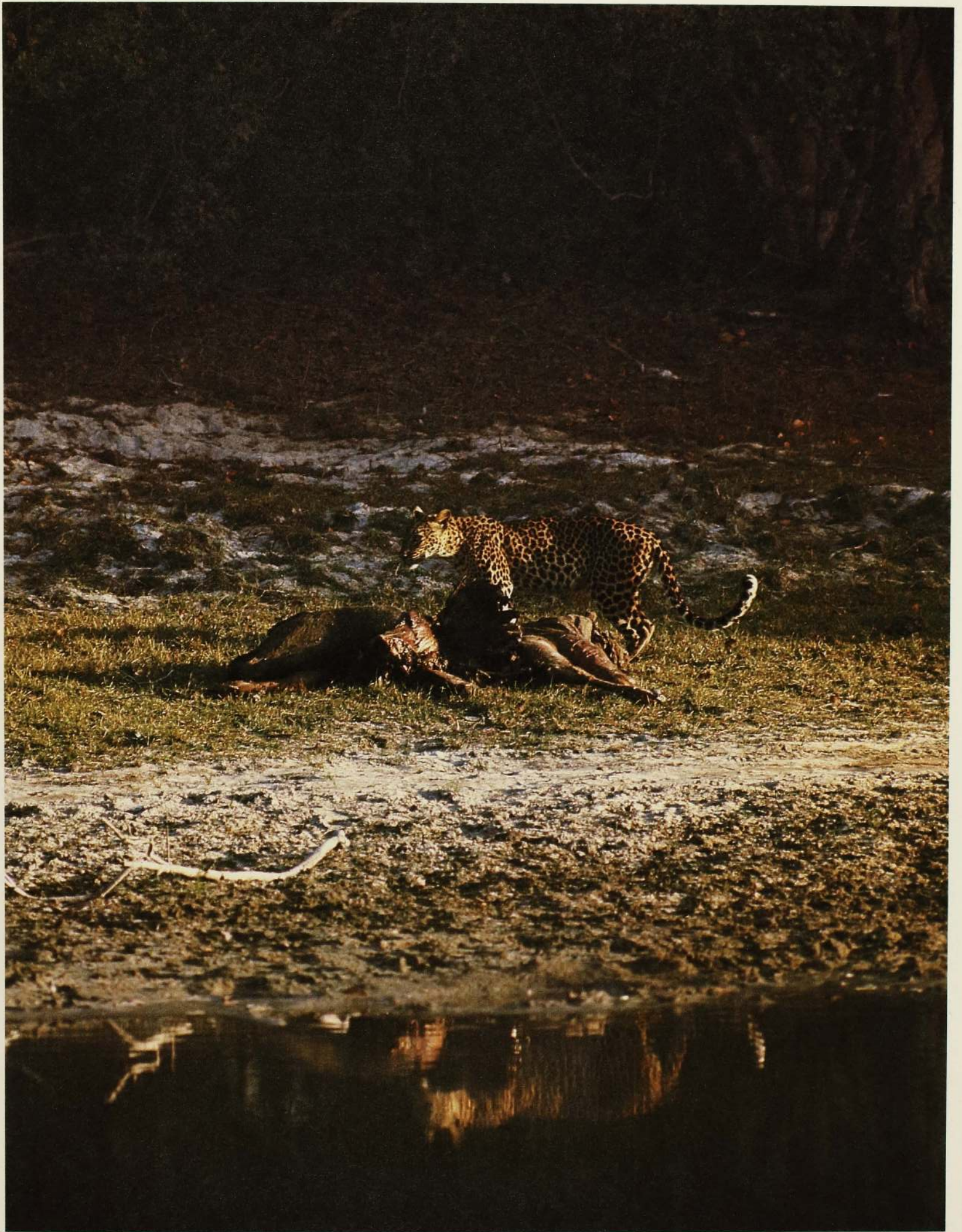
A word of thanks to Major-General Mano Madawela, Director of Wildlife Conservation, for having consented to write the Foreword. To my wife, Upamalie and my three children, I can only say that without their help at home and in the field this book would not have been written.

I shall conclude with a big bouquet to Trumpet Publishers for undertaking to publish this book, and with a word of genuine praise to Mr. Ananda Harischandra and J.F.I. Printers, whose skills have contributed so much to the appearance of this volume.

Dr. T. S. U. de Zylva.

“Those who view the stark future with impunity have simply not bothered to consider the moral and ethical considerations involved. By any standard it is just as wrong to allow a species of life to be exterminated as it is to destroy the Sigiriya Frescoes. Neither can ever be duplicated again. People enjoy looking at wildlife just as they enjoy looking at art, and wilful destruction of either is an aesthetic sin.”

Adapted from Philip Crowe's
'The Empty Ark'.



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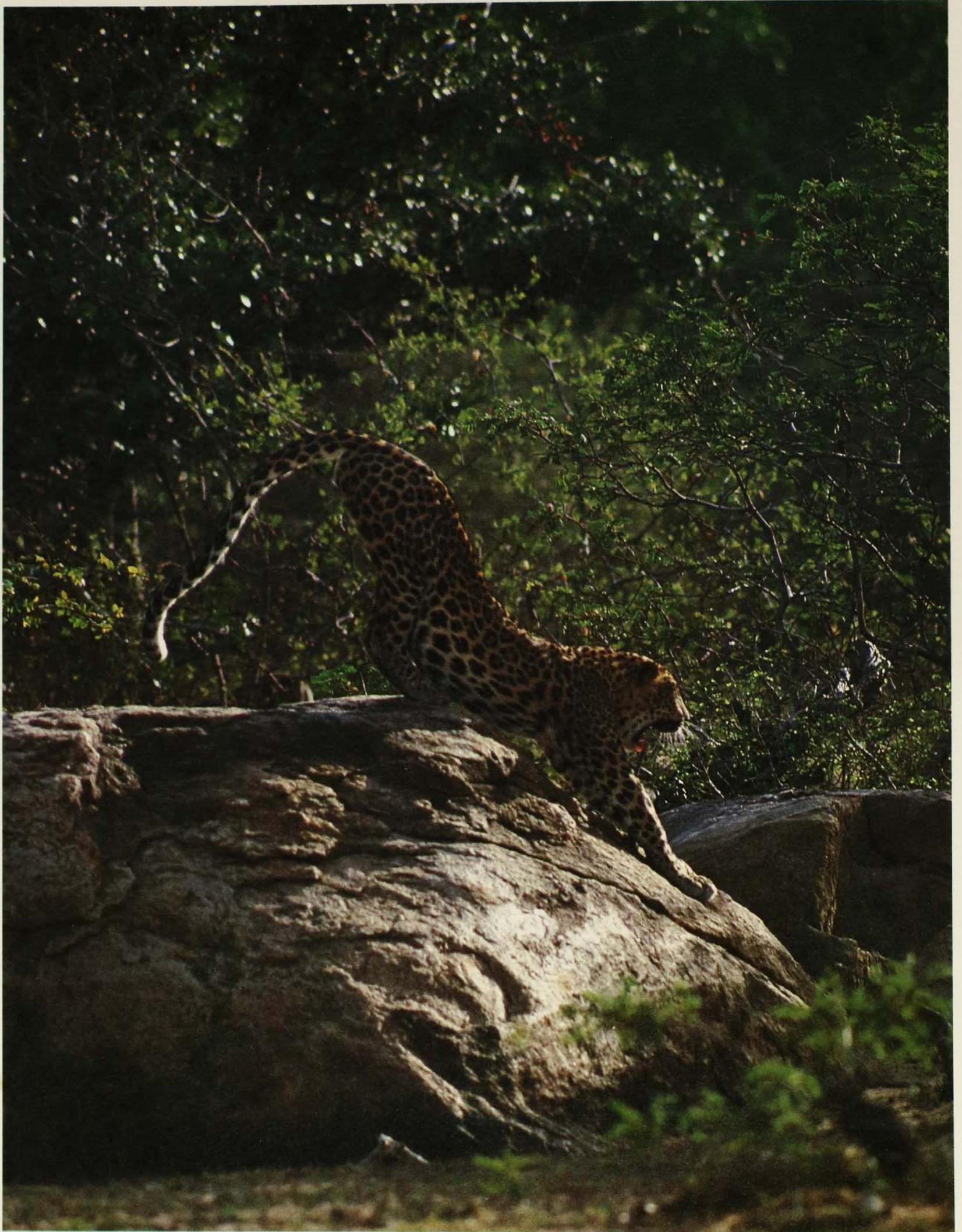
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Break of Day

Dawn was just breaking when we halted our vehicle alongside a small rocky outcrop to the left of the Uraniya road in the Ruhuna National Park. Sprawled out atop this rock, was a leopard lying on its side and apparently fast asleep. Sensing the abrupt silence that followed the stopping of the engine, he raised his head, turned around to face us and remained sphinx-like and immobile. His penetrating gaze fell on the car like the beam of a searchlight and we dared not move for fear that we would scare him off. That intent glance was held for a few seconds and then waned as the leopard lowered his head very very slowly until his chin came to rest on the bare rock between his outstretched paws.

Photography was not possible in the existing light and the long wait for sunrise turned out to be a dreary exercise. The leopard's occasional yawning confirmed that he felt the same way too.

The first rays of the morning sun lit up the jungle scenario with a silvery translucency that held us spellbound. The sunbeams steadily warmed up the bare rock and teased the hind quarters of the leopard. He responded by rolling over time and again, obviously revelling in the sunny warmth. Then, when we least expected it, the leopard stood up and strode down the rock-slope. He stopped in his tracks for one brief moment and with typical feline grace, stretched out the sinewy muscles of his entire frame. A camera clicked and almost simultaneously the sinuous yellow cat loped into the undergrowth and melted into the shadows. Another glorious day had dawned in Ruhuna.





Starting out

Quivering in the first flush of dawn, Digan Wala stirs to life. The loud caterwauling of peacocks fills the air, and the graceful flights of egrets and cormorants usher in the day. In their wake, a small herd of elephants comes down to the water's edge to quench their thirst in dignified silence.

After a hurried drink the elephants amble along the bund and disappear into the forest. Here they will remain, until, driven by the relentless mid-day heat, they will seek the cool waters once more.



Now it's a New Day

The sun rising from behind Wilapala Wewa, cuts morning mists to etch silvery outlines around the sleek forms of spotted deer.





Monkey Masquerade

“I have often noticed the preference shown by the great grey wanderoo monkeys for sitting on tree-tops where they get a distant view, on the sides of hills, or in high trees by the edges of tanks or fields, or on the boughs overhanging rivers; and they love, too, to sit watching water-holes, quietly hidden among the leaves, only to reveal their presence after a while by some movement, or by uttering a word of their speech. May it not be that they find life entertaining there? Working women gossiping on door-steps, old gentlemen sitting in club windows, and monkeys perched on high boughs by water-holes are less dissimilar than they suppose.”

John Still (Jungle Tide) 1930

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Killer in Action

“If men could bring their ethics of killing up to the level of the hunting animals and only slay for food, the jungle might retain its wonderful balance of life for centuries to come; but in the long-run it looks as though the best hope for the more beautiful animals may lie in human population becoming stationary before we require the whole surface of the earth for growing food for factory hands.”

John Still





The Kill

This stag had been brought down by a leopard in the small patch of jungle wedged in between the Uraniya road and the Siyambalagas-wala road, at the point where they converge near Palugaswala. A good portion of the hind-quarters had been eaten but putrefaction had not yet set in. We surmised that the stag had most probably been killed the previous night, and thought it rather strange that the killer had made no attempt to conceal the carcass or drag it to a less conspicuous place. There was of course the

remote possibility that a vehicle passing that way earlier in the morning might have scared the leopard away.

When we discovered the kill, it was well past eight in the morning and by then, the carrion eaters had already arrived for the banquet. The jungle crows stood their ground but a single mongoose took one look at us and scurried for cover. A hawk-eagle sitting on a low branch was an uninvited guest. It swooped down on the 'kill' at irregular intervals and each time it did so, wrenched off a chunk of venison. The jackals for some unknown reason had declined the invitation.



A Taste of Paradise

Our National Carrier has chosen the peacock as its emblem probably having taken the cue from Hindu mythology where it is mentioned that the peacock was the vehicle of Lord Skanda. It is also strange that the Ruhuna National Park which borders on the sacred shrine of Kataragama (the abode of Lord Skanda), is teeming with peafowl.

Palugas-Wala is a picturesque jungle villu situated beside the Uraniya road in the Ruhuna Park. A couple of hundred metres past Palugas-Wala is a small culvert and to the left of this culvert, at the fringe of the jungle is a small glade. This open

arena happens to be a favourite haunt of peafowl, specially during the months of the North East Monsoon.

While driving that way early one morning, we stopped by to watch a gorgeous peacock dancing to his rather drab and reluctant mate. With his fantastically extravagant train of feathers elevated to form a multi-eyed fan, he pranced around the peahen with superlative elegance. His paroxysms of emotion were evident from the frequent gusts of vibration that made the elaborate fan seem to tremble. All his frenzied efforts however, failed to evoke even the slightest response from her. Each time he made a pass at her she swerved as if to avoid getting entangled in those dazzling plumes. Throughout the entire performance she



remained utterly indifferent, moving hither and thither, aimlessly pecking at the tall blades of grass. Not once did we see her take even a casual glance at that accomplished performer.

When finally she was cornered and the lord and master alighted on her back in all his glory, she only crouched impassively. The union was not long sustained but the peacock continued dancing though with diminished ardour. The peahen shook herself to regain her composure and moved away without as much as turning her head to look at that exquisitely adorned philanderer who had just outraged her modesty.

Vanity in velvet

At a time of the day when most of the other members of his clan were grazing in the jungle glades and parklands, we encountered this majestic stag deep in the heart of the jungle. He was lazing around aimlessly, all by himself in this patch of forest that to us, looked forbidding. The heavy under-growth was lush and green and in places deep enough to provide sufficient cover for a lurking leopard.

Our intrusion into his privacy only made him turn his head around sharply. He appeared very alert but not in the least alarmed. Realising that there was no danger from us, he

threaded his way through the tangled vegetation and disappeared into the forest.

A handsome stag of fine proportions! There could be no doubt that once the 'velvet' on his antlers wore off, he would rejoin the herd and probably vanquish all rivals and become the 'master stag'.

Spotted deer stags shed their antlers annually, in the first few years and at irregular intervals as they grow older.

The new antlers always come out in 'velvet' which gradually wears out when the stags rub them off on the roughened barks of trees.





‘Poottuwa’ of Ruhuna

It was way back in 1966 that I saw this tusker for the first time near Wilapala-Wewa in the Ruhuna National Park. He and his entourage of elderly females had come out into a glade to graze on the lush, green grass, and I had just entered the Park accompanied only by my tracker, Jinadasa, to produce a documentary film on wildlife.

Most of the time, two big cow-elephants flanked the young tusker on either side – a sure indication that these animals were still unfamiliar with their surroundings. This confirmed my tracker’s statement that the tusker and the accompanying herd

had only recently made their appearance in the Park. Because his tusks were crossed, this lanky beast standing about six and half feet at the shoulder, had already been christened ‘Poottuwa’

On numerous visits to Yala through the years, I have often run into my old friend in the most unlikely places, but when I saw him recently, foraging in a patch of jungle close to Buttuwa, I thought he looked majestic. Two decades had gone by, and now he looked taller, fuller and far more sagacious than when I first set eyes on him on that warm December afternoon.



Homage to the Sun

It is rather strange that unlike in other swimming and diving birds, the plumage of cormorants is not water repellent and soon becomes sodden. They must therefore dry their plumage after submersions.

This Little Cormorant was doing just that, all by itself, beside a small water-hole in Wilpattu.



Suspicion

The two sentinels flanking this sounder are on the alert. Their countenance clearly displays their defiance.

A foolhardy leopard in Wilpattu, risked a confrontation with a formidable group like this one, and ended up ignominiously with bruised ribs and a fractured tail.

The Eagle has Landed

A Sri Lanka Hawk-Eagle alighted in a shallow stream flowing into Kumbuk Wila in Wilpattu National Park. There was much abuse from bulbuls, noisy chatter from babblers and shrill whistles from the jungle squirrels, but undaunted by this cacophony, the eagle not only quenched its thirst but also followed up with a leisurely bath.



Wanton Killer

This plucky little predator, the Ruddy Mongoose, has a characteristic habit of carrying its black-tipped tail curved upwards. We tagged ourselves on to this Ruddy Mongoose which was on a hunting spree in the Ruhuna National Park. Within a few minutes it pounced on a big grasshopper and chewed it up with an audible crunch – rather suggestive of a child biting a wafer biscuit. We also saw it hurriedly clamber up small trees and fallen branches, scouring every nook and corner, looking for prey. Finally, it leaped in the air and brought down a Blue Mormon butterfly and left the hapless victim for the ants to finish off.

The Ruddy Mongoose is partial to carrion and is often an uninvited guest at leopard 'kills'. It is the scourge of poultry farmers and there have been instances where this villain had broken into a fowl cage and killed over half a dozen birds in a single night.





Going Places

“For instinct serves the deer instead of brains,
And in the woods, from being all so near
To some great whole, of which they all are grains,
They share by right the knowledge of the herd.
The fawn lay silent while the leopard passed
And knew by nature what it was that stirred.
So he grew up to lead the herd at last,
A stag of beauty, dainty, full of grace,
King of his kind, and father of his race.”

John Still (Poems in Captivity)





Table Manners

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Muntiacus malabaricus

Muntiacus malabaricus – the high-flown scientific name for a dainty deer only slightly larger than a Beagle. The female seen here was photographed at Ibba Wala in Wilpattu. The male has a richer chestnut-red colour and sports small antlers with short brow-tines and undivided beams. When alarmed, this deer will call hoarsely and incessantly, its voice more like a dog's than the bell of a deer. Hence its popular name – Barking Deer.

This sharp-eyed deer is not easily seen in the jungle, except in times of drought, when it regularly visits small water holes. At one such water-hole, we had the rare opportunity to witness the fate of a barking deer that did not hark to a message relayed on the 'jungle telegraph' and paid the supreme penalty.

During a severe drought Dangaha Uraniya, a water body in Wilpattu National Park, had dwindled down to a mere pool. My friend Nihal Karunaratne and I were not more than ten metres away from the water's edge, hiding in a 'Kotuaththa' and filming the small groups of barking deer that came down in quick succession for their morning drink.

Four barking deer had just reached the water when suddenly, one of their comrades in the jungle adjoining, commenced barking hoarsely. All the thirsty deer fled in disarray except for one. This juvenile ignored the call and continued to lap the water that had seeped into the deep

hoof-marks at the muddy edge of the water-hole. Within thirty seconds of the alarm call, we heard a deafening roar and almost simultaneously, seemingly from nowhere, a big leopard pounced on the deer, grabbed it by the neck and sat on its haunches. The small deer was still struggling in the jaws of the seated leopard, when the petrified onlookers regained their composure and thought of filming it. But this was not to be. A fiercely growling leopardess charged the leopard in an attempt to snatch its prey. With one jerk of its neck, the leopard swung the deer away from the female and dived into the undergrowth. The frustrated leopardess rushed off in a rage, nearly knocking over our 'kotu-aththa' in the process.

All this happened in the twinkling of an eye – or so it seemed. The dumb-founded photographers just hadn't time to 'press the button', but they should have known better and anticipated some sort of action because the alarm call clearly indicated that some predator was prowling in the vicinity.



Wary Whistlers

“When the whistling teal rose for their evening flight, the clouds of their flocks filled the air with their voices as they streamed across the afterglow in endless strings.”

These pretty tree-ducks abound in our more remote tanks and jungle villus. Whistling teal pair-off only during the breeding season. The strange behaviour of this pair seemed to indicate that, hidden in the reeds, or in a tree-cavity, or in a crevice among the roots of a tree standing at the water's edge, they had a nest.



Tranquil Haven

“The forest around was indescribably grand. No sounds but those of Nature fell on the ear. The trees were of immense proportions, and their trunks were moss-grown and weather-beaten. Truly elephants must have a noble nature, and one may almost believe that they delight in the wild places they inhabit, as much for their beauty as for the safety they afford. They wander from stream to hill-top, rub their tough hides against the mighty forest giants, and live without fear except of man, their only enemy.”

*G.P. Sanderson
(Thirteen years among the Wild beasts of India)*



The Hornbill

“In that dim place,
I heard a sudden hollow laughter peal,
The merriment of some inhuman race,
Who seemed to steal,
On velvet padded feet from shade to shade,
Watching me, mocking me, just out of sight;
For when I turned to look, they laughed again,
Though nothing stirred, except the secret flight
Of one large bird,
Who disappeared among the deeper trees.
Then, from afar, re-echoed down the breeze
That wicked demon laughter I had heard.”

John Still (Poems in Captivity)
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The Lordly Sambur

The sambur stag is usually solitary in his habits associating with hinds only during the rutting season. Hinds are more sociable and may be met with in small parties, all year round.

The sambur is predominantly a resident of the heavy forest. Its ability to remain inconspicuous and its predilection for covert spots makes it difficult to locate. In areas like the National Parks where disturbance is minimal, they can be seen during the day; but when in their natural haunts and habitats, they can be seen only at night.

The horn-like challenge of the sambur – a true ‘voice’ of the wilderness – specially when heard at night, creates a characteristic jungle atmosphere – “unforgettable unforgotten”.





Possession

A rutting stag has selected his mate and spirited her away from the rest of the herd. His devotion to her was apparent from the way he kept trailing her. Whenever she stood still, the stag appeared restless and nudged her from behind with his snout or placed his chin tenderly on her rump. At no stage did the doe make any attempt to evade his advances; so we assumed that she was receptive and that mating was imminent.

We met this honeymooning couple on the Gonalabba Plains in the Ruhuna National Park. At the time there were no other animals in the vicinity, so we too hurried away without intruding on their privacy.

Buffalo Bliss

Leisurely chewing the cud, immersed in his muddy bathtub, this lone buffalo bull was the very epitome of contentment. Each time he jerked his head a halo of flying insects appeared around his crown. Within seconds, this halo waned as the insects re-settled on his massive head.

Though the monsoon was in spate and all the jungle villus were brimming over, our buffalo preferred his solitary retreat.

A buffalo bull is ever ready to fight, to keep his territory and his cows. The tattered ear could well have been the result of such an encounter.





Browsing

“There is a mystery behind that masked gray visage, an ancient life force, delicate and mighty, awesome and enchanted, commanding the silence ordinarily reserved for mountain peaks, great fires, and the sea.”

Peter Matthiessen.



Green Aisles

“In the forest far from the sounds of men, one comes upon the bunds of tanks now utterly forgotten, where the banks have given way, and the beds become like natural glades for the deer to graze in. Pigs find mud holes and wallow there, and wild buffaloes spend the

heat of the day sunk in their pools with only their noses showing. In some parts, the old fields have become park-lands whose open glades and clumps of trees are beloved of all the greater beasts and of peafowl.”

John Still.



Chewing the cud

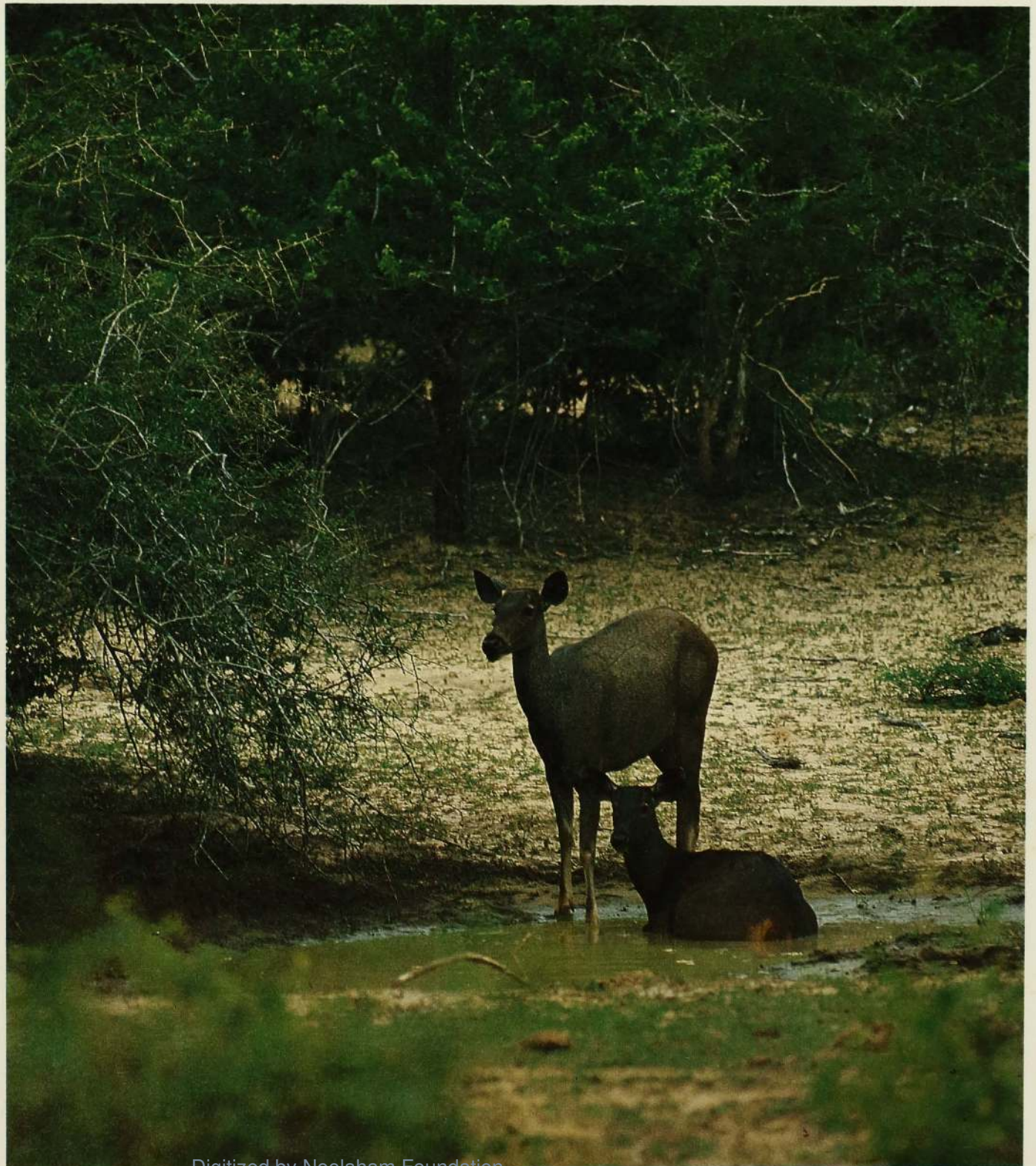
Atop its genial host now leisurely chewing the cud, a Cattle Egret picks up flies and ticks. When the wild buffalo decides to commence grazing, the egret will clamber down and follow briskly in its wake and feed on the grasshoppers and other insects disturbed by the moving beast.

Children of the forest

It was not possible to say whether these young sambur hinds were sisters or just friends. Whatever their relationship might have been, they emerged from the jungle together. We watched them with concern, for here were two children of the forest, treading the game paths, unescorted. The bigger of the two was the more alert and led the way stopping now and then to sniff the air with nostrils twitching and trumpet ears moving back and forth, monitoring every vibration. Each time the leading hind looked at our halted vehicle, she stamped her fore-foot on the ground in mock challenge.

From the time they first broke cover it took them several long minutes to get as far as the little muddy

pool that held the precious water they sought so desperately. A dry spell in Ruhuna had resulted in most of the water-holes dwindling down to a string of small pools. The younger companion quenched her thirst first and sat in the water to cool herself. Then the other stooped to drink, but before she could even taste the water she straightened up abruptly in vague distrust at some sound or scent. In a trice she bounded off in panic into the safety of the jungle, closely followed by her terrified little companion. Almost simultaneously there was a movement at the fringe of the jungle and it was only then that we noticed a fullgrown sambur hind turning around to flee. So the fawns were not alone.



Welikanda Leopard

“This snow-white sand of quartz, is curious only in the possibility of its supporting vegetation. Such is the soil in which cinnamon delights.” So said Sir Samuel Baker when he visited the Cinnamon Gardens in Colombo.

This type of sand is found in several regions in Wilpattu National Park. Its resemblance to snow is very striking specially when reproduced in colour photographs. Leopards seem to have a predilection for this sand and are often seen lying-up on this ‘snow’, specially in the mornings and late evenings.

Hilla and Dieter Zingel, my guests at Wilpattu, were keen to meet-up with a leopard, When our quest in

the most likely places had come to nought, we decided to try Welikanda. Welikanda literally means ‘hill of sand’ and the tracks of leopard and sambur invariably pattern the entire area. This perilous terrain can only be negotiated using a four-wheel drive vehicle.

When we ultimately confronted our quarry, he was fast asleep but soon awoke to measure-up the intruders who had dared to come in so close. What intrigued us about this leopard was the presence of an injury (bruise) behind the right eye. Could he have sustained it in a fight with one of his own kind or was it inflicted by a more formidable beast with whom the leopard took the odd chance ?







Muddy Interlude

It was a typical confrontation on Buttuwa Plains. Ignoring several motor vehicles that passed along the road beside them, these elephants spent the better part of the morning grazing on the dry plain. Towards mid-day, they moved into this shallow, reedy swamp to cool-off – squirting muddy water on their bodies. After this muddy interlude they commenced feeding on the tall grasses that flourished in this wet patch.

A vehicle packed with fidgety people, halted on the road just opposite, was not going to deter these dignified beasts. They were in no mood to forsake their well-laid table for fear of man.

KOH
TPT

Sabre-Rattling

“Bucks begin to rub their antlers against trunks and shrubs when the velvet begins to dry, and they continue to do so until the antlers are shed. Sometimes this rubbing is vigorous, the antlers clanking noisily, but at other times the buck does it gently by wiping his face, forehead, antlers and neck over the bark.”

George Schaller.

The stag we saw beside the Thalgasmalkada road in Yala was indulging in this peculiar exercise but he was certainly not setting about it in a leisurely manner. The scoured bark of the small branches clearly shows the severity with which they were being lashed by those tough antlers.

Even as we drove off, this stag was still at it – trying to make pulp out of those tender saplings.



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Birth of a Saurian

Mr. Shirley Perera, Assistant Director of Wildlife Conservation, had camped at Pahala Potana while on circuit in Block 2 of the Ruhuna National Park. Close to the campsite and a few metres from the lagoon, he had noticed a mound of heaped-up earth that looked very suspicious. When he approached this mound he had heard some awkward sounds from within it. So he kicked the top-soil off and what he found inside was a cache of crocodile eggs, some of which were already hatching out.

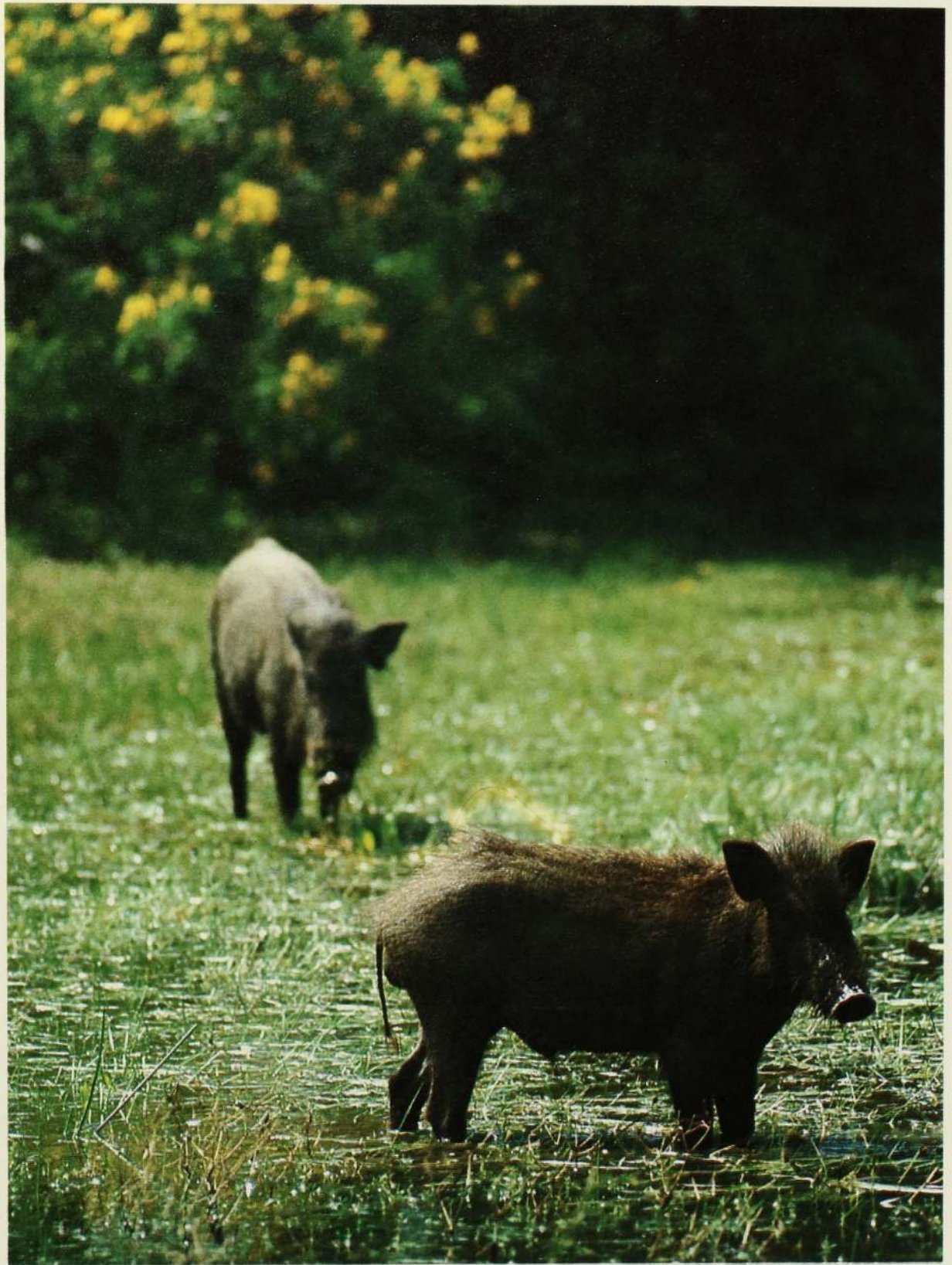
I met Shirley on his way back, immediately after he had forded the Menik Ganga. He made the mistake of disclosing the details of his discovery to me, and paid the penalty of having to do a return trip to Potana.

We counted fifty-six eggs in all, and out of each one of these eggs there emerged precisely eleven inches of hissing, snapping, miniature crocodile. The new-born babies clamped their jaws firmly on anything within reach including the limbs and tails of their own brothers and sisters. Within twenty four hours all the baby crocodiles had gathered together in a shallow pool that was really a part of the Potana lagoon itself.

Baby crocodiles cannot dig away the earth that lies above them; therefore they begin calling while still inside their shells. The mother who has been listening for this, digs away the earth for them.



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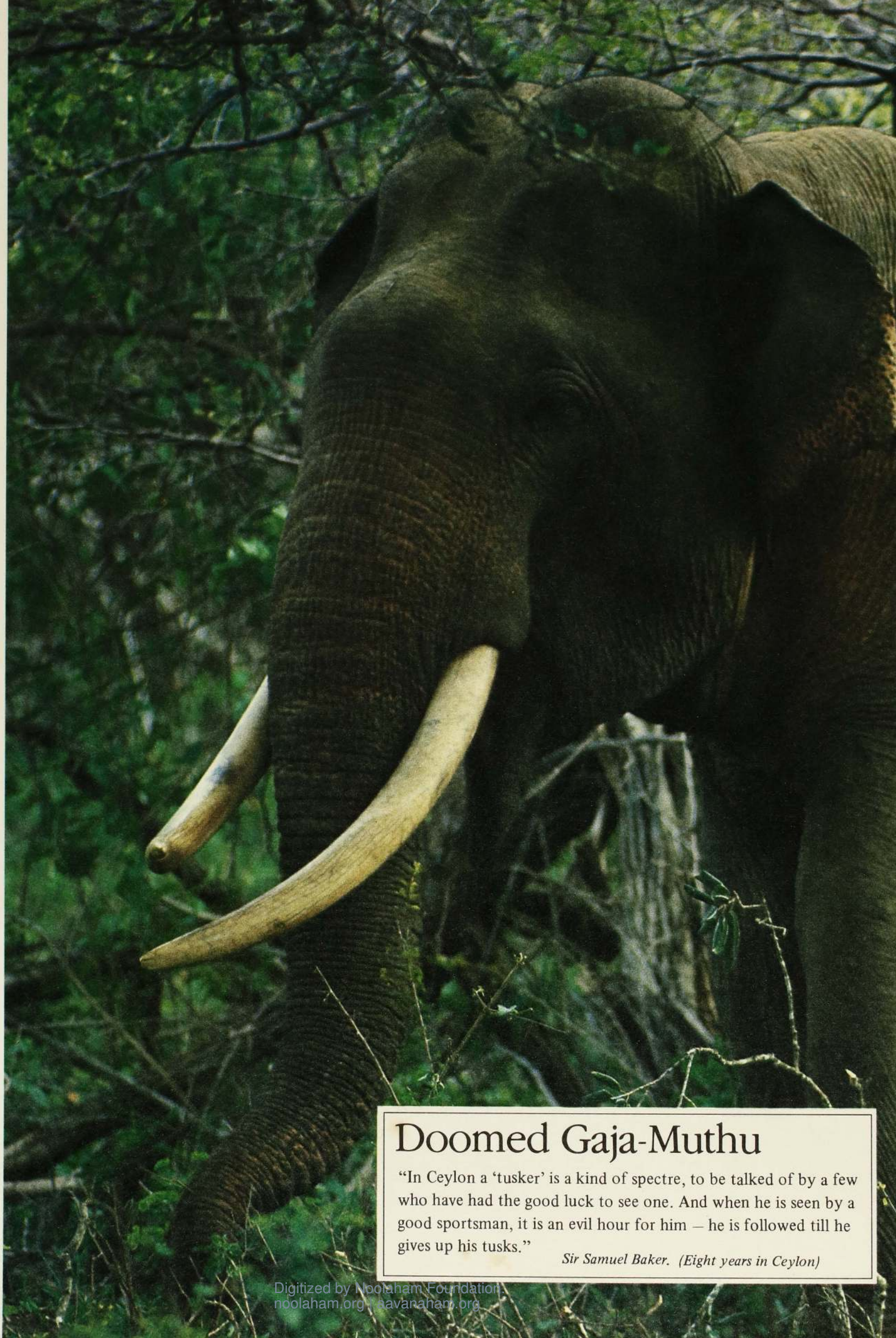
Nature's efficient plough

In the wake of the North-East Monsoon, the open plains and forest glades of the low-country dry-zone become inundated. The resulting swamps are an unfailing attraction for wild pigs, and many a sounder can be seen at this time of the year, grunting and rummaging in the mud, looking for larvae and succulent roots and tubers. While rooting about, the pigs furrow the earth and plough up the mud turning the soil over most effectively.

Sounders are usually composed of sows and young of all ages including young boars. The new-born young are longitudinally

striped, these markings disappearing with age. When sounders move about they keep to the game-tracks but scatter and rely on speed to avoid danger. Their quick trotting gait with rapidly-moving feet gives the impression that their feet are carrying no weight at all.

Next to man, their chief enemy in the jungle is the leopard which takes a heavy toll of their numbers.



Doomed Gaja-Muthu

“In Ceylon a ‘tusker’ is a kind of spectre, to be talked of by a few who have had the good luck to see one. And when he is seen by a good sportsman, it is an evil hour for him — he is followed till he gives up his tusks.”

Sir Samuel Baker. (Eight years in Ceylon)

Plumes on Parade

There are only four known species of flamingo in the world. Two are confined to South America while the other two are distributed throughout the land areas where warm weather prevails. Our birds are the Common Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus roseus*) and they are winter visitors probably coming over from the Rann of Kutch in North West India.



In spite of their long legs, flamingos prefer shallow water of just a few inches in depth. Their favourite haunts, while in this country, are the shallow coastal lagoons and salt-flats in which they are invariably seen far out from land. In such havens they are safe and secure and can still enjoy good feeding.

A group of around three hundred flamingos had decided to take a rest, right beside the water's edge at Embilikala Kalapuwa. It was high noon when I drove up to them and spent the next couple of hours enjoying the rare privilege of studying these fascinating birds at close range.



Gays among the giants?



In the Ruhuna National Park one often comes across male elephants grappling with each other. At first sight these giants appear to be merely testing out their strength by pushing each other around. After a while however, the 'duel' turns into something like a demonstrative affection for each other and nudges are soon replaced by caresses.

In the course of this love-play, the sensitive trunk of each elephant is used with the dexterity of a human hand. Judging by the physical state of the participants there is undoubtedly a sexual element involved. The 'pair' may sometimes continue to indulge in this erotic behaviour for the better part of one whole day and will move only short distances within a rather restricted area. The couple I watched ended up in a shallow jungle pool.





A Throne on reeds and rushes

“From haunts of sylvan Wilpattu
To villus that make inland sea,
There springs antlered monarch in rhythm
With grace of a wild melody;
Where reeds and rushes are rustling
There’s a throne for the king of the free.

When heat of noontide is blazing,
Majestic in silence alone,
With soothing winds him gently fanning
The sambur king sits on his throne;
O gaze on the vast panorama
And dream of the kingdoms unknown!”

B. Ivor Palipane



Cervine Splendour

“With head erect, antlers thrown back, his white throat exposed, his tail raised, his whole body gathered together prepared to bound away into the deep forest in the twinkling of an eye, he stands — a splendid specimen of the cervine tribe. We look and admire. Then a hind gives an imperceptible signal, and the next moment the whole herd has dashed through the jungle alleys, vanishing from sight — a dappled hide now and again gleaming in the

sunlight as its owner scampers away to more distant haunts.”

“Surely the gift of being able to appreciate to the full the beauty of such a scene, and the happy memories it may recall many a long day afterwards, are worth far, far more than the possession of all the record deer horns in existence.”

F. W. Champion.



Pride

“No more gorgeous creature exists on earth than the peacock.”

Western writers have been so fascinated by this beautiful bird that they say, “the adornments of the peacock rival the glittering splendour and jewel-like quality of oriental treasure troves.”

So far, the peacock has not been listed among the endangered species, thanks to the religious zeal with which it has been protected since ancient times. May it remain this way forever.



An entrancing tableau

This pair of lesser egrets built their nest together, took turns at brooding the eggs and shared the task of feeding their offspring.

Their devotion to each other was evident whenever the pair happened to alight on the nest together. At times, they passed a leafy twig – a token of love – from beak to beak. At other times, with outstretched wings and trembling wing-tips, the two pirouetted in concert – their poised elegance and harmony of movement, reminiscent of a sophisticated Tchaikovsky ballet.

Walge-Kotta



A rather conspicuous feature among the lone bull-elephants that roam the plains of the Ruhuna National Park is, that most of them have short tails sans the terminal fringe of stiff bristles. Such an animal is fondly referred to as a 'walgekotta' (short-tailed individual).

The popular belief is that these caudal bristles are lost when elephants grapple with each other, sometimes in fun but sometimes more seriously. It could also be that a few bristles come off each time they get entangled in thorny twigs when the elephant swishes its tail in the brush. A shortened tail however, would suggest a mishap of a more violent nature.





Poised in perfect grace

“The message was plain and urgent, and it was signalled forward mile by mile as silent-footed fear stole through the wood. Far away beyond the bend of the stream, I heard the blurt of a sambur’s challenge. Then, still far away, though nearer than the sambur, I heard the shrill belling of the spotted deer as their herd turned all eyes and ears and noses to point to the approaching danger; but still the monkeys discussed it without emotion. Nearer came the cause of warning, itself silent amid noise. A little muntjac barked hoarsely and incessantly, his voice more like a dog’s than the bell of a deer; and soon another took up the scent and joined in; and the squirrels helping in the chain of signals, whistled shrilly from their trees just round the bend; and from that we knew, the monkeys and I, that the danger was



not man. They grew more alive to the danger's imminence. Outlying members moved inwards towards the company of the tribe, until all had gathered on the dome of one old tree, where they sat in groups and listened, and looked down the bed of the stream. Whether it was scent that gave first evidence to confirm their fear, or sound or sight, I cannot tell; but all at once they seemed to know that the enemy was in their presence, and uplifted their voices in loud scandal, just as their descendants, our ancestors might have shouted insults at the sabre-toothed tiger.

Then I, too, saw fear embodied, as a leopard walked slowly and deliberately up the bed of the stream. He was so dignified and calm that I almost blushed for my shameful relatives as he scorned their plebeian clamour with aristocratic contempt. As he came near I could see the easy power of the muscles moving inside his sleek skin as their noiseless pistons bore him onward poised in perfect grace."

John Still (Jungle Tide) 1930

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Crafty Carnivore

“In the jungles the jackal obtains a certain amount of its food (jungle fowl, hares and other small game) by lying in ambush, or it will do a careful stalk through the undergrowth and spring out upon its victim.”

“The jackal is partial to carrion and therefore anything dead attracts it and nothing in that line comes amiss to it. It does not matter what the creature was during its lifetime. That it be dead (or very nearly so) and therefore defenceless, is all the jackal asks, for he is blessed with more cunning than courage. A carcass is soon discovered and equally soon ceases to pollute the neighbourhood, for all the jackals in the vicinity will immediately collect and devour every scrap of flesh. Therein they do a service to man in an island that has no vultures or other habitual scavengers.”

W.W.A. Phillips



The Top Shelf

In Sri Lanka where giraffes do not exist, the elephant holds exclusive rights to the tender, succulent leaves that sprout on the lofty branches of certain trees. Its height combined with the length of its trunk gives the elephant a tremendous 'reach'. Monkeys are the only other animals that have access to these roof gardens.

The elephant is a wasteful feeder and brings down far more branches than he really needs. The sambur and the spotted deer take advantage of this and often follow in the wake of foraging elephants.

Elephants spend most of their time in the dense jungles surrounded by vegetation, most of which is potential food. One would naturally expect the elephant to be primarily a browser. It is rather difficult to subscribe to the view that the Sri Lanka elephant prefers to graze rather than browse.





Agile Acrobat

Adept at clearing considerable gaps between branches, the common giant squirrel can speed along the tree-canopy in top gear. It feeds on leaves, shoots and nuts but grubs, insects and birds eggs are often on the menu.

When taken by surprise this squirrel can perform the vanishing trick by pressing down its entire body, flat against the top of a branch. Its usual method of escape however, is to thread its way rapidly along the upper branches.

The giant squirrel seen here was one of a pair that were living in the vicinity of the Mana Wila bungalow in Wilpattu. The pair had built several lofty nests in the vicinity. Local villagers believe that the 'Dandulena' always builds exactly seven nests. It is true that several nests are built but the young are born only in one. The others are merely used as bedrooms.

Speak no evil





For you my love

The courtship ritual of the little tern is most fascinating. At the beginning of the mating season, the male bird comes flying in to the breeding grounds carrying a small, silvery fish. Dangling the fish tantalizingly in its bill, the bird struts around the female with its head held high and turned to a side, in a most comical fashion. This display is invariably accompanied by much chattering from both participants. If she accepts the 'gift' it simply means that she is willing and able. Mating soon follows and the female will subsequently lay her two or three eggs in a shallow scrape on the sand.

Both sexes incubate and feed the young. While one bird is incubating, the other will fly in at irregular intervals and feed its mate with a fish, re-enacting the entire courtship ritual sans the mating.



Lofty Hideout

“You may see neither hide nor hair of him, but his personality pervades the jungle; no living beast other than the elephant forgets his potential presence, for the price of unwariness is death.”

Adaptation From Aldo Leopold.



Jackals

“In the glades where the grass is dying,
Grey in the twilight:
Silver in the moonlight:
I can hear the jackals crying.
Full misery in their haunting tone,
As though by them in all the world alone
Were borne the burthen of the dying spring,
Almost too sad to sing;
A dreary, melancholy, long-drawn moan,

Growing in volume while it swells,
In wild cacophony of yells,
Burst from a hundred hells,
Calling, howling, clamouring again,
Claiming delivery, proclaiming pain,
To final savage ecstasy of hate.
Then it breaks short and stops:
And silence comes amain.”

John Still (Poems in Captivity)



Fleet-footed Bunny

A hare on the run appears really fast mainly because, its zigzagging running pattern and elusiveness deceive the observer. Most predators can outrun a hare in open country but in rugged terrain it can speed along dodging obstacles and sometimes covering over ten feet at one bound.

Though it often falls prey to jackals, leopards, wild cats, eagles and big owls, its protective coloration, elusiveness and its procreative powers, ensure its survival.

Squealing Kindergarten

Wild pigs are prolific breeders no doubt, but the four and twenty piglets in this sounder were the offspring of three different sows. The piglets differ from the sows in having striped coats – possibly a ruse to provide concealment in the brush. Or could it be that the progenitors of wild pigs were striped? Scientific opinion favours the former theory.



In the mire

The habit of wallowing is confined to only three animals in our country. We often associate the buffalo and the wild boar with a mire but it is difficult to imagine the lordly sambur indulging in this rather ungainly habit. Strangely, wallowing is confined to stags. Hinds have not been seen in wallows.

The mud-plaster they acquire is in all probability meant to ease the irritation resulting from the bites of ticks and other insects. But, why then doesn't the hind resort to this same treatment ?



Eyes and ears

“Leopards are leisurely animals, fond of taking thought, and more prone to hark to the sounds the wind brings them, and to wonder. When a leopard turns his head towards some voice of the woods, it is obvious he considers its message, and he is aware of lives other than his own. It is true his philosophy is strict utilitarianism, but so often is ours, and his is at least virile. Perhaps man may be the dull animal he is at worst because he did not pass into the hunting stage until his bodily form and the chief folds in his brain were already fixed.”

John Still (Jungle Tide) 1930





Sun-worship

“With snorkel nostrils and periscope eyes, huge jaws and deadly tail, the crocodile is one of the few animals which deliberately attack human beings.”

Crocodiles habitually come out on land to sun themselves and whenever they do so, keep their jaws wide open. When their traps are shut, their teeth can still be seen, giving these creatures a hideous grin. As opposed to this, the alligator’s teeth remain invisible with jaws closed.

The crocodile’s jaws are impressive no doubt, but its teeth are not made for chewing and serve only as clamps. So, whatever it eats,



it has to swallow whole. Small animals are taken whole; but a larger victim is tugged away and allowed to putrefy and become soft enough to be torn apart, in preparation for its gargantuan feast.

The crocodile's classic mode of attack is to remain submerged and silently approach its victim and make a swift lunge to seize it in vice-like jaws. A large crocodile can get close enough to an animal at the water's edge and yank it into the water with one swipe of its powerful tail.



Aristocrat

The rank-order among spotted deer is based on the visual assessment of an opponent's physical attributes, particularly the length of the antlers. George Schaller also states that the antlers on a buck are status symbols. So there could be no doubt that this stag is way up on the hierarchical ladder.

Even to the human observer, the poise and dignity of this stag leaves nothing to be desired.

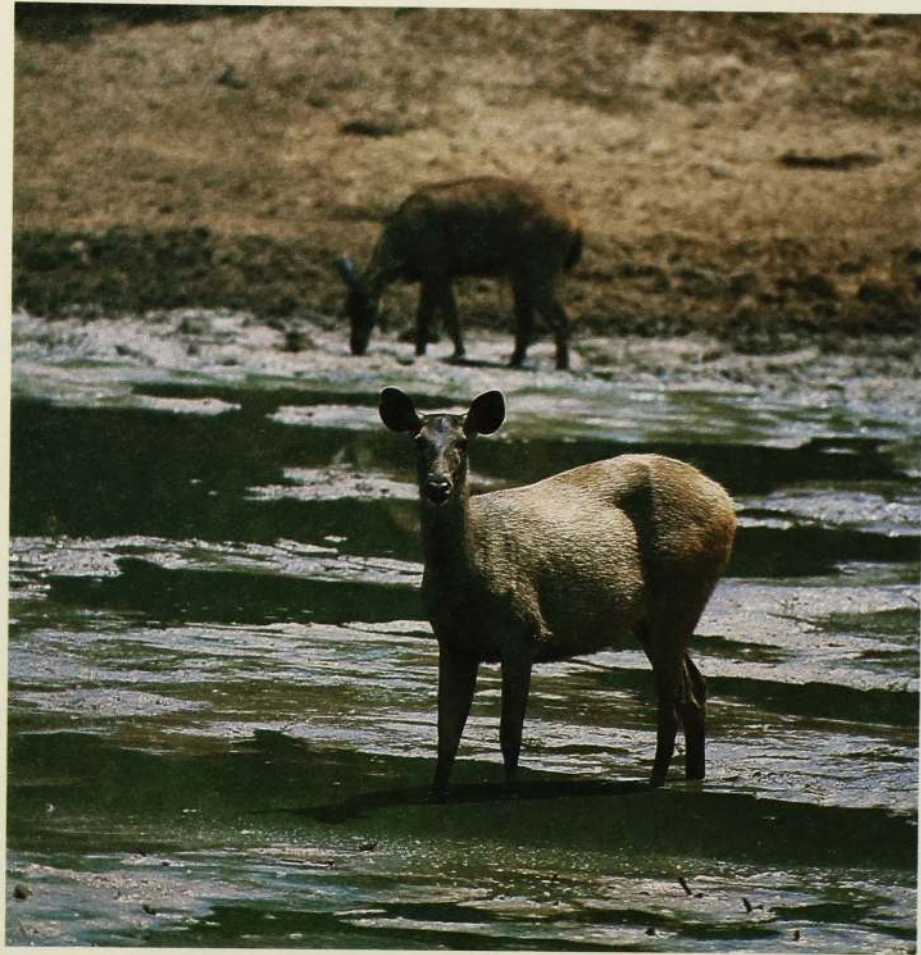


High Noon

Childers Jayawardena, Assistant Director of Wildlife Conservation was on an inspection tour of the water holes in the Ruhuna National Park. Plans were afoot to repair and restore some of them. He was kind enough to pick me up from Buttuwa bungalow and take me along.

Having spent the better part of the morning visiting dilapidated water holes, we reached this nameless visu around

mid-day. We had arrived at an auspicious time — a small herd of elephants had just finished their bath and were clambering out of the water. We missed watching them frolicking in the water but their performance after coming ashore was quite fascinating. I was so engrossed watching the circus that I had to be reminded by Childers to use my



Muhudu-weli Pokuna in July

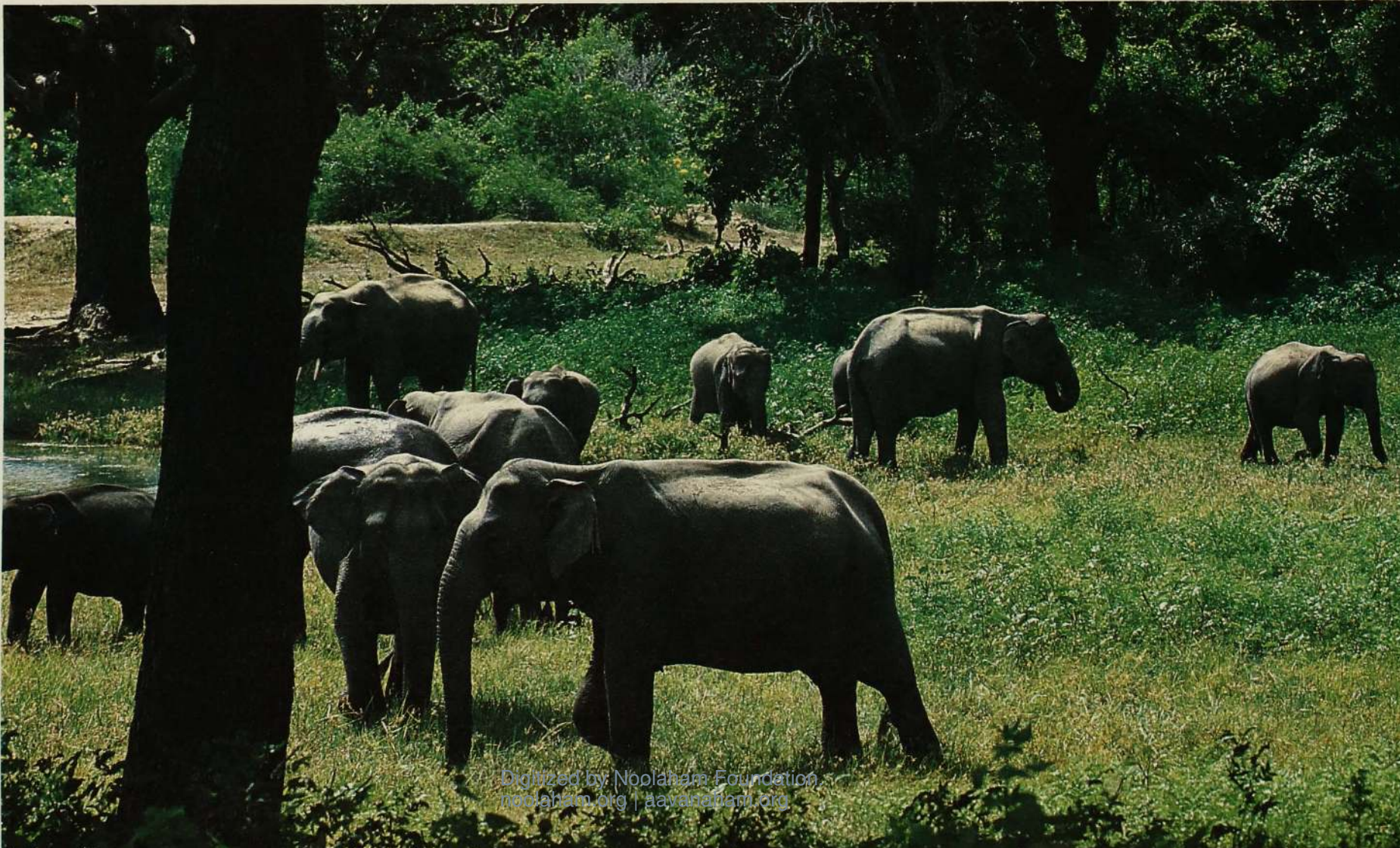
“I have found it more interesting to watch deer come to water than the forceful beasts, particularly the tall and wary sambur who do not go in herds like spotted deer, and are more individual in consequence. Sometimes they come alone, but more often, I think, in families. Some stags will stay close to a pool for hours before daring to drink, trying this side and that. Sometimes a stag is silent, barely betrayed to the most instructed ear by an occasional sliding pebble, or the rasp of hoof on rock, or the brush of a leaf along his side. At others he will bell with bugle challenge, and stamp his forefoot so as to produce a whirring vibratory sound as though the earth itself trembled, and exactly how this is caused I have never fathomed. At last, with trumpet ears ever turning, and with many pauses, he will come slowly down, drink deep, and go in silence; or he may take heart to run in hastily, and then, before more than tasting the water, gallop off in panic, and with a crash of the undergrowth dissolve once more into the silent, watchful, listening, fearing forest.”

John Still (Jungle Tide) 1930



Deberagas Wala

My guest on this excursion was Mr. A. F. King, Assistant Manager of the Standard Chartered Bank. He and I escorted a party to the Palatupane Office and were returning to Buttawa via Uraniya. It was almost mid-day when we halted our car beside Deberagas Wala, having spotted a herd of elephants down below, close to the water's edge. Mr. King and I watched fascinated while this herd continued to forage and gradually moved up closer to us. Game Guard Hendrick assured us that there would be no danger as long as we were courageous enough to stay put. Within the space of half an hour, the elephants were all around us. They dwarfed the small Renault in which we were. Two groups were on the road, one in front and one behind, some were in the jungle to our left and the rest were to our right. A young tusker grazing on our right was so close that the sand and dust he was kicking up, drifted into our vehicle.





we were just beginning to enjoy the thrill of being amidst this peaceful herd when we heard a vehicle approaching in the distance. We realised that a quick get-away was imperative lest the elephants should panic at the approach of another vehicle. Hendrick thought that we should move forward ignoring the two beasts in front but warned us that a particular cow-elephant grazing farther to our right, might make a mock-charge. The engine purred and as I released the clutch the car lunged forward; the two elephants in front moved aside to give us right of way and almost simultaneously from the right the cow-elephant charged trumpeting loudly. Of course we were well ahead of her by then and when we looked back she had stopped in her tracks – a moment to remember !

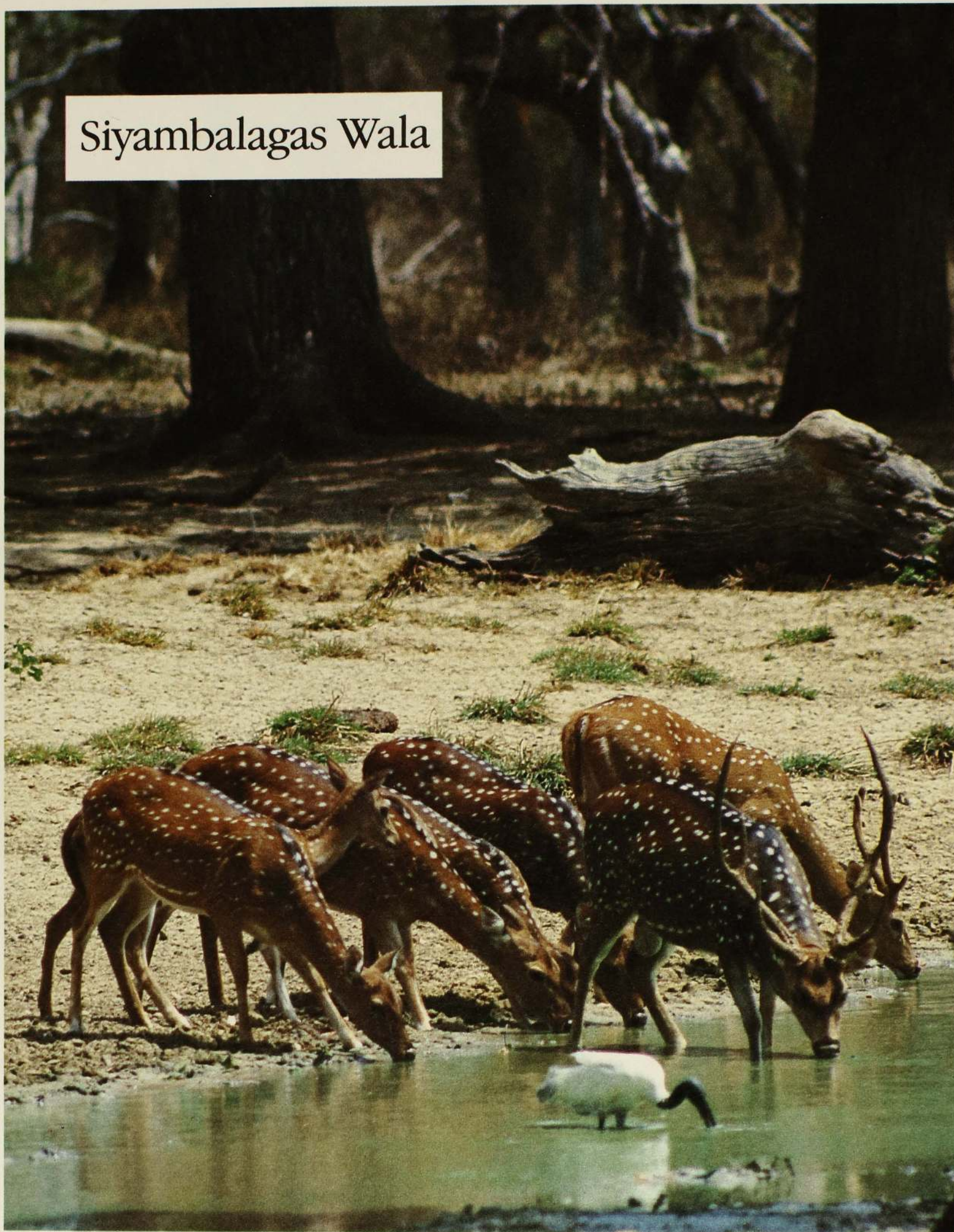


Hitch-Hiking Herons

One should not run away with the idea that these herons are going places on the backs of the wild buffaloes that are spending the heat of the day sunk in their pools. These birds usually feed in comparatively shallow waters at depths that do not exceed the height of their long legs.

The resourceful birds that you see here, have discovered a way of extending their feeding range to include deeper waters. Perched atop the wild buffalo's back, the herons lean over the 'gunwale' and spear the fish and frogs that are disturbed by the wading or swimming buffaloes.

Siyambalagas Wala



“When the scorching wind rushes through the woods for months on end, and the papery leaves rustle harshly on wiry twigs; when every footfall in the forest is betrayed by the crunching of its parched carpet; when soil in hollows that once were ponds grows brick hard, and deep

cracks checker the baked mud where footprints of the last beasts to seek water there remain cast as though in cement until dissolved by the October rains, seemingly unimportant clefts among the rocks assume strategic value, and direct the movements of wild animals.”

Perils of approach

Buttuwa Wewa is one of the larger jungle tanks in Ruhuna and retains a fair amount of water during the drought. It is a favourite watering-place for most animals and is the regular haunt of the bigger wading birds. The water teems with crocodiles, and they are more in evidence when the level has dropped.

Animals that come here to drink and the birds that scour the water's edge for fish and frogs must tread cautiously because this pre-eminent predator rules supreme in the murky water. John Still dwelt eloquently on this danger when he said, "To the common perils of approach this horror was added, and though I suppose their senses would warn them of his lurking presence, some more daring or foolish among animals half-crazed with thirst had taken the risk, and paid the price of death, the only price the jungle will receive as full payment for error."



Across the Menik Ganga

For generations the animals of Ruhuna, specially the elephants, have been migrating to and fro across the Menik Ganga. This takes place mostly during the drought months when there is only a trickle of water in the river. The game tracks that the animals regularly follow cut into the banks and give access to the forest as lanes that are tributary to a highway.

Knowledge of such places where these lanes cut into the river can come in helpful when gathering information about the movements of animals in general and elephants in particular.





Rainbows on the river

Four varieties of brilliantly-attired kingfishers patrol the borders of our forest-clad rivers, and in the mangrove-lined estuaries downstream, two more species may occur.

The rattling laughter of the bigger and more conspicuous kingfishers betrays their whereabouts but the smaller species may escape notice until they are seen darting across the sunlit patches, a foot or two above the water, uttering musical, piping notes. Plunging like arrows from their perches, these glittering gems, invariably emerge from the splash with a wriggling, silvery fish firmly clasped in their beaks.



The two small species comprise the Common Kingfisher and the rare Three-toed Kingfisher. The latter bird is smaller than a sparrow and frequents the dim recesses of jungle-girt streams. For sheer brilliance of colour there is no bird in Sri Lanka to rival this flying rainbow.

“It was the rainbow gave thee birth,
And left thee all her lovely hues;
And, as her mother’s name was Tears,
So runs it in thy blood to choose
For haunts the lonely pools, and keep
In company with trees that weep.”

Ruhuna in August

Ruhuna National Park has a surfeit of wild buffaloes and they constitute a major problem for wildlife management in the area. Overgrazing and pollution of watering places are two of the major hazards. The Department has captured buffaloes on several occasions and sold them for domestication but it is doubtful whether this has really made an impact on the large herds.

During the drought, dozens of buffaloes wallow in the precious little water that remains in the jungle pools and water holes. The water in these is soon transformed into a greenish soup of algal muck – the algae being carried from one pool to another on the hides of the buffaloes.

Some observers credit the wild buffalo with de-silting muddy pools. When they move out of their wallows they certainly carry away sizeable quantities of silt, plastered on their hides. The silt subsequently dries up on their hides and falls off or gets rubbed off on the trunks of trees.





Kumbuk Wila

A sambar hind is irresistibly drawn by the mid-day tranquility of this sheltered wila in the Wilpattu National Park. In the early mornings, the clear water is fringed with teeming masses of aquatic birds. The surrounding trees too are alive with birds.

The picturesque beauty of this wila makes it a haven for nature lovers.

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Menik Ganga in June

“The river had ceased to run. Here and there pools of water, bitter with the roots of trees, still lay in the deeper shadier reaches; but for the rest it had become a ribbon of sand, and a highway for thirsty beasts. For though there was no water on the surface it lay not far beneath.”

John Still,

June is always a dry month in Ruhuna and very often at this time of the year the Park is in the grip of a severe drought. Most of the animals shift to territories closer to the river so that they can have access to water, however depleted the flow.

Elephants come down regularly to drink in the river around mid-day, but if the flow has dwindled, they would rather dig holes in the dry bed and drink from these.

Drought in the Jungle

And when the grasses in the glades are dead,
The sun invades the forest's secret heart.
Into the deepest shade his arrows dart,
Slaying the leaves as once they slew the grass.

Through the denuded mantle of trees
The heat strikes deep into the forest bed.
Out of pools it drinks the very lees,
Leaving their muddy margin starred with tracks,
A rigid record of the last to drink.

And yet the animals remain alive;
For here and there they find some precious pool
Deep in the rocks, where water sweet and cool
Defies the longest drought and never fails.
These are the final goals of all the trails;
The points of peril, where the creatures strive
To pass the watchful sentinels of death.
For every leopard knows that thirst must drive
The deer to drink, though every panting breath
Carry the warning taint of lurking foe.
So death haunts all the pools on silent pad,
And deer approach them stepping soft and slow,
Receding, waiting while thirst drives them mad,
Then they rush in, and drink, and drink, and drink,
Till sudden terror bids them fly the brink.

John Still (Poems in captivity)



V.I.P. at Rakina Wala

Rakina Wala, a comparatively small jungle villu in Yala, is a favourite haunt of the greater beasts especially the elephants. At the height of the drought, this villu is reduced to a small pool and as its local name suggests, would undoubtedly have been a place where hunters lay in ambush to slaughter thirsty beasts.

When the hot South-West Monsoon winds suck up the water and the level recedes, thousands of fish fighting for their lives in water that has become too shallow, are captured by storks and herons and scooped-up by pelicans. So, Rakina Wala is transformed into a veritable fish-market during the months of the drought.

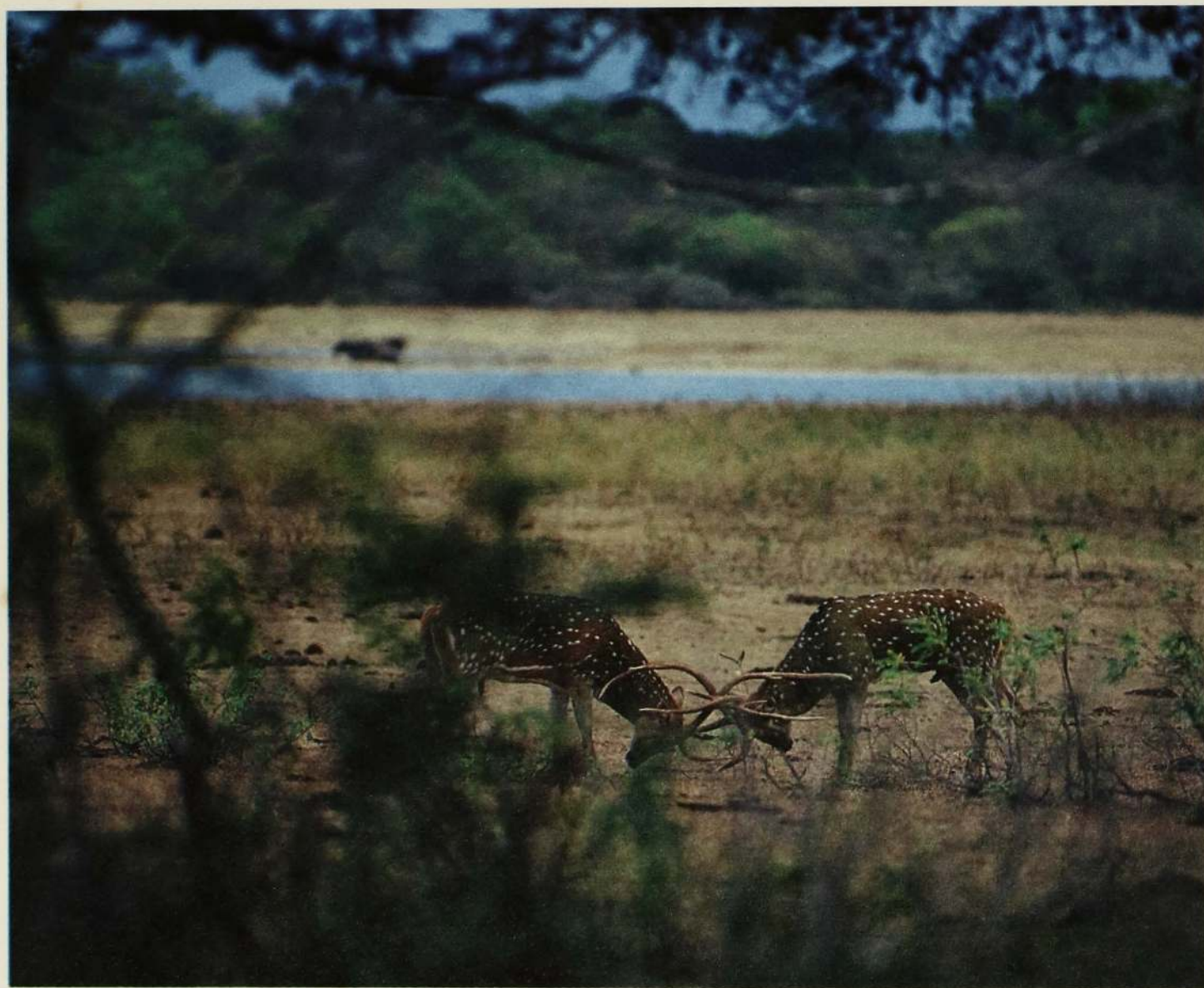
A single, male black-necked stork was a guest of honour at this remote water hole.



Locked in Combat

Mock-bouts between stags are among the more common behaviour-patterns of spotted deer. They commence by locking antlers and striving to push each other backwards. After a few attempts they disengage briefly and go at it all over again. One session of sparring may consist of about half a dozen such brief encounters. Most of these sparring matches don't last more than a couple of minutes and are not of a serious nature.

The encounter that we witnessed one late December afternoon at Gonalabba in the Ruhuna National Park, was however, no sparring match. It was a right royal battle, with each stag trying desperately to vanquish the other. The fight lasted a good five minutes with the grappling pair moving alternately to the left and right as fortunes fluctuated. It ended when one of the stags seized an opportunity to disengage and took to his heels.



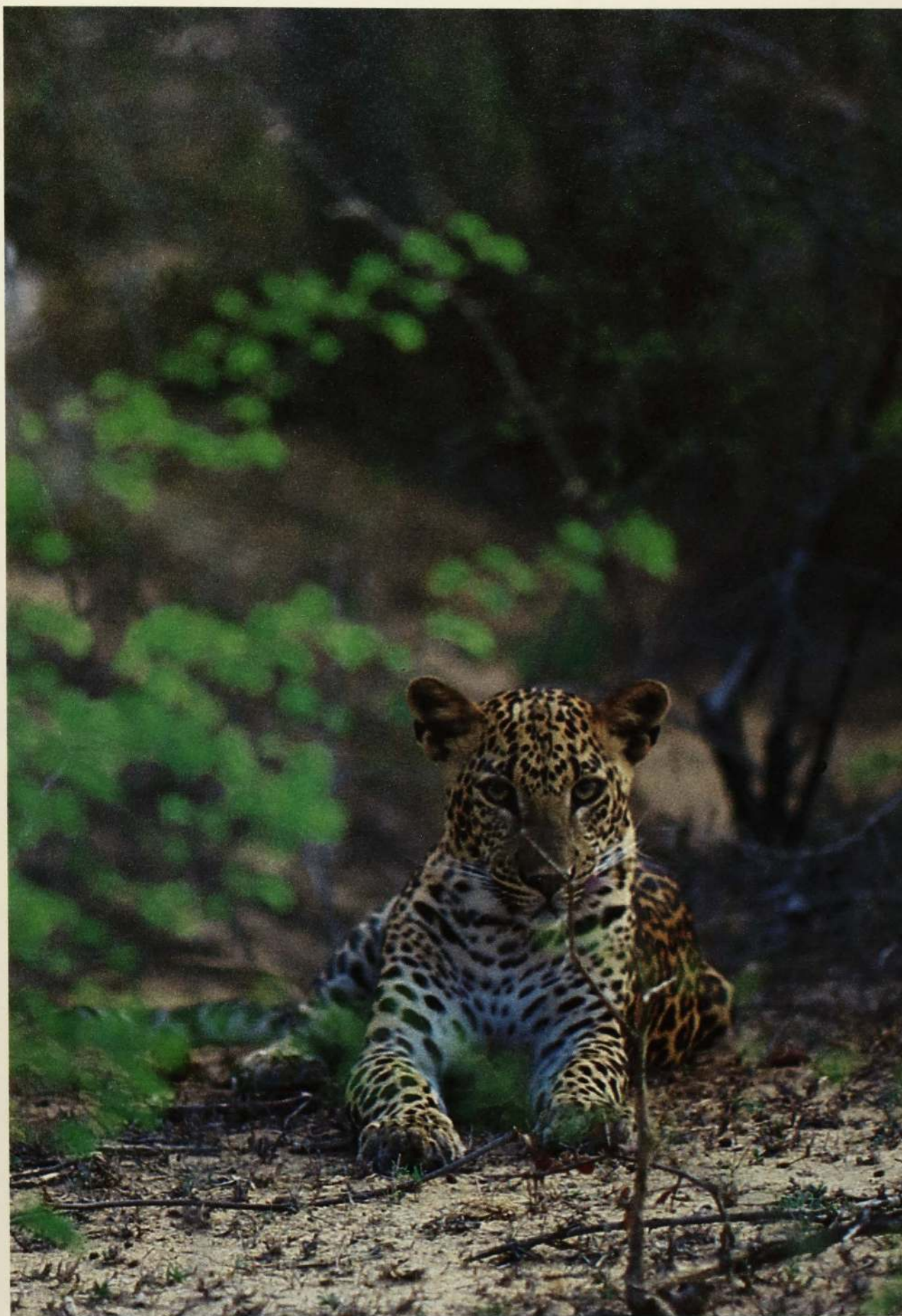


Cradles on the sand

During the drought, the vast expanses around the Lewayas and Kalapuwas laid bare by the receding waters look barren and desolate. However, many surprises await anyone who cares to walk or drive on these grass-covered flats. Birds will explode from almost beneath one's feet and either fly off or run along the sun-baked plain, feigning injury. These birds are the ground-nesting species that invariably lay their eggs in shallow scrapes on the sand. The majority are plovers but there will be stilts, terns, larks and finch-larks as well.

The yellow-wattled lapwing is patiently incubating her four eggs while the pair of Little Terns are tending their hatchlings.

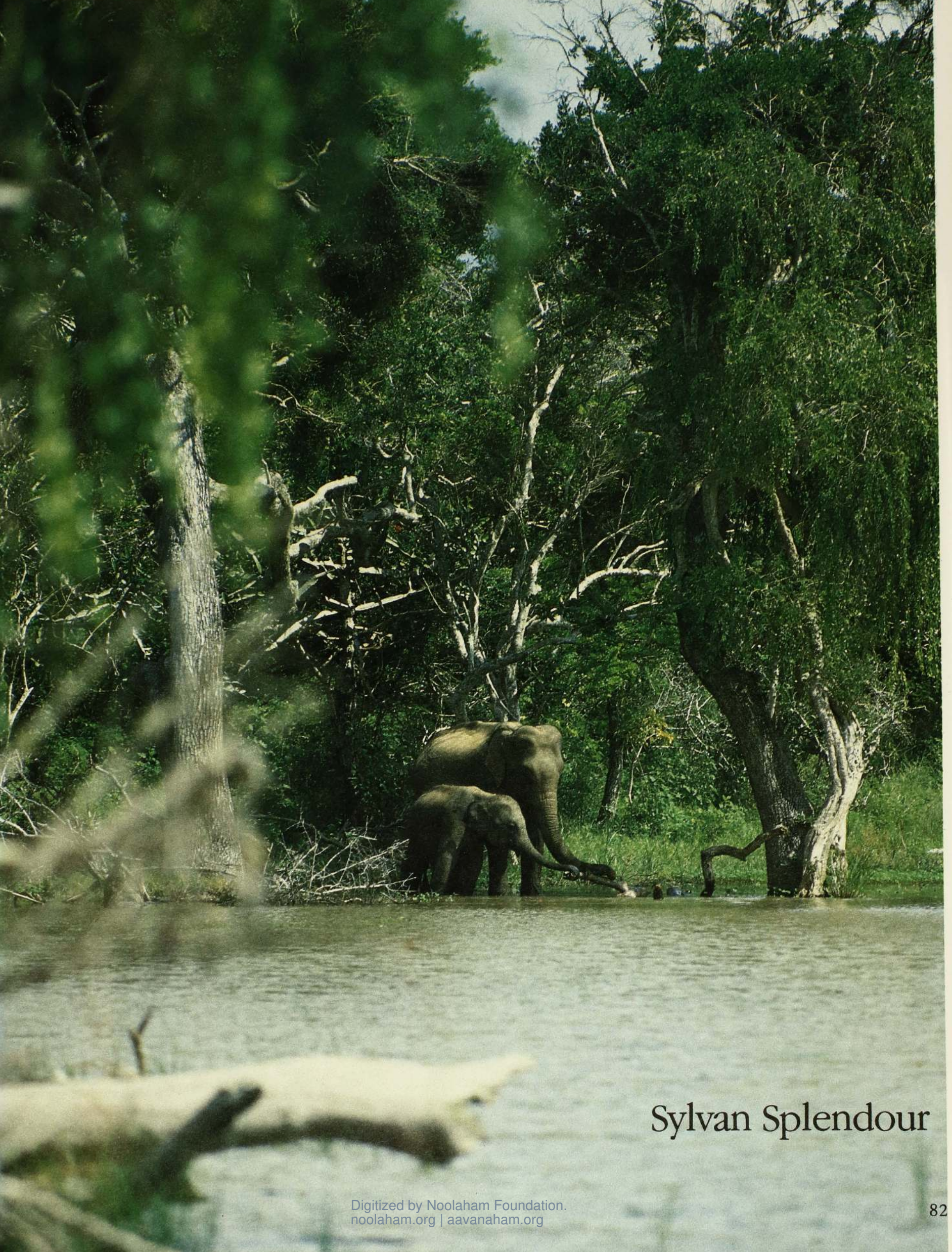




The Leopard Cub

“Far lost in some deep contemplation
In innocent white-spotted charm,
The leopard cub pauses in grandeur
To start with each tingling alarm;
Elastic are his growing sinews
To stiffen and strengthen his arm.

With rage to live maddened with hunger,
Though slayer, to none else do harm;
Be lord of the merciful jungle
And drink of its majesty’s calm;
Who stays fell deed when love is loveliest
Eternal will live in its balm.”



Sylvan Splendour

Chip of the Old Block

Mid-July, when drought conditions prevail, is a time of hot wind and dry days in the Ruhuna National Park. We were seated in our car, halted beside Rakina Wala, witnessing a kaleidoscope of parading animals, when suddenly the jungle reverberated with a shrill trumpeting. I was fairly certain that within a matter of minutes, a herd of elephants would break cover to our right — the direction from which the sound came. My mentor, Game Guard Gamini Dissanayake, thought otherwise. He was of opinion that the elephants were further away than I thought and seemed fairly certain that they were watering at Digan Wala, not more than half a kilometre to our right. He suggested that we should drive down there and check up.

We approached Digan Wala as silently as possible with engine switched off, but the elephants spotted the green Renault and scurried up the bund on the farther side of the Wala. The group comprised a full-grown tusker, a baby tusker and a bull elephant. The trio seemed intent on returning to the water and kept hovering around in the sparse jungle just beyond the bund. We



decided to stay on to dissuade them from doing so. After a while, the restless trio led by the tusker ambled along in the direction of Rakina Wala. As soon as they were out of our sight we turned the car around and hurried back to Rakina Wala. With cameras aligned and pre-focussed, we awaited our guests. We did not have to wait long. Within minutes the tusker broke cover and with muted footfalls strode majestically to the water's edge. Following closely on his heels came the perky youngster with his tusks held high – looking every bit a miniature edition of his sagacious leader.



Veal for Dinner?

Beside me in the halted jeep were my German friends, Dieter and Hilla Zingel from Wiesbaden and Game Guard Bandara. Sprawled out on its belly beside a scanty bush about seven metres in front of us, was a magnificent leopard. To our left, in the direction the leopard was facing, and about hundred metres away, a herd of wild buffaloes were splashing and snorting in the water.

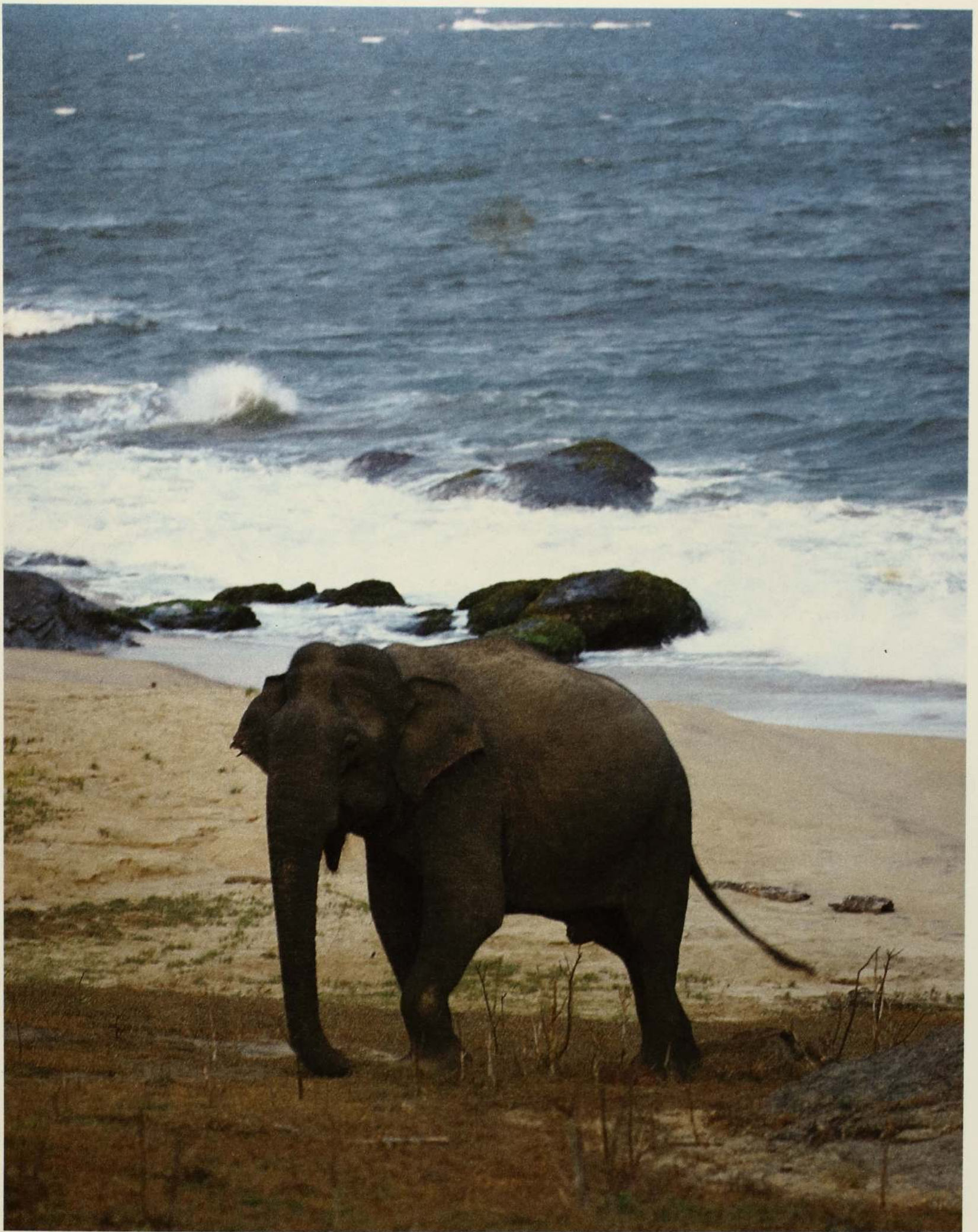
As the evening wore out, the buffaloes began to come ashore one by one. The last to leave the water were two cows followed by their respective calves. The moment our leopard spotted the calves his entire countenance changed. He stood up very, very slowly with his eyes glued on target, and ignoring the noisy camera shutters, streaked ahead in short spurts and began the stalk. The intervening terrain was a wide open plain with no cover at all and right from the start we were certain that his efforts would come to nought. The buffaloes soon spotted the marauder and turned to face him. That was enough – a leopard knows that he must not take any chances with full-grown buffaloes. So he crouched impassively and stayed put till the buffaloes closed ranks, turned around and disappeared into the jungle in single file.

Packed with courage

“The old boar lives entirely alone, except when he rejoins the sounder for mating purposes. He is credited with being the most courageous animal in the jungle and is quite fearless when aroused. In India, he is respected even by the tiger whom he does not hesitate to attack in self defence. There are several instances on record of desperate fights between these two animals and in one or two cases the tiger is known to have been killed. Likewise in Ceylon, there are instances of ‘battles royal’ with leopards, which, as a rule, do not interfere with him. Generally speaking however, the boar is not pugnacious and will not attack unless molested or interfered with. He leads a quiet life, rooting in the jungles and tanks, and spends much time in wallows and mud-holes.”

W. W. A. Phillips





Maritime Elephant

David Shepherd, the famous wildlife artist expressed surprise when he was told that the Sri Lanka elephant frequents the sea shore and forages on the beach. I understand he saw this for himself when he visited the Ruhuna National Park a few years ago. Speculation was rife at the time, that it ever

Mr. Shepherd did paint the Sri Lanka elephant, he would most probably depict the pachyderm by the sea.

Regular visitors to the Ruhuna Park are aware that this is not an uncommon sight, especially in the vicinity of the two bungalows at Buttua.

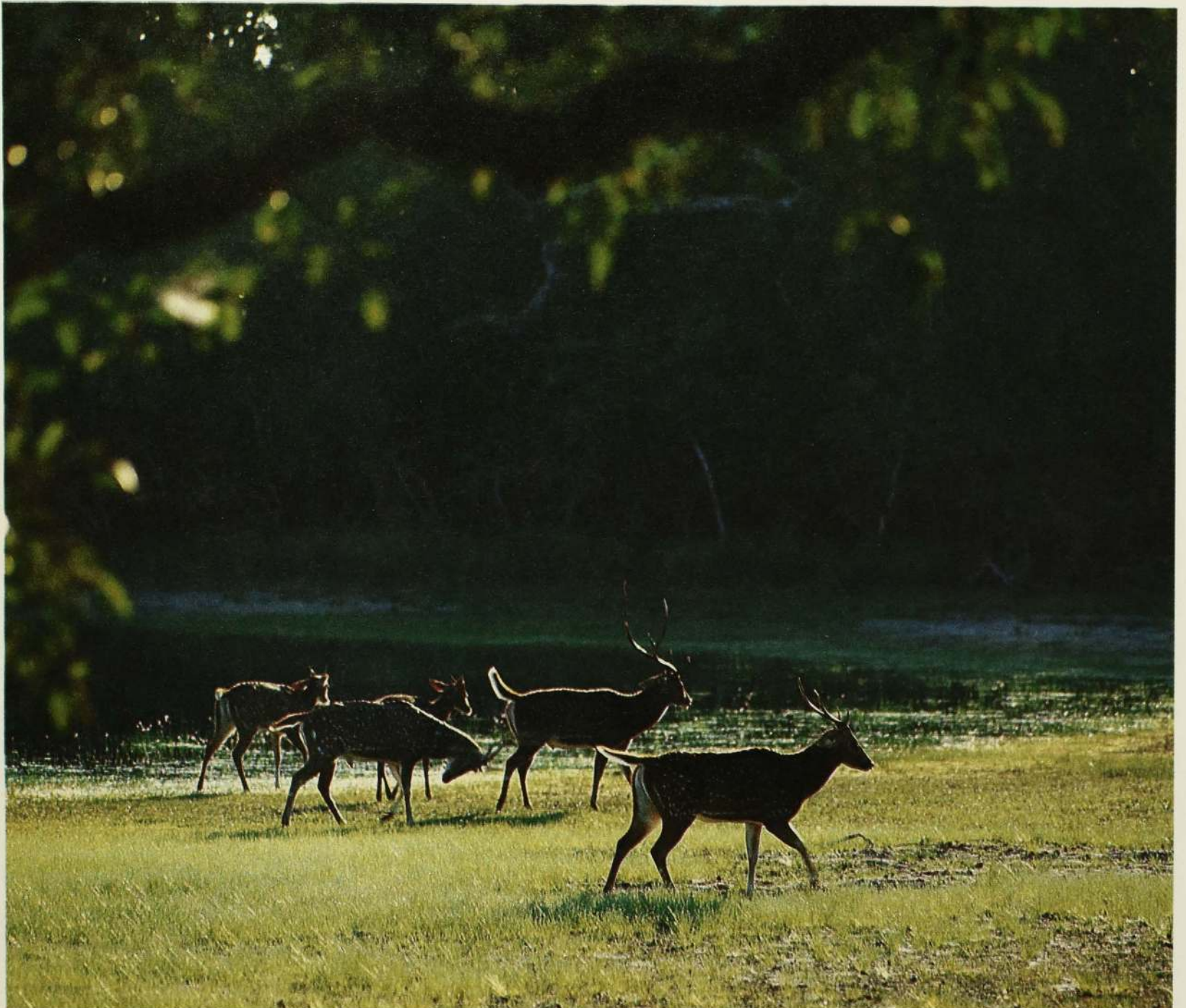
Borupanwila Belle

Borupanwila and Thimbiri Wila, in the Wilpattu National Park are both regular haunts of the biggest of our deer – the stately sambur. These wary animals come down to the water for their mid-day drink, or loiter on the open glades or lie-up in the shade of the large trees fringing these picturesque villus.

When we drove into Borupanwila one evening, we surprised a sambur hind that had been lying-up amidst the tall grass tussocks, by the water's edge. She sprang to her feet.

and probably realising that she was wedged-in between the vehicle and the water, stood perfectly still. Curiosity was written all over her face and her trumpet ears were moving back and forth questioning the delicate vibrations in the air. She advanced a few paces in our direction rather nervously, until the sound of a camera shutter made her turn. She did not panic but walked away from us, carrying herself elegantly with a gait that was reminiscent of a tall lady in high-heeled shoes.





Wilpattu Evening

This 'buck herd' comprising five individuals paraded past Thimbiri Wila in the Wilpattu National Park. One stag is seen performing the 'head-down' display whilst on the move. The 'head-down' display is meant to intimidate an opponent but it is not a challenge to another animal's status, so it does not lead to any form of aggression. (Schaller)

In the shadows

Hares come out of hiding in the cool of evening and seek the open spaces where they commence feeding on grasses and various types of succulent shoots.

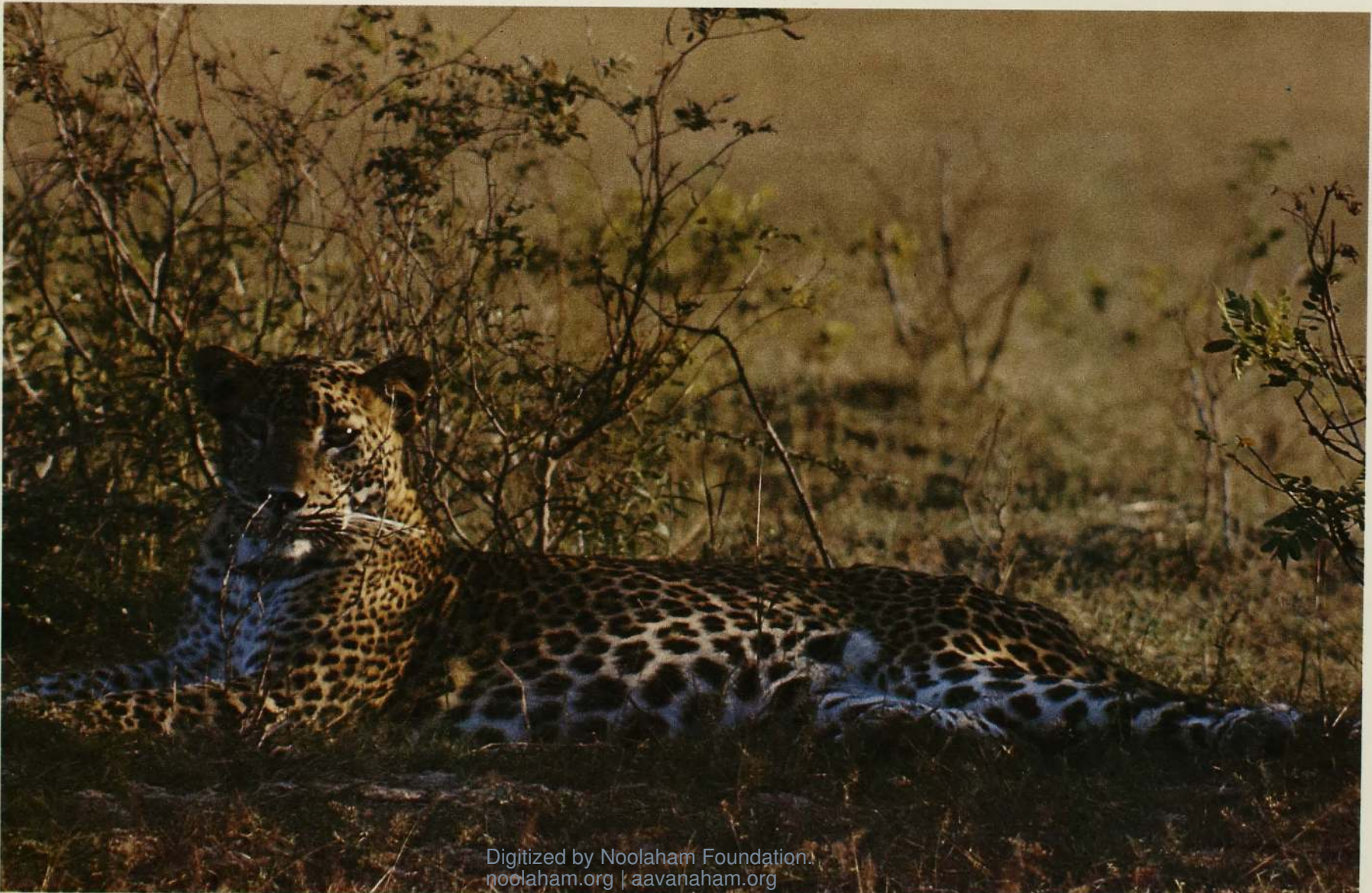
This black-naped hare was spotted just as it was leaving a sheltered patch of undergrowth where it had probably been lying up the whole day.

When skies are overcast, hares can be seen around at any hour of the day.



Deceptively Nonchalant

“The leopard’s fierce efficiency is disguised by its spotted beauty. Watchful and cautious, he naps by day amid rocks and high grass, or lies in the leaf-dappled shadows on the limb of a tree. But if prey comes near, he rouses himself to hunt, gliding from cover to cover as secretly as a snake.”



Supper at Sundown

One August morning, accompanied by Game Guard Bandara, I set off for Kina Uttu in the Wilpattu National Park to try my luck at water-hole photography. At about eleven o'clock we reached Kina Uttu and stumbled on a fairly fresh 'kill' of a leopard beside that desolate villu. The unfortunate victim had been a full-grown sambar hind. When we drove up to the 'kill', we were surprised to see a big male leopard fast asleep, hardly fifteen metres away. Gorged to the point of being almost immobile, he took one look at us, then rolled over and blissfully went back to sleep.

We hastily parked our vehicle behind a nearby thicket and crawled into the 'kotu-atta' that we had prepared the previous evening. We settled down behind our screen of

leafy twigs and waited anxiously for the show to begin. It was only after a numbing four-hour vigil that things began to happen.

A big wild boar emerged unannounced from the jungle, boldly walked up to the 'kill' and started feeding on it. The leopard's nonchalance at this cheeky intrusion was, to say the least, utterly disgraceful and most irksome to the two of us who looked forward to witnessing a bit of action. The leopard's only reaction was an occasional half-hearted snarl. The pig treated the spotted cat with contempt and with his snout all smeared with congealed blood, continued his gory meal. Not until he had his fill did the pig move away.





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Jungle Twilight

“It is usually tacitly assumed that the rolling back of the jungle tide will continue indefinitely until the whole world has been tamed by man. Natural selection is to be superseded by man’s selection, and evolution suspended where it does not serve his purpose. Gardens are to take the place of jungles, tame beasts to live in place of the wild, and revolt to be supplanted by obedience. Plants will but pollinate and beasts mate by special licence as on a stud farm, and weeds will be as rare as at a flower show.”

“Visions of a regimented earth where birds only sing by request are to me so much more distasteful than the age-old struggle with the jungle tide, that I rejoice in an outlook that seems to the commercial utiliser of applied science horribly pessimistic. I do not think man will win final victory over the jungle; but rather that the battle will go on in the future as it has in the past with alternating victories on either side, and with the tide of the jungle ever ready to rise and flow over civilisation whenever it grows too proud to keep on learning, as Spain once grew; or when it gets tired of exerting will-power as we (English) seem to be doing; or when it makes mistakes, as the Sinhalese kings did when they pinned their prosperity to a vulnerable irrigation system.”

John Still (Jungle Tide) 1930



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