A small group of friendliest, ever-mindful of our cue, set off along a trail I had never trodden. It was the start of my birding pilgrimage, the start of my adventure into the wilds of Sinharaja Forest Reserve, the adventure of a lifetime. I was excited, perhaps a little nervous, but mostly thrilled. We were about to explore one of the most biodiverse areas in the world. Sinharaja is known for its outstanding biodiversity, particularly its endemic birds. The forest is home to over 240 species of birds, including many that are found nowhere else on earth. The diversity of birds here is unmatched, and the sound of their songs fills the air.

We began our adventure in the early morning, as the sun was just beginning to rise. The forest was alive with activity, and we were soon joined by a large group of Sri Lanka Blue Magpies, the most common endemic bird in the area. These birds are known for their distinctive blue color and their ability to mimic other birds.

As we walked deeper into the forest, we were met with a variety of interesting sights. We came across a group of Layard's Parakeets, which were feeding on the leaves of a nearby tree. We also saw several Malabar Trogons, which were perched on a branch, looking for insects to eat.

In the Wet: Field Notes from Sri Lanka's Wet Zone

Text and photographs by Ian Lockwood

In four days of serious birding, I was able to see 20 of the 22 endemics and a host of other species! The mixed feeding flocks were particularly rewarding. They included gregarious Orange-billed Keas and vibrant New Zealand Parakeets, as well as a variety of other bird species. Among the highlights were several Malabar Trogons, which were spotted in the forest, and a pair of Sri Lanka Frogmouths, which were heard calling from a nearby tree.

We passed through splendid tracts of lowland and then montane rainforest. The pathway below our feet has been worn smooth by those of pilgrims for more than a thousand years. We have been privileged to have the company of Professor Sarath Kotagama, one of the country's leading ornithological authorities and a veteran of Sinharaja's boundary. Sitting on Martin's balcony, sipping tea and eating string hoppers, I was able to see the forest around us is as pristine as in the beginning of time. A group of endemic Sri Lanka Blue Magpies crossed our path and I heard the inimitable calls of the Sri Lanka Cobblers. The forest is home to a diverse range of bird species, including many that are found nowhere else on earth.
Central Highlands have been dammed up as is the case with those of the Western Ghats (Sri Lanka gets about half its electricity from renewable hydro sources). Non-native plantations of eucalyptus, pinus and acacia have replaced large tracts of native forest in the Central Highlands, non-native species common with the Palni and Nilgiri Hills. I was not surprised to see this forest replaced with cleared land at the base of the mountains, a common site on all my travels.

Saw significant areas of original vegetation still remain in the Central Highlands, with two enjoying full protection. The Peak Wilderness Sanctuary is a large 250 sq. km. forested area that surrounds the sacred slopes of Sri Pada (Adam’s Peak). Its intact vegetation from the lowland rainforest north of Ratnapura, through montane rainforest to the dwarf, shola-like cloud forest near its 2,243 m. summit make it a significant Protected Area. In the pilgrimage season, thousands trek up to the peak, mainly to view the sacred footprint. Most will take in a breathtaking dawn and an incredible 360° view of the natural beauty of the area. The climb offers some of the best opportunities to see the handsome Yellow-eared Bulbul (Pycnonotus sinensis), Dull Blue Flycatchers (Eumyias sordida) and Sri Lanka White Eyes (Zosterops ceylonensis). This is a species commonly found on the summit. The bulbuls like to feed on crumbs at the tea stalls that line the pathway to the summit. This January, on the way down the hill, I finally encountered a Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush (Myophonus blighi), considered to be the most difficult endemic to see in the country!

Horton Plains
To the east of Peak Wilderness is an elevated tableland that is protected as the Horton Plains National Park. It’s an easy hour’s drive from Nuwara Eliya and now attracts a large number of visitors. Horton Plains is significant for its cloud forests and patanas, which bear a remarkable similarity to the shola-grasslands of the high Western Ghats. An interesting paradox that the grasslands dominate valleys in Horton Plains while cloud forests carpet ridges and slopes (as we’ve found in places such as Eravikulam and Mulkiwathy). On several visits to Horton Plains, I have found the walk to the viewpoint at World’s End to be highly rewarding, provided I made an early start. Highlights of the walk include fine examples of rhododendron (Rhododendron arboreum), a tree that is a migrant from the Himalaya and is also found in the upper reaches of the Western Ghats. Many visitors walk to the viewpoint at World’s End to be highly rewarding, provided I made an early start. Highlights of the walk include fine examples of rhododendron (Rhododendron arboreum), a tree that is a migrant from the Himalaya and is also found in the upper reaches of the Western Ghats. Many visitors walk to

SPECIALIST IN THE WET ZONE & WESTERN GHATS

There are distinct endemic species that are confined to either the Western Ghats or Sri Lanka. For example, the Western Ghats has the Nilgiri langur (Trachypithecus johnii), a leaf-eating monkey found in rainforests and sholas. On the other hand, Sri Lanka has the similar-looking, but distinctive purple-faced monkey (Presbytis vetulus) found in the Central Highlands and wet rainforests (there are several sub-species). The Dull-Blue Flycatcher (Eumyias sordida) is only found in Sri Lanka while the Nilgiri flycatcher (Eumyias albicaudata) is restricted to similar hills in the Western Ghats. Species names, however, can be confusing when considering endemic status! Species like the Ceylon Frogmouth (Batrachostomus monileatus) and Malabar Trogon illustrate this phenomenon. The Malabar Trogon is a bird often associated with the Western Ghats. It is, however, not truly endemic since it is found widely in Sri Lanka. Likewise, the Ceylon Frogmouth is found in several rainforest sanctuaries in southern India. For unclear evolutionary reasons several species are not truly endemic. For example, the Western Ghats has the Nilgiri long-tailed macaque (Macaca silenus), a leaf-eating monkey found in rainforests and sholas in the southern Ghats. Sri Lanka has the similar-looking, but distinctive large-scaled pit viper (Trimeresurus trigoncephalus), which is the slightly larger cousin of the Malabar and large-scaled pit viper of the Western Ghats.
Listed as vulnerable in the IUCN's Red Data Book, the Sri Lanka Blue Magpie *Urocissa ornata* (above left), lives in the lowland and montane rainforests of the Wet Zone. Largely feeding on small animals, insects and even fruit, this is one of the most colourful of the 26 recognised endemic birds of the island country. Rainforests are famous for their high reptilian diversity, represented here by this hump-nosed chameleon *Lyriocephalus scutatus* (above right).

World's End, the theatre of dramatic escarpment that has several parallel viewpoints in south India's hill stations. Like similar places in India, the park has struggled with visitors coming to "create nuisance" instead of appreciating its wildlife and stunning habitat. After a campaign and funding from the private sector, the park is now impressively managed and kept clean. Horton Plains now boasts what must be the cleanest, most public toilet in a South Asian national park!

**SINHARAJA**

Sinhiraja (See *Sanctuary Asia*, Vol. II No. 3, July-September 1982) is Sri Lanka’s flagship wet zone. It has an area of 112 sq. km. and is home to one of the world’s most diverse rainforests. The park has been a World Heritage Site since 1989 and is one of the most important rainforests on the Indian Subcontinent. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is home to over 100 species of birds, including the endangered *Trimeresurus trigonocephalus*, a pit viper that is one of the most poisonous snakes in the world. The park is also home to a large number of amphibians, reptiles, and mammals, including the *Lyriocephalus scutatus*, a hump-nosed chameleon, and the *Ceratophora aspera*, a rough horned lizard. The park is also home to the *Otocryptis weigmanni*, a small gecko that is found in the park's lowland rainforests.

**KNUCKLES**

Separated from the Central Highlands by the Mahaweli Ganga (Sri Lanka's longest and deepest river), the Knuckles is home to a large number of birds, including the endangered *Trimeresurus trigonocephalus*. The park is also home to a large number of amphibians, reptiles, and mammals, including the *Lyriocephalus scutatus*, a hump-nosed chameleon, and the *Ceratophora aspera*, a rough horned lizard. The park is also home to the *Otocryptis weigmanni*, a small gecko that is found in the park's lowland rainforests.
largest river (b)asin, the 210 sq. km Knuckles or Dumbara range is an island of wet zone-like habitat surrounded by drier plains. Although within sight of the cultural centre and former capital at Kandy, the Knuckles range is actually one of the remotest, least-studied areas of the entire country. The area comprises a rugged mountain range that hosts at least eight distinct vegetation types. A high species density that defies the range’s remote location; montane and cloud forests and the sandy soils that border them. On my visits, I’ve been struck by the grand landscape and the unfathomable biodiversity to which the Knuckles Range is exposed. The Knuckles Range has been attracting wildlife biologists, especially for its herpetofauna. There are several endemic lizards, including the Tenet’s leaf-nosed lizard Ceratophora tennentii and the newly-discovered pygmy lizard relative Cophotis dumbaraensis.

The country’s leading expert on herpetofauna is Professor Anslem De Silva. I met him just before I subjected my family to six days in the Knuckles last this spring. A friendly, slightly Bohemian-looking man, he has a way of suggesting a place where I should look for some key species. His books on the Knuckles, Horton Plains and the reptiles of Sri Lanka are essential for people interested in Sri Lanka’s natural history. Knuckles is protected as a national MNP and Biopshere Reserve, although there are significant threats posed by the expanding cardamom and tea plantations nibbling at its edges.

There are a handful of other lesser-protected areas in the wet zone that I have not detailed in this short overview. The future of the Protected Areas is relatively secure, and the challenge for Sri Lanka’s conservationists is to protect and study the remaining fragments of forests. The pressure of human populations in the wet zone is undeniably a concern as people expand tea and other spice plantations. Ecological literacy on the island is impressive and cultural traditions have certainly helped to protect some of its amazing biodiversity. As I put the finishing touches on this text and edit the last picture, there is a troop of purple-faced monkeys Trachypithecus vetulus feeding on the last of this season’s mangoes in our garden. I’m not in a Protected Area, just a suburb of Colombo! They look remarkably similar to the Nilgiri langur Trachypithecus johnii that I grew up with in the Western Ghats. It is a treat hearing their booming calls every day and I hope that future generations of Sri Lankans will be able to enjoy such close encounters with the amazing wildlife of their wet zone.

Further examples of the author’s work can be found at http://highrangephotography.com/