

Mannar

Sri Lanka's Far Corner



Sri Lanka's island of Mannar is rich in antiquity, myth and natural history. **Ian Lockwood** explores the wildlife and landscape of this far-off land that is a crucial transit point for species migrating back and forth between the Indian peninsula and its southern neighbour.

Baobab Adansonia digitata trees in Mannar, found otherwise only in arid Madagascar, mainland Africa, Arabia and Australia, were planted by pearl traders from Arabia hundreds of years ago.

Myth and history mix freely in the waves gently lapping on the shores of Mannar, the tongue-shaped island in north-west Sri Lanka. Here stories of monkey armies, great mythological battles and Adam & Eve precede a timeline of colonial conquest and the search for the pearls and riches of Serendib. In modern times the island was on the frontlines of the violent, tragic conflict that engulfed Sri Lanka for nearly three decades. Today the guns are silent and Mannar and its surrounding areas are inching forward to a new day. For most people there is not much here; extremely dry, hot and seemingly barren landscapes. However, the area's stunning wildlife, in particular its birds are what makes Mannar significant for people interested in natural history.

For a relatively small island, Sri Lanka hosts a number of different landscapes, each of them hosting diverse assemblages of life and rich cultural traditions. The country has four different climatic zones that play a key role in the biogeography of its biodiversity. Most of the country is divided between the dry, wet and intermediate zones. Mannar is in a small sliver "arid zone" and is quite different from the wet forests of the Central

Highlands and southern ranges that are a magnet for wildlife enthusiasts. The land in Mannar is low, barely a few metres above sea level, the climate is exceedingly dry and the area is sparsely populated with humans. Other than the rich layers of Mannar's history, now mostly lost in sand and surf, or the quirky feral donkeys that wander the streets, it is the non-human migrants that draw visitors up to this isolated corner of Sri Lanka.

A KEY BIRDING AREA

Mannar serves as a key transit point on the flyway for birds migrating from India into Sri Lanka. Some of the birds stop and spend the winter months on the island and shoals of Adam's Bridge while others continue further south. The birds enjoy a designated Protected Area in the Vankalai Sanctuary that covers the area where Mannar is connected to the mainland by a low causeway. Vankalai consists of low-lying, salty mud plains. When these low areas fill with water from the northeast monsoon, mixed with salt water from high tides, the area offers a bonanza for visiting birds. Several roads bisect Vankalai allowing visitors to view birds without having to disturb them by venturing into the lagoon. There are a variety of



waders, egrets, herons, storks and birds of prey that are drawn to Vankalai's wetlands during winter.

The most famous winter visitors in Vankalai are the Greater Flamingos *Phoenicopterus roseus*, flying across the Palk Straits from locations in southern India. During the civil war years, their numbers were not monitored carefully and population estimates have varied over the last few decades. In the recent winter season there were two to three large groups of greater flamingos, with at least one group having hundreds of individuals. Aside from the Vankalai

area, the flamingos also frequent the salt turns adjoining the dusty Mannar township. The larger groups are often seen in the shallow sea water north of the causeway that connects Mannar to the mainland. If you're in the right place you can witness a mass of pink feathers flying over you.

Besides Vankalai, there are some Protected Areas on Mannar Island as well. However, the whole island offers a variety of habitats and niches where wildlife thrives. The island is composed of palmyrah groves, seasonal wetlands, dunes and small settlements



Sunset at Adam's Bridge, a long chain of limestone shoals between Rameshwaram Island, situated southeast of Tamil Nadu's coast and Mannar Island, makes for a picturesque image.



TOP Brown-headed Gulls *Chroicocephalus brunnicephalus* fly overhead as fishermen go about their daily activities at the pier at Taimanar, located on the western coast of the island.

BOTTOM Enthusiastic birders, tourists and locals gathered at North Beach. As Mannar is a temporary host to a large population of migratory birds travelling from India to Sri Lanka, it is ideal as a birding destination.



WILDLIFE TOURISM IN SRI LANKA – BOON OR BANE?

In recent years Sri Lanka's wildlife has gained popular attention and a study by the Sri Lanka Tour Operators cited 38 per cent of all foreign tourists visiting at least one national park or Protected Area during their visits. Compared to its neighbours this is a significant figure for Sri Lanka. Thus, conservation efforts have economic as well as ecological and environmental benefits. Local communities next to Protected Areas have benefited from jobs and employment in the sector and there is generally good support for wildlife conservation in Sri Lanka. However, some parks have very high numbers of jeep-based tourists. Vehicles jostle and compete with each other for leopard sightings. When leopards are sighted, cell phone messages go out and soon noisy, traffic jams surround the unfortunate leopards. The experience is not pleasant in Yala for most of the year or Mineria during its highly publicised "elephant gathering." Whale watching efforts have faced challenges with management and protocols for engaging marine mammals. On the other hand, birdwatching and tourism in Sinharaja rainforest is approaching the ideals of ecotourism. All visitors must employ guides drawn from local communities, but trained by the Forest Department. Visitation in Sinharaja is based on walking rather than vehicle tours. No large hotel chains are active here and accommodation is locally run. Until recently when power lines were brought in, most electricity was generated on small-scale hydro generators. The model is worth emulating in other locations in South Asia.

STAYING IN MANNAR

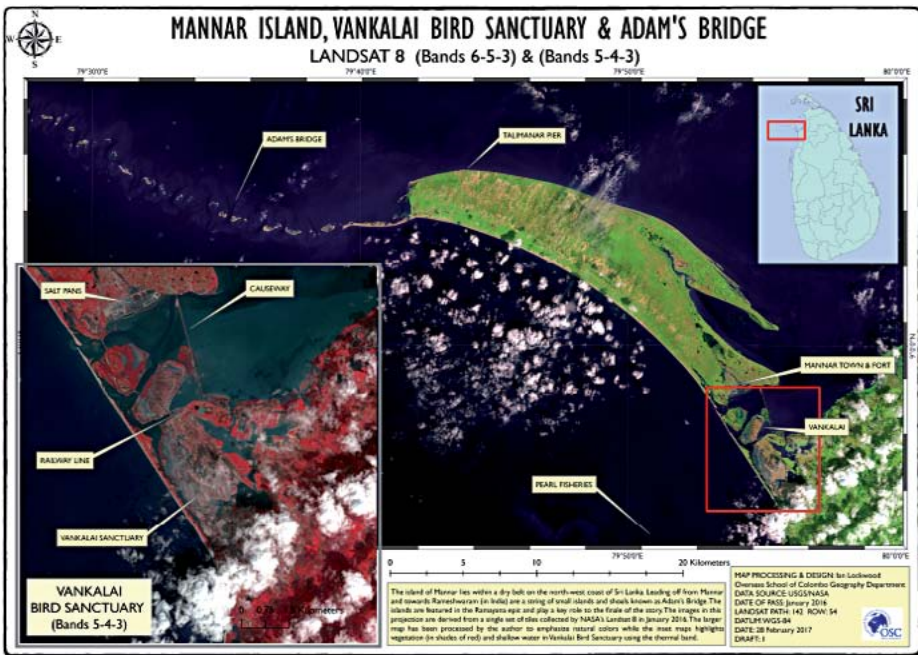
Birdwatchers and naturalists have several places to stay in Mannar. Four Tees, run by the knowledgeable and friendly local entrepreneur named Laurence, is an excellent place to access a variety of habitats. Laurence guides his guests to all the key bird watching locations and serves famous crab and fish curries. Further up the road the Palmyrah House offers a luxurious place to stay. They always have a naturalist on staff.

ABOVE Mannar's seemingly barren landscape can be deceiving; in reality, the island is a haven for many species of migratory birds such as these flamingos that arrive here seasonally from the Indian peninsula.

of fishing communities. Grey Francolins *Francolinus pondicerianus* are found throughout the island including the densely packed, leafy neighbourhoods of Mannar town. The Old Dutch fort at the edge of Mannar town is an interesting destination and is a good place to look out for flamingos and soaring birds of prey like the White-bellied Sea-eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster*. Mannar's baobab *Adansonia digitata* trees, planted by Arab pearl traders several hundred years ago, are a magnet for common birds and visitors like Rosy Starlings *Pastor roseus*. Seasonal wetlands come alive between November and February and create opportunities for complex food chains.

On the western edge of the island, the pier at Taimanar (where the ferry used to leave for Rameshwaram) is well known for its gull populations drawn by the adjoining fishing villages. A few kilometres away from Talimannar it is possible to walk along the beach to where the shoals of Adam's Bridge (Ram Setu) lead off to the west. The seas around these islands are very

Another view of Adam's Bridge. Many geologists believe that this strip could previously have connected Sri Lanka to India.



shallow – it is not difficult to see how this was an important migration route for animals and humans when sea levels were lower during past ice ages. Unless you have special permission from the Navy most people are unable to access these low-lying islands hosting several rare birds that have been monitored by ornithologists.

TROUBLE IN PARADISE

Although Mannar is being recognised for its rich biodiversity, its future is not guaranteed. Some of its human inhabitants are now enthusiastically involved in ecotourism ventures and recognise the special value that the island has. On the other hand, the government has cleared areas for housing former IDPs (Internally displaced people) in poorly chosen sites that play a role in bird migration. A wind turbine farm is planned and the EIA for this project is available to the public. Given the importance of Mannar in the annual migration of birds into Sri Lanka, this seems like a poorly-thought out plan. 🐦

TOP A satellite map of Mannar Island, depicting Adam's Bridge, Vankalai Sanctuary, Mannar Town and other landmarks.

BOTTOM A pair of Woolly-necked Storks *Ciconia episcopus* spotted at the Wilpattu National Park.