

Sri Lanka

The Best for Big Game Safaris Outside Africa



Why a small island can lay claim to being the Best for Big Game Safaris outside Africa

SRI LANKA: BEST FOR BIG GAME OUTSIDE AFRICA

Why the small island of Sri Lanka is the best for Big Game outside Africa

A British journalist told me that a shortcoming of Sri Lankan tourism is that it has failed to be bold in how it tells its big stories to the world. I am inclined to agree. One of these shortcomings is the failure to educate the world at large that Sri Lanka is the 'Best for Big Game Safaris' outside Africa. It is difficult to imagine that the tiny island of Sri Lanka is the next best to the gigantic African continent for Big Game Safaris. But it is so.

However, Sri Lanka's tourism industry and Sri Lankans as a whole have failed to realize and publicize that Sri Lanka is the 'Best for Big Game Safaris' outside Africa. This is a big and important story we need to tell. It is one of a suite of stories that we need to disseminate to strengthen Sri Lanka's brand as a tourism destination and in particular as a top destination for wildlife travel.

I first put into print my thoughts that 'Sri Lanka is the best for Big Game Safaris outside Africa' in the September 2010 issue of Hi Magazine. In the article, I explained why we need to create 'a symmetry of phrase' with Africa's Big Five and also factors such as selection criteria to put the Big Five branding on an intellectual framework.

This is a story I had begun to tell over the last nine years. In September 2009 the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau (SLTPB) in London arranged for a press evening where Chitral Jayatilake and I spoke. The exhibition was themed 'Sri Lanka: The Ultimate Island Safari'. In a sense this is the wider and bigger story. However, in terms of carrying a punch line to the media and the public, a subset of that story, that we are the best for big game outside Africa is more potent.

For several years now my team has developed the literature to articulate that Sri Lanka is the best for Leopard and Blue Whale. We have the largest, predictably occurring seasonal concentration of wild elephants anywhere in the world: 'The Gathering of Elephants' at Minneriya (and Kaudulla National Park). More recently, I have ramped up the publicity that Sri Lanka is the best place in the world for seeing and photographing the Sloth Bear. I am also drawing attention that it may be the largest tropical bear or if not one of the biggest (I understand from Dr. Shyamala Ratnayake that as data is still thin on the ground for tropical bears, there is still some uncertainty in how it ranks in terms of weight).





The whale watching which I helped to popularize in May 2008 from Mirissa and since March 2010 from Kalpitiya shows that Sri Lanka is in the top ten for seeing Sperm Whales. I have used these five animals to brand a Sri Lankan Big Five to reinforce Sri Lanka's position as a Big Game Safari destination in a similar vein to Africa.

Why is the 'Best outside Africa' branding justified? Firstly, let me point out that Sri Lanka does not match Africa as a Big Game Safari destination. It is the nearest counterpart. Anyone familiar with Africa will know that nowhere in the world do you have such a concentration of big game, all in the field of view at one time. The sheer numbers are unrivalled. This article is about what happens when you look outside Africa what is the next best continent or country? I am also using the presence of five big, charismatic mammals, which inspire awe, are desirable and can be seen with a fair degree of likelihood as a benchmark for branding a destination for Big Game Safaris.

Before we look outside, let me also briefly re-visit one of the criteria for an animal to qualify as being branded for a 'Big List'. An animal must be capable of inspiring awe and fear because it does kill or can kill people. Let us start with the African Big Five which comprises of the Lion, Leopard, Elephant, Rhino and Buffalo. All of these animals are big and do kill people. The awe factor is necessary in the context of safari because subtly or otherwise there is an association with an element of danger. Not only must an animal be able to kill a human being, it must also be big to be physically frightening. Thus predators such as lions and herbivores such as elephants are typical big game safari animals. If you were on your own, unarmed and on foot, you would feel very vulnerable and quite likely frightened on encountering one of these animals. Mosquitoes may kill more people than any other visible animal, but one does not think of being on an adventurous safari if one went on a walk in an area with a risk of malaria. Similarly snakes kill, but not enough people will want to see them in much the same way as they would like to see lions and leopards. In Africa and Sri Lanka, the Big Five animals are mammals, but a destination does not necessarily have to choose only mammals for its 'Big List'.

The awe factor means that many countries outside Africa and Asia will struggle to find a Big Five. Let us briefly run through the continents. In North America we have the three bears, the Black, the Brown (and the sub-species the Grizzly) and the Polar Bear. There is also the Cougar or the Mountain Lion. Trying to see these four species, five if you add the Bison, in one tour will be difficult and enormously expensive. This would violate the criteria I have listed, that a tour for a Big List must work as a mainstream package tour in terms of time and cost.

Tusker at Yala National Park



Leopard cubs at play







Spotted Deer quenching their thirst at a waterhole in Yala National Park

In South America one has the Jaguar which can kill people, but it is very elusive. Despite its huge bio-diversity, there are not many qualifiers for a Big Five list. The same can be said about Antarctica, which does not have a single mammal which is feared, although seals can potentially inflict harm.

In Australia, one of the large species of Kangaroos can potentially disembowel and kill a human being. So can birds like the Cassowary, Emu and the Ostrich. However, although not explicitly stated, the discussion of criteria for animals which make it to a Big List centres around mammals. People are unlikely to fly to Australia mainly for a safari to see Kangaroos, although people do go there and to Antarctica for their wildlife as a whole.

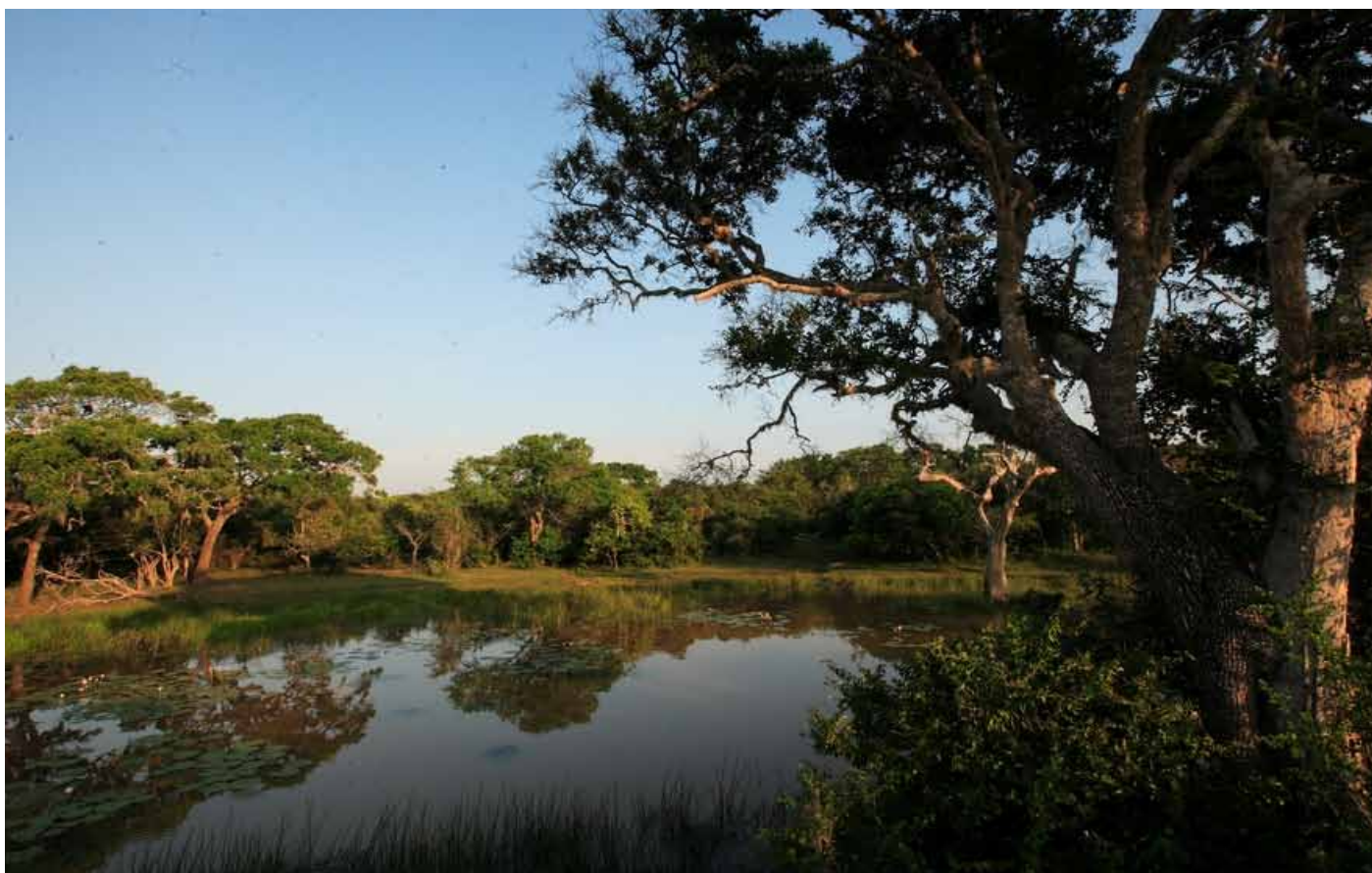
In Western Europe we have the Brown Bear and in certain Eastern European countries we also have the European Bison, which could potentially kill a human being. The Wolf is once again spreading in Western Europe and although it does not kill people, has always inspired awe and fear and can be considered in a European Big Three. If we were to remove the criteria of charismatic predators which are feared for killing people, animals such as the Lynx could make it into a list. Parts of Eurasia also have the Tiger, the Siberian Tiger being a special example. But as you can see, outside Africa and Asia, one will not find five big mammals which inspire awe and fear with their potential to kill people. It tends to be such mammals that fuel the desire for Big Game Safaris.

In Asia, with the exception of India and Sri Lanka, large mammals are very difficult to see. In India, it may be easier to go in search of tigers than it would be for elephants. The Leopard and Sloth Bear are difficult to see. Since 2001, when the team at Jetwing Eco Holidays began to market Sri Lanka for its leopards and big game, wildlife photographers and wildlife enthusiasts from India are increasingly visiting Sri Lanka to see and photograph Leopard, Sloth Bear and Elephant. When the ease of viewing or strike factor is taken into account for these three mammals, Sri Lanka ranks well ahead of India. Sri Lanka does not have the most charismatic land mammal of Asia, the tiger. It also does not have the Asiatic Lion which is restricted to the Gir Forest in the state of Gujarat in India or the Rhino. However Sri Lanka compensates with two awesome animals, the Blue Whale, the largest animal to have ever lived in the planet and the Sperm Whale, the largest toothed whale. India is not short of animals for a Big Five.

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Asian Elephant at Minneriya National Park



One of the many picturesque waterholes of Yala National Park

But the distances which need to be travelled and the time required makes it prohibitively expensive and difficult, compared to Sri Lanka. When the likelihood and cost of seeing and photographing four or five charismatic mammals (my barometer for big game safari potential) on a two week safari is considered, Sri Lanka is by far the better destination.

If you compare India and Sri Lanka as destinations for seeing Asian wildlife and mammals in particular, it is also the case that it is much easier in Sri Lankan national parks. Yala is only rivalled in Asia by the core zone of Corbett National Park for the ease of seeing mammals. Mammals are relatively easy to see in Sri Lanka and expectations of most visitors when it comes to safari pivot around seeing mammals.

According to classical bio-geographical theory, small islands don't have large animals. Sri Lanka contradicts this theory. This is because until relatively recently in geological terms (about 10,000 years ago), it was not a small island. The sea levels were much lower during the last glaciation and Sri Lanka was a part of the large Eurasian land mass. This resulted in large land animals being on what subsequently became isolated as an island by rising sea levels. What is more, we find large land animals in significant concentrations giving rise to spectacular wildlife viewing spectacles like 'The Gathering'.

To summarize on some of my claims expressed above, it is pertinent to reproduce here two tables. Table 1 lists the criteria for an animal to qualify for a Big List and Table 2 lists the ranking of my Big Five nominees in terms of their ranking for ease of viewing in the world and in Asia.

My objective behind creating tags such as 'Sri Lanka is Best for Big Game outside Africa', 'Sri Lanka: The Ultimate Island Safari: and 'Sri Lanka's Big Five' is to create livelihoods in rural Sri Lanka through wildlife tourism by monetizing Sri Lanka's bio-diversity. I do hope more people will take stock of Sri Lanka's uniqueness, a tiny island that is a big game safari counterpart to a vast continent. It is now time for more people to carry the story that Sri Lanka is the Best for Big Game outside Africa and to see the island as a continental alternative.

TABLE 1: CRITERIA FOR AN ANIMAL TO QUALIFY FOR THE BIG FIVE LIST

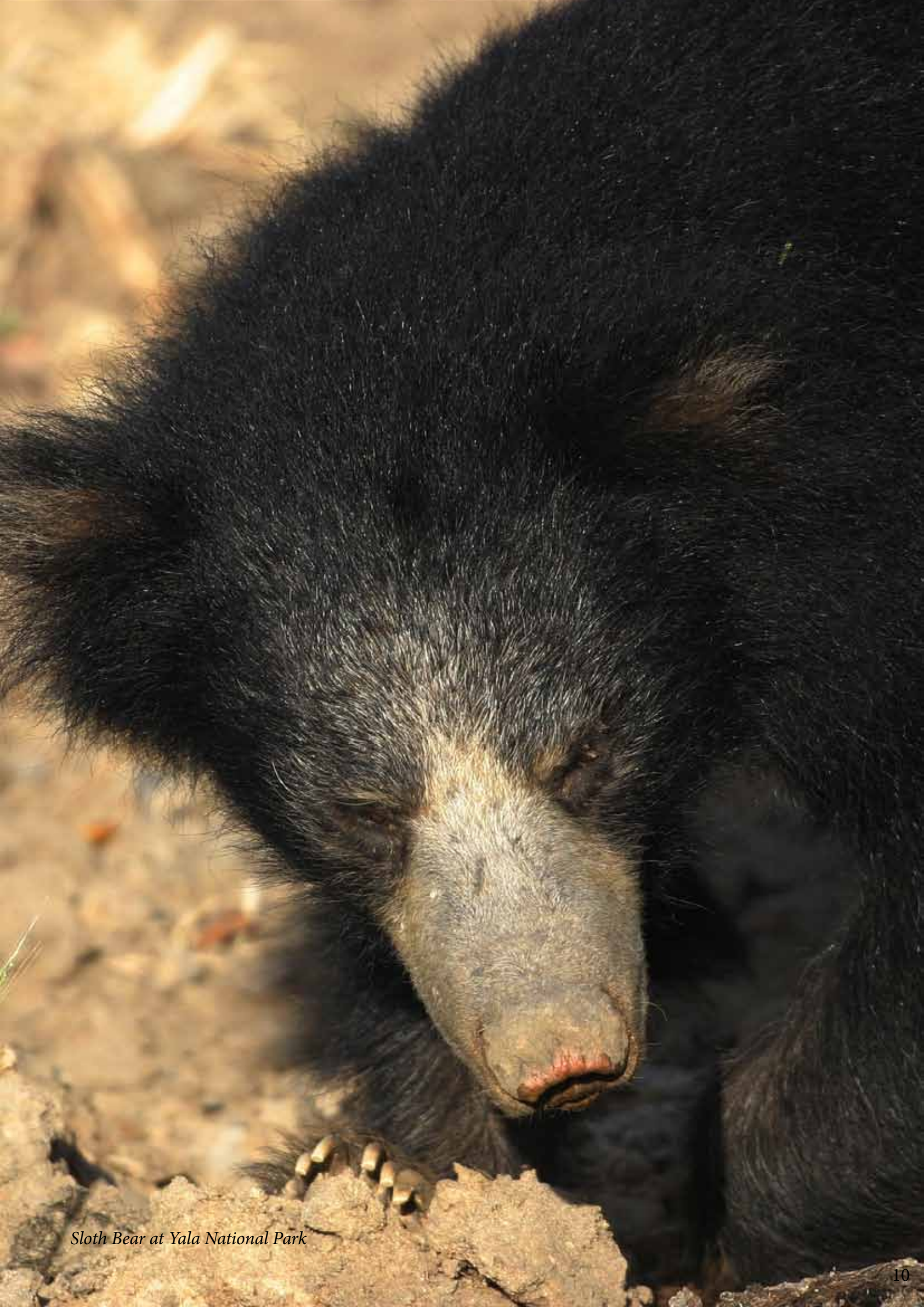
Big	It must be physically big.
Desirable	It must be an animal which is so desirable that people would travel from the other end of the world to see it.
Awe	Must be capable of inspiring awe and fear because it does kill or can kill people.
Strike Rate	It must be possible to see it with a reasonable degree of likelihood for it to be sellable as a wildlife tourism product.
Sri Lanka: a Top Site	Sri Lanka should be one of the best places in the world in which to see it.
Mainstream Tour	Ideally, the species chosen, subject to seasonality, should have a reasonable likelihood of being seen in the course of a single, affordable tour which can be used for mainstream tourism.



Leopard Cub at Yala National Park

TABLE 2: HOW SRI LANKA RANKS FOR EASE OF VIEWING OF 'SRI LANKA'S BIG FIVE'

Species	World	Asia
Blue Whale	1	1
Sperm Whale	Top 10	1
Asian Elephant	1	1
Leopard	1	1
Sloth Bear	1	1



Sloth Bear at Yala National Park



Leopard at Wilpattu © Riaz Cader

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people, far too many to list here, have helped me over the years to position Sri Lanka as one of the leading destinations in the world for wildlife travel. In the specific context of this article, a few people are a part of the story. Chitral Jaythilake, a wildlife photographer has embraced some of the concepts I have introduced such as Leopard Safaris, The Gathering and Best for Blue Whale. He has worked hard with his team to complement the efforts of my colleagues and the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau. Two others who have provided a much needed external catalyst for these two articles are Shiromal Cooray and Srilal Miththapala. Shiromal Cooray asked me for some new ideas, after attending ITB in March 2010, forcing me to bring together what I had been telling my staff and media for several years. Srilal Miththapala also accelerated the need for me to articulate my thoughts with his article (Sunday Times, 14 March 2010) where he suggested a Sri Lankan Big Four. Miththapala in his conversations with me also pressed me to raise the profile of the Sloth Bear. He also supported the branding of “The Gathering of Elephants”. I have also had a number of professional wildlife tour operators, guides and game lodge owners in Europe and India who have given me their time to sound them out on the view that Sri Lanka is the best outside Africa for big game safaris.

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de Silva Wijeyeratne, G. (2010). [Our Big Five]. Why Sri Lanka is the Best for Big Game Safaris outside Africa. The Sunday Times Plus. Sunday 18 October 2010. Features. Page 6.



Sperm Whale off Kalpitiya



Striped Dolphin



Elephants at play in Minneriya



Blue Whale off Mirissa



Blue Whale off Mirissa

SAMPLE ITINERARY

Day 1 Arrival in Sri Lanka and transfer to hotel in Kalpitiya for two nights.

Day 2 Early morning and late afternoon, take the boat from the hotel and head out to sea, beyond the reef in search of Sperm Whale - the largest toothed whale in the world. The deep seas off the Kalpitiya Peninsula where the continental shelf lies, provide an ideal habitat for these giant oceanic predators, which need to dive several hundred meters to hunt prey such as the Giant Squid. After sighting Sperm Whales, your naturalist will focus on Spinner Dolphins, where pods often numbering in the hundreds are regularly seen within a few kilometers of the shore

Day 3 After breakfast, leave for a hotel near Wilpattu for two nights.

Afternoon game drive at Wilpattu National Park in search of Sloth Bear and Leopard. Wilpattu is also home to over 250 species of birds, while Asian Elephant, Barking Deer, Spotted Deer, Sambar, Jackal and Asiatic Buffalo are some of the other mammal species seen.

Day 4 Relaxation in the morning. Afternoon game drive to Wilpattu National Park in search of Leopard and Sloth Bear

Day 5 After breakfast, leave for a hotel in Kandy for one night. Late afternoon visit the sacred Temple of the Tooth in the city. Relaxation for the remainder of the day.

Day 6 After breakfast, leave for a hotel near Uda Walawe for one night. Afternoon game drive to Uda Walawe National Park where sightings of Asian Elephant are virtually guaranteed.

Day 7 After breakfast, leave for hotel near Yala for four nights. Relaxation for the remainder of the day. Afternoon game drive to Yala National Park in search of Leopard, Sloth Bear and Asian Elephant.

The biggest draws in Yala are Leopards, Elephants and Sloth Bears. A recent study has shown that Yala has one of the highest densities of Leopards in the world. The lack of other large carnivores means that the leopard is the top predator and adults and cubs are remarkably relaxed during the day, offering great opportunities for viewing and photography. Yala is also the best place in Asia for sighting the shy and usually nocturnal Sloth Bear. Yala is also home to over 250 Asian Elephant with the highlight being the 10-12 large Tuskers that roam around the park.



Days 8-10 Morning and afternoon safaris at Yala National Park in search of Leopard, Sloth Bear and Asian Elephant.

Day 11 After breakfast, leave for a hotel in Galle for three nights. Evening, visit the Galle Dutch Fort (a UNESCO World Heritage Site).

Days 12-13 Morning, drive to Mirissa Fisheries Harbour and get on the boat in search of Whales. Blue Whales and Sperm Whales are both seen regularly in these waters. It is the best place in the world for seeing Blue Whale and almost certainly the best place in the world for sighting both Blue Whales and Sperm Whales. Our team has conducted over 250 whale watching expeditions in the past two seasons alone and has sighted the whales on more than 95% of the outings.

Day 14 Morning, drive with your naturalist to the Mirissa Fisheries Harbour one last time to look for Blue Whales and Sperm Whales.

Afterwards, transfer to hotel Colombo for one night. Relaxation in the evening.

Day 15 After breakfast, transfer to International Airport.



Large pods of Spinner Dolphins are usually encountered on most whale watching outings from Mirissa



Lone Elephant at Yala National Park



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