



Montane Biodiversity in the Land of Serendipity

By IAN LOCKWOOD

Serendib, the former name of Sri Lanka, is associated with the radiant noun *serendipity*. Defined as “the faculty of stumbling upon something fortuitous especially when looking for something completely unrelated,” it is an idea that energizes both visitors and long-term residents of this varied little island. Some readers will associate the island with its tortured political and ethnic past while many for its maverick cricket team. I came here to teach and learn and to make connections to a chain of mountains across the sea that I know well.

Sri Lanka, teardrop of the Indian Ocean, lies tantalisingly close to India’s southern shores. Its ecology and landscape share many commonalities with the southern Western Ghats and the dry Carnatic plains of the southern peninsula. Yet, as I have discovered during five years of living in Sri Lanka, its varied landforms and ecological regions offer something quite distinct; something that must be seen, walked through and felt, to be understood.

For a small island there is a great deal of biodiversity, something made all the more significant in this UN-sponsored *Year of Biodiversity*. Some of this diversity is found in the coastlines with their reefs, inland lakes and

mangrove forests. The dry zone with its wetlands and thorn forests also harbours a great variety of life forms. The threats to this living treasure are familiar: expanding developments and settlements areas, agricultural practices moving into wild habitats, demand for timber, armed conflict, etc. Thus, Sri Lanka has been included (along with the Western Ghats) as one of Conservation International’s 34 Global Biodiversity Hotspots.

This photo-essay focuses on a narrow selection of montane habitats in the Central Highlands and nearby mountain ranges where I have had the good fortune to encounter some of Sri Lanka’s impressive living diversity. Here Sri Lanka hosts forests that date back to Gondwanaland and have never known the sounds of saws. Other forests, including parts of the Sinharaja World Heritage Site have had sections logged but have made a remarkable recovery since being protected in a burst of enlightened conservation moves several decades ago. Today, in an age of declining biodiversity, Sri Lanka’s high level of protection given to its land, experience from forest restoration and importance placed on education provide crucial lessons for the rest of the world



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1. Sacred Shadow over Peak Wilderness: This view looking west towards the Indian Ocean captures some of the grandeur of the vast Peak Wilderness area that envelops the holy mountain of Sri Pada (also called Adam's Peak). These forests have been protected from time immemorial because of the pilgrimage site on the summit. They are also critical to the water security of the lower valleys and plains. They also host high levels of biodiversity within the lowland, montane and cloud forest of the Protected Area. The arduous trek to the summit of Sri Pada from Ratnapura exposes one to the amazing vertical zonation that is delineated by increasing altitude while one nears the 2,243m. summit.

2. Restored Forest in the Heart of Sinharaja: Thirty years ago this was a ravaged bathing spot and water source for an adjoining logging camp in the heart of the Sinharaja forest. Today, after several decades of protection, the forest has recovered and there are few signs of the violence that once raged nearby. The biodiversity in this forest is astounding but perhaps more important is the lesson of concerted effort spearheaded by citizens to protect the land and what can be achieved in terms of restoration in a tropical forest.

3. Forest Canopy from Sinhagala Peak: Sinharaja's interior contains large tracts of relatively undisturbed and never logged tropical rainforests. Sinhagala (which means lion rock?) Peak at 742 m. offers an unsurpassed view over the canopy.

4. Sri Pada in the Moonlight of a Poya: Moonlight on a poya (full moon) night illuminates the eastern face of Sri Pada. Lights on the temple and pilgrim path cast a magnetic glow that is framed by the montane forest surrounding the peak.

5. Sri Pada Peak from Horton Plains: The grasslands of Horton Plains bear remarkable similarity to the high altitude shola/grasslands of the Western Ghats. Looking west, the profile of Sri Pada rises above the valleys of tea and hydroelectric reservoirs (not visible) that dominate the Central Highlands.

6. Thotapolakanda Peak, Horton Plains: Thotapolakanda Peak (2,357 m.), as seen from the Ambawella area, is the third highest peak in Sri Lanka. The early morning mist condenses amongst the remnant cloud forest mixed with grazing pastures to create a picturesque image.

7. Bracket fungi, Sinharaja: A rotting log is embraced by bracket fungi, something that will play a crucial role in recycling the nutrients in the decomposing wood.

8. Hump-nosed lizard *Lyriocephalus scutatus*, Kitulgala: One of Sri Lanka's most flamboyant endemic lizards is the Hump-nosed lizard found in the lowland rainforests. The species is distinguished by its hump as well as the bright yellow gular pouch on males. This female was photographed near Kitulgala, Sri Lanka's white water rafting centre.

9. Western Purple -faced Langur *Trachypithecus senex*, near Colombo: Cousins of the Nilgiri langur *T. johni* of the Western Ghats, the purple-faced langur has been categorised as one of the 25 most endangered primates in the world. These leaf-eating monkeys are associated with the lowland and montane rainforests of Sri Lanka's wet zone.

10. Green Pit Viper *Trimeresurus trionocephalus*, Sinharaja: The endemic green pit viper is the cousin of the bamboo and Malabar pit viper that many in the Western Ghats are familiar with. It is largely arboreal but stays at a low level where it can prey on frogs and lizards on the rainforest floor. It is venomous but is not associated with fatal bites.

11. Blue Magpie *Urocissa ornata*, Sinharaja: Undoubtedly Sri Lanka's most colourful endemic bird is the gregarious Sri Lanka Blue Magpie that is restricted to the lowland and montane rainforests of the wet zone. These birds are excellent indicators of a healthy forest habitat. This good-natured individual was photographed in Sinharaja where they have become relatively habituated to curious humans with binoculars and long lenses.

12. Red Slender Loris *Loris tardigradus*, Sinharaja: This small and extremely rare primate feeds on insects in the trees of the lowland rainforests. It is nocturnal and is rarely seen by visitors.