

Here: a family of elephants splash joyously in the waters of Ruhuna West National Park, a protected sanctuary popularly known as Yala

TRUNK CALL

Home to Sri Lanka’s ‘big three’, elephant, leopard and sloth bear, Yala is the island’s second largest national park, where big skies and big crowds come as part of the package – and patience is a virtue, writes **Ben Illis**



One teenager sneaks up on another and, with a little trumpet, rears up and ducks his companion clean under the water. His victim spins round and pushes his tormentor, who loses his footing and disappears momentarily under the surface. A female, possibly the mother, lazily flicks her trunk, administering an admonishing cuff round the ear. Chastened, the boisterous youths take their rough-housing to the other side of the wewa, or tank – a manmade water-hole that serves as an oasis in the arid, thorny scrub of the park. On the water’s edge a baby – no more than six months old – trembles visibly, bracing herself. Her mother gives her

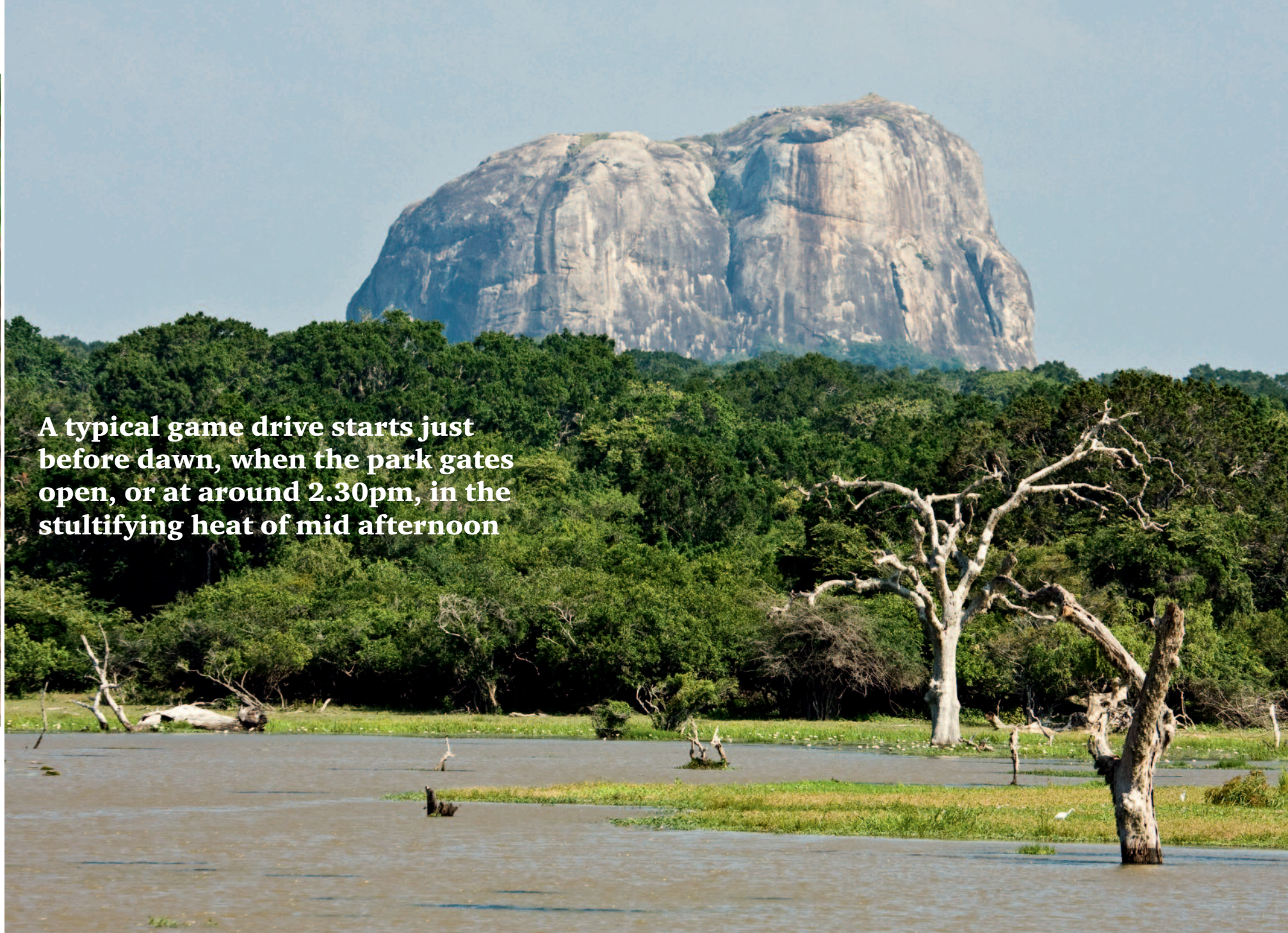
a gentle nudge and she nervously takes to the shallow water. Watching elephants at play, it is hard not to anthropomorphise. Their joy is palpable as they lounge and frolic in the cooling waters, trumpeting and spraying water over each others’ backs. It is a joy that often manifests in what looks suspiciously like a broad grin. All the usual family dynamics are present; characters are strong and easy to identify. Of course, witnessing elephants bathe is itself a rare treat and one to cherish.

We are in Ruhuna West National Park, popularly known as Yala, where the Sri Lankan ‘big three’ of elephant, sloth bear and leopard co-habitat in almost 400 square miles of

predominantly thorny scrub forest and open grassland, studded with tanks and punctuated by rocky outcrops that rise to some 50 metres in places. The park is lined with golden sand beaches to the south east and also supports other habitats, including brackish lagoons and mangrove marshland. Yala has been a protected sanctuary for over a century and is home to around 6,000 elephants; 400 leopards – the greatest density of leopard in the world – and an unknown number of the rare Indian sloth bear. All the ‘big three’ in Sri Lanka are, in fact, considered sub-species in their own right and wander freely across the park’s four open blocks and the strict reserve that forms

block 5. We visitors are not so lucky and are restricted to the block into which we enter. The bulk of viewing takes place in block 1, where leopard density is more than matched by the density of jeeps here to see them. A quieter experience can be found when other blocks are open to the public, although, paradoxically, a combination of a far lesser habituation to the presence of jeeps and a lesser familiarity with the animal’s habits on the part of the drivers means that, while you may encounter fewer jeeps, you may also encounter less game.

Wildlife viewing in Yala is poles apart from its more familiar counterpart in Africa, where much of the wildlife →



A typical game drive starts just before dawn, when the park gates open, or at around 2.30pm, in the stultifying heat of mid afternoon

is laid out on a plate. Here, the hunt is on. A typical game drive starts just before dawn, when the park gates open, or at around 2.30pm, in the stultifying heat of the mid-afternoon. The gates close promptly at nightfall. As elsewhere in the world, the best viewing tends to be early in the morning or late in the afternoon and there is rarely much to be seen in the heat of the day. A drive does not guarantee a sighting, of course, and many is the day when we have driven around, large animals nowhere to be seen, frustration mounting until, more often than not, we are rewarded for our forbearance by something quite magical. On quiet days, though, the smaller animals and astonishing variety of birdlife more than make up for any lack of the bigger, headline residents. Golden jackals and mongooses are the most likely smaller, predatory mammals to be encountered and make for interesting, characterful viewing, as they hunt and scavenge. Grey langurs sit in trees, grooming and munching leaves, while water-buffalo wallow indolently and wild boar snuffle in the background. Jewel-like bee-eaters and kingfishers dart around on dusty paths and tanks, respectively. Peacocks roost in dead trees, majestic tails streaming behind them, shimmering in the light. Most days we encounter at least one male dancing, his tail spread fan-like in all its pomp and glory. The Sri Lankan national bird – the jungle-fowl – struts self-importantly, like a superbly vibrant cockerel, males scrapping noisily in the shadows of the thorny scrub bushes. Hornbills clatter overhead. Aptly named painted storks make a colourful addition to the watery vistas,



Opposite, clockwise from top left: Yala contains one of the world's highest concentrations of leopard; Elephant Rock at Yala; wild peacock; water buffalo include two species rarely found outside Yala - a painted stork feeds nearby; the changeable hawk-eagle generally hunts from a favoured concealed perch

while open-bills; woolly-necks; lesser adjutants and, for the very lucky, the endangered black-necked make up the stork quotient. Raptors abound, brahiminy kites; serpent and changeable hawk eagles are most common, often pestering the spotted pelicans that swim in lazy circles in the larger tanks. Beautiful barbets, orioles and paradise fly-catchers are here in their droves, as are sunbirds, plentiful, eye-catchingly bright pigeons.

Back to the action, and our driver takes a call that a leopard has gone to ground in a culvert under the sun-baked, red earth track. The race is on. We arrive to find no less than 10 other jeeps lined up in anticipation. All eyes are on the mouth of the tunnel. Time ticks by and one by one the other jeeps give up. Finally, only three remain, as, he emerges, proud and majestic, his sleek flank catching the afternoon sun. Excitement runs high and the post-adrenaline rush lingers as we move off to continue the search. A little while later, our driver pulls alongside a friend's jeep to boast of our leopard sighting. His friend laughs back and asks his passenger to show us photos of a young female with cubs playing, right out in the open. Jealous doesn't even begin to cover it. The good-natured competition between the young drivers, as well as their astonishing eye and encyclopaedic knowledge of the park's wildlife, is a real feature of a trip to Yala.



ESSENTIAL VIEWING

Don't miss the opportunity to pay a visit to Sri Lanka's other wildlife hotspots during a tour to Yala



Sri Lanka is home to the world's oldest protected reserve - Mihintale Forest, established in 307 BC, when archaeological finds have shown that King Devanampiyatissa decreed no man should kill animals in the forest, to preserve them for future generations. It should come as no surprise, then, that there are many other excellent wildlife-viewing locations spread across the island, many of which may well be offered on a tour that takes in Yala. Here's a brief run-down of five of the best:

MINNERIYA
A tiny park (see above), centred around the Minneriya Tank, where vast herds of over 300 elephants - the largest wild elephant gathering in the world - congregate at the height of the dry season every August and September.

www.srilankaecotourism.com/minneriya_national_park

SINHARAJAH RAINFOREST
Sri Lanka's only primary rainforest and one of the most significant such habitats in the world. It is primarily known for its bird-life and was declared as World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1989.

www.srilankaecotourism.com/sinharaja.htm

UDA WALAWE
A medium-sized park in the central south of the country, renowned for its large herds of elephants, easily viewed in marshy wetland.

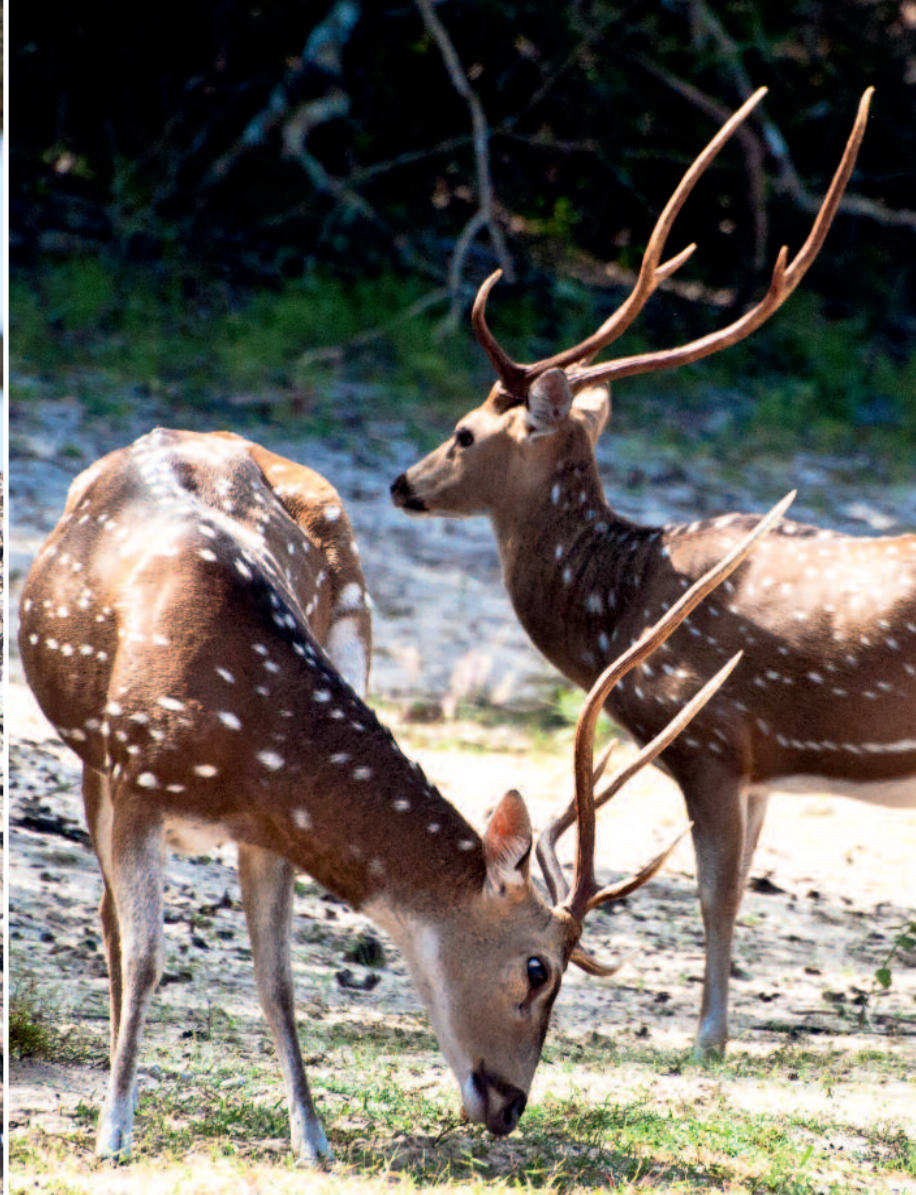
www.srilankaecotourism.com/udawalawe_national_park.htm

WILPATTU
Sri Lanka's largest park and was off-limits until recently, due to extensive land-mining in the civil war. Now entirely safe, animal populations are booming and it is one of the best places in Sri Lanka to see leopard.

www.wilpattu.org

MIRISSA
A pretty fishing village in the south and a well-known starting point for some of the world's most successful blue-whale watching tours.

www.mirissa.com



Sri Lanka's Wildlife Department remains determined to protect what is one of the country's biggest touristic draws

Still tingling from our leopard sighting, we head back to the bungalow. The wildlife department operates several bungalows inside the park, which can be booked (by telephone or in person only) for \$75 per person per night. Staying in the park does present some logistical difficulties, in that one must bring all supplies for the entire trip. The market at Tissa has everything you need, but without refrigeration in the bungalows, it is up to you to supply ice and ice boxes and a predominantly vegetarian diet is both safer and easier. A nearby fish-canning plant, which the jeep drivers all know, provides ice and a semi-itinerant fishing village on the shores of the park itself sells fish and, if you are lucky, also lobster. Bungalows are serviced by excellent cooks, who expertly turn out curries and rice and a fantastic breakfast, but don't expect western cuisine. Bungalows sleep eight in two twins and camp beds on the verandah. Mosquito nets are provided, but you will need sheets and towels. Accommodation is basic, but that is part of the charm. Of course the less intrepid can stay in many nearby hotels of varying standards that have sprung up to fill the void left by the widespread devastation by the tsunami of 2001. There are also several organised camping outfits in operation at specific locations within the park.

At 5am the following morning we tuck into syrupy coffee with condensed milk, ahead of our morning drive. The sun is not yet up and the boom of the surf from the

Opposite, clockwise from left: fresh fish and even lobster can be sourced from the village of Tissa; a land monitor finds the perfect spot; chital are mainly active during the coolest periods of the day; tusked male elephants are a common sight in Yala

