

SRI LANKA

Wildlife, Plants & Botanical Gardens





Where the Wild Things Are

A land where you can come face to face with a wild elephant, watch the savage grace of a leopard, see a nesting turtle lay its eggs on the beach, be awed by the brilliant display of a peacock or catch sight of orchids festooning a giant rainforest tree, may seem like a dream.





But in Sri Lanka, this is reality, for nature has blessed the island with a disproportionate abundance. Despite its small size, it has one of the richest biodiversities of any country in the world. This astounding diversity is due to its dramatically different terrains, ranging from coastal plains and mangroves to dripping rainforests, from the arid dry zone to the emerald forests and spring-like temperatures of the Hill Country.



Large areas rich in flora and fauna are conserved in 13 national parks and over 100 other protected areas. Perhaps this is not surprising, given the country's 2,000-year-old history of conservation.

What was probably the world's first wildlife sanctuary was created here in the 3rd century BC by a king who converted to Buddhism.



Both plants and animals within this and subsequent sacred sanctuaries were left undisturbed, in respect for Buddhist strictures against the taking of life.

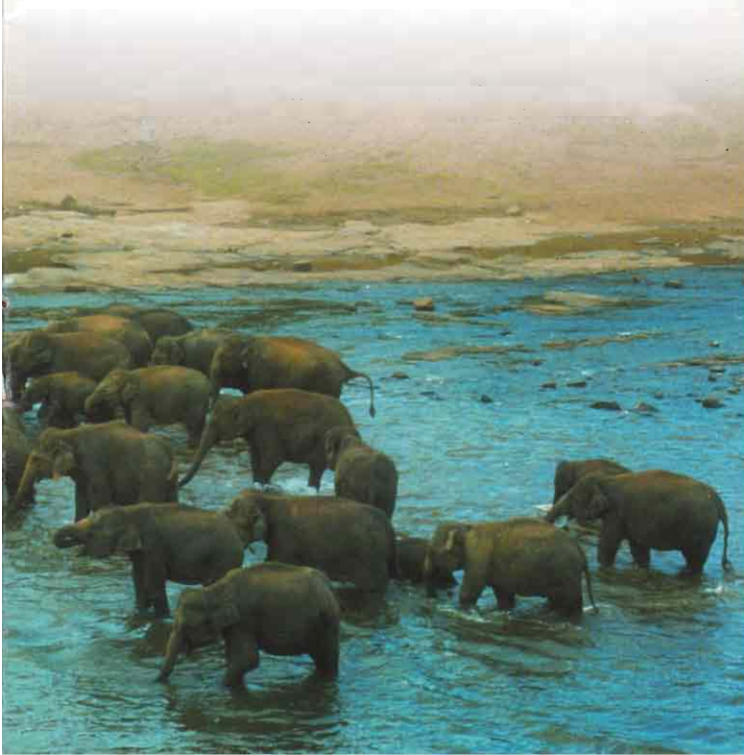
Sri Lanka's icon animal, the majestic elephant, is a sub-species of the Asian elephant and smaller than its African cousin.



Large herds of these sociable and highly intelligent creatures can be seen in several national parks, especially where fresh young grass springs up around the edges of the “tanks” (man-made lakes), as the water recedes during the dry season.



Visitors are certain to see elephants close up at the *Pinnawela Elephant Orphanage*, on the road to Kandy, where the Department of Wildlife has been caring for orphaned elephants for more than 30 years.

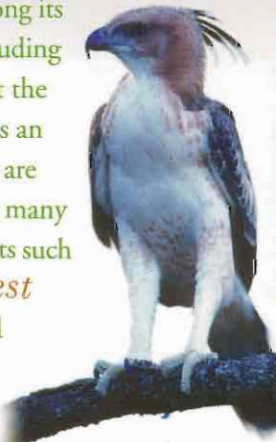




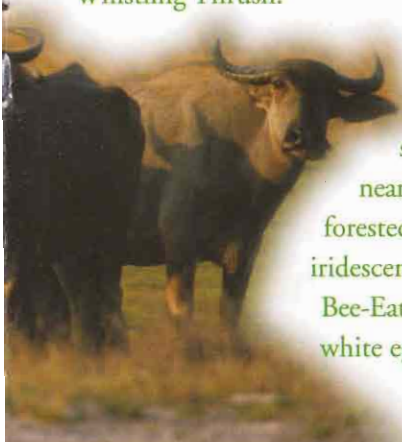
Other striking mammals which can be seen in the wild include the shy, solitary leopard (*Yala National Park is thought to have one of the highest densities of leopard in the world*), the fierce although rarely encountered sloth bear and four species of deer.

Among the primates are several species of monkey (including the ubiquitous macaque) and the appealing large-eyed loris. Visitors may be lucky to spot the strange, scaly pangolin, wild buffalo, giant squirrel, wild boar, jungle cat or the cat-like palm civet.

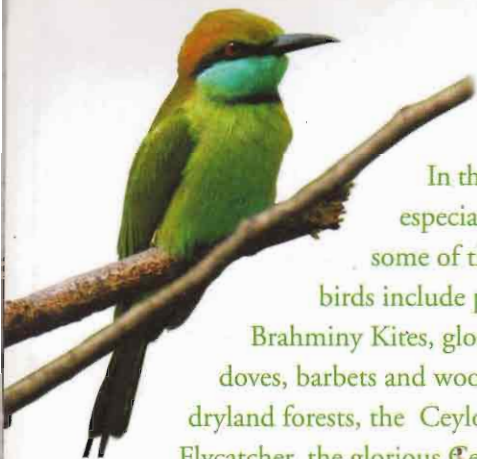




Perhaps nowhere is Sri Lanka's incredible biodiversity more evident than among its birds, with almost 450 species, including residents and migrants. To say that the island is a bird watcher's paradise is an under-statement. Some 23 species are endemic, found only in Sri Lanka, many of them living in the montane forests such as the *Sinharaja Rainforest* (protected as a UNECSCO World Heritage Site), and Kelani Valley Forest Reserve. Rare montane endemics include the Dusky-blue Flycatcher, Yellow-eared Bulbul and Whistling Thrush.



A surprising number of beautiful birds can be spotted while travelling, near rice paddies and in open forested regions, including iridescent kingfishers, the Green Bee-Eater and the slender snowy white egret.



In the dry country, and especially near the tanks, some of the most striking birds include peacocks, soaring Brahminy Kites, glorious pigeons, doves, barbets and woodpeckers. In the dryland forests, the Ceylon Paradise Flycatcher, the glorious Ceylon Blue Magpie and flocks of noisy parakeets can also be spotted.

In the marshy areas and around the tanks, large aquatic birds are easily seen, including the stork, spoon bills, cormorants, pelicans, numerous ducks and the Indian darter, which plunges into the water to spear its fish. An astonishing number of migratory birds (about 170 species), arrive in the island from mid-August, with sandpipers, stilts, plovers, terns and kites flying from the north to winter around the lagoons along the eastern and southeastern coasts, and in the northwest of the island.



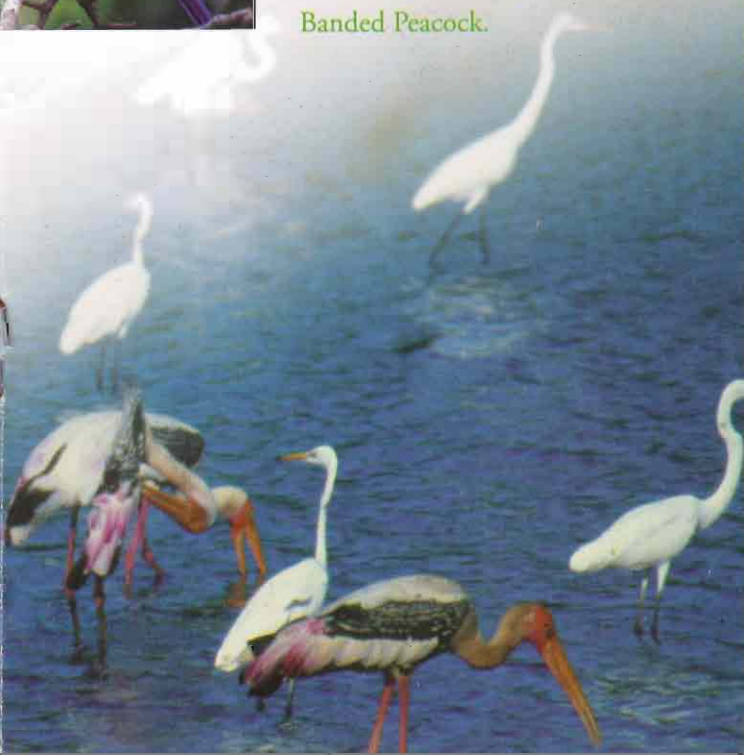
Large flocks of glorious pink flamingoes are among the most striking migrants, almost invariably spotted in Bundala National Park.



Birds are not the only brilliantly coloured creatures seen flying in the island's skies, for there are almost *250 species of butterfly*, most of them found in the foothills up to about 900 m (although half a dozen species occur over 1,200 m). In the Horton Plains, some of the most beautiful butterflies include the Blue Mormon, Blue Admiral, Rare Ace and delicate Tamil

Lacewing.

The Peak Wilderness Reserve is renowned for a number of brilliant red butterflies, including the Crimson Birdwing, Red Helen and Red Spot, while the Knuckles Range near Kandy has several exquisite species including the emerald green and pale blue Banded Peacock.

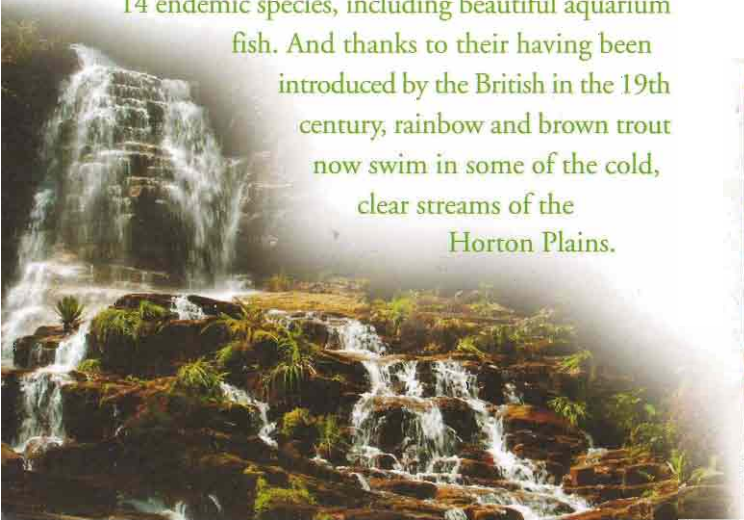




Every March and April, there is a mysterious flight of thousands of butterflies to the sacred mountain, Sri Pada or Adam's Peak. There does not appear to be any scientific explanation for the flight of these butterflies, although legend has it that they are paying homage to Lord Buddha, as are the thousands of pilgrims below them, climbing the mountain between December and May.

Sri Lanka has an intriguing number of creatures that slither, swim or jump, with 54 species of freshwater fish, and an amazing number of frogs and reptiles.

The fish found in the marshes and rivers include 14 endemic species, including beautiful aquarium fish. And thanks to their having been introduced by the British in the 19th century, rainbow and brown trout now swim in some of the cold, clear streams of the Horton Plains.





Those interested in frogs will find that Sri Lanka offers more species than other places noted for their number of amphibians (including Borneo, New Guinea and Madagascar). Over 100 species of brightly coloured tree frogs are found in the island's rainforests, while numerous other frogs are common in the Hill Country.



Many of the reptiles are found nowhere other than in Sri Lanka, including two species of crocodile. The more common of these is the *Marsh Crocodile*, which can often be seen on banks of lakes, rivers and in the marshlands. The rivers and estuaries of the west coast are good for catching sight of the water monitor, a sizeable reptile which swims in rivers or rests along the banks.



Only five of the large variety of snakes in Sri Lanka are potentially lethal, and these are rarely encountered in the cities or villages. Just one land tortoise, the

beautifully marked Star Tortoise, is found, while there are five species of marine turtle, all of them protected.

Not surprisingly, early visitors to the island felt they had stumbled upon the *Garden of Eden*, a place where brilliantly flowering trees and shrubs abounded, lush tropical fruits were there for the picking, rare orchids grew wild and luxuriant jungles harboured medicinal plants. With so many climate zones, some 3,350 species of flowering plants are found, an amazing 23% of them endemic. Wet-zone forests are home to majestic tall trees and lush undergrowth, in marked contrast to the talipot palms and scrubby jungles of the dry or arid zone.



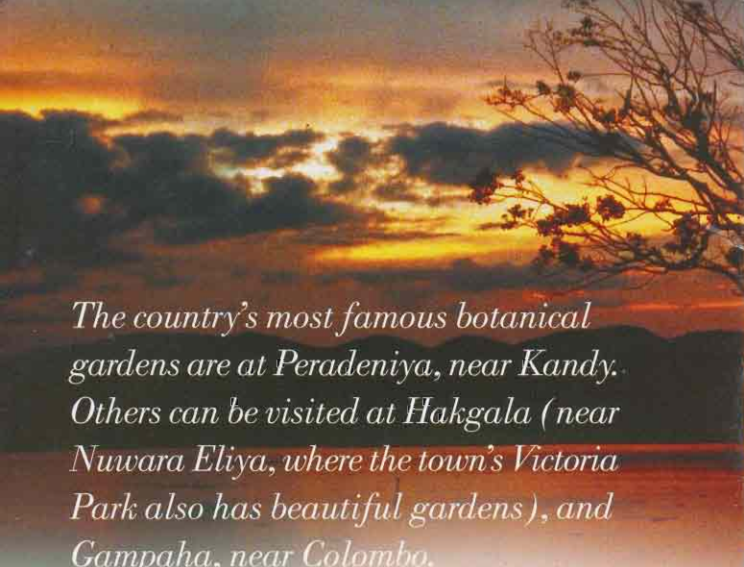
Driving up to the highlands and mountains, the luxuriant plants of the foothills and lower montane region give way to treeless grasslands, to the wild rhododendron forests of the Horton Plains plateau and the stunted cloud forest of the Knuckles Range.

Sri Lanka is home to 170 species of orchid, 74 of them found nowhere else in the world.

Some of the most precious orchids can be seen in the wild in the Sinharaja Rainforest or Horton Plains, or more easily viewed in botanical gardens.

Plants used for traditional or ayurvedic medicine are not the only ones with economic value, for many spices and aromatics grow here, including the famous Ceylon cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, nutmeg, mace, pepper and vanilla. Commercial spice gardens around Kandy offer a good opportunity to see such plants growing.





The country's most famous botanical gardens are at Peradeniya, near Kandy. Others can be visited at Hakgala (near Nuwara Eliya, where the town's Victoria Park also has beautiful gardens), and Gampaha, near Colombo.

The plants in these gardens include orchids, spices, medicinal herbs and many rare plants.

A network of National Parks, Nature Reserves (excluding Strict Nature Reserves where visitors are not permitted), and Wildlife Sanctuaries offers visitors an opportunity to discover the country's remarkable wildlife and plants. Inside these parks, visitors are not permitted to get out of their vehicles (normally open-sided, four-wheel drives) except in a few designated areas.





Among the most popular and accessible parks are Yala (also known as Ruhuna), famed for its leopards; Wasgomuwa; Horton Plains; Randenigala and Lunugamwehera, while the best for viewing large herds of elephants include Kauduluwawa, Gal Oya, Uda Walawe and Minneriya.

Horton Plains National Park and the Horton Plains Plateau, the Knuckles Range and the Peak Wilderness all contain fascinating flora and fauna, while the Sinharaja Rainforest is the country's remaining lowland virgin tropical rainforest, a treasure-house of endemic species. Bird sanctuaries include Bundala National Park, Kumana, Kalemetya, Tangamalai and Wirawila.

Accommodation is available within only six of the national parks, although a wide range of accommodation (including resort hotels and wildlife lodges) is found nearby all major parks and sanctuaries.

For further information, please contact Sri Lanka Tourist Board or click onto www.srilankatourism.org

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Sri Lanka
A land like no other