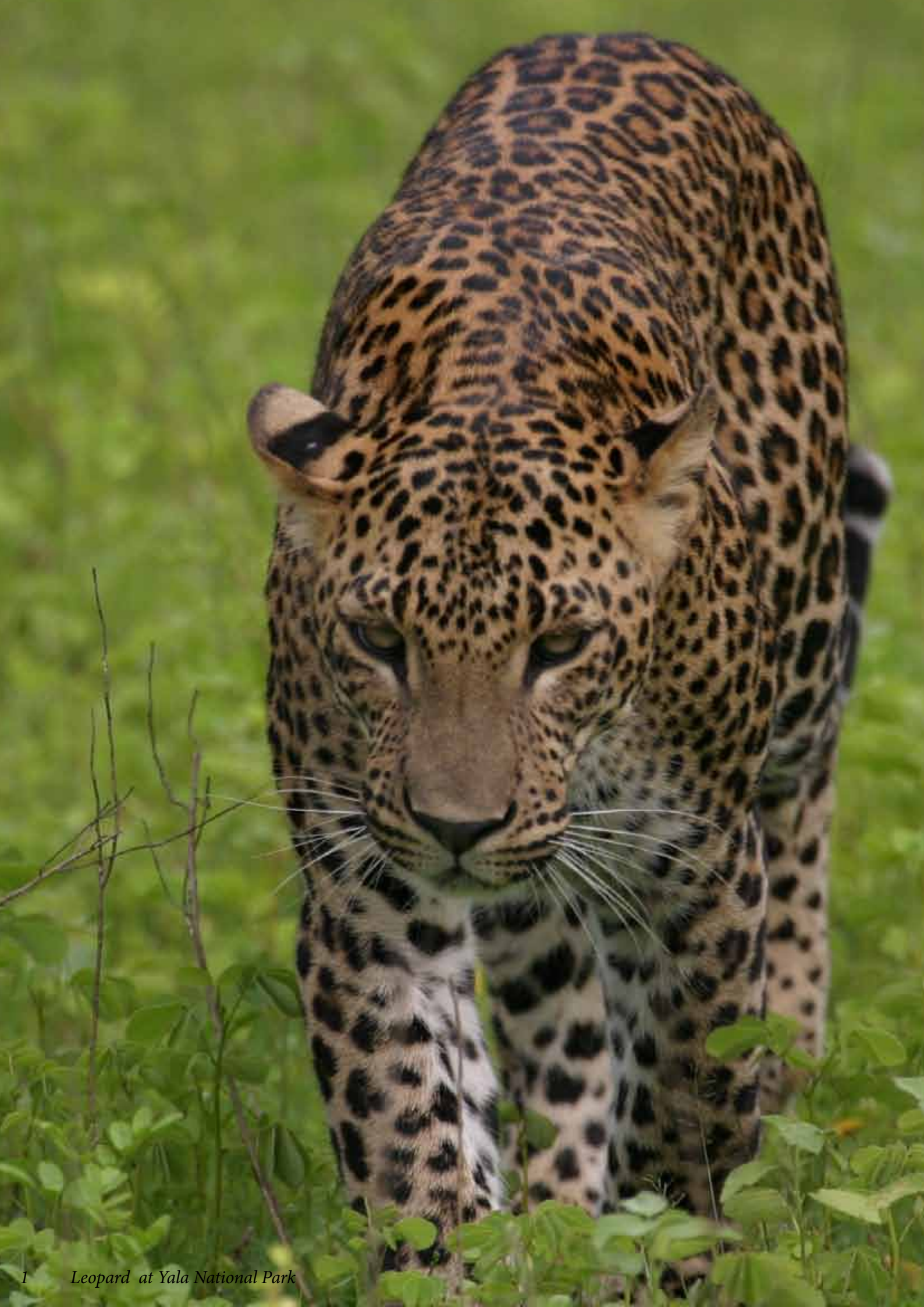


Sri Lanka's

Big Five



Sri Lanka is the top spot for some of the most coveted safari animals in the world



SRI LANKA'S BIG FIVE

Africa's Big Five is famous and over the years I have heard many people loosely referring to various Sri Lankan equivalents. One such example was an article by Srilal Miththapala in the Sunday Times of 14th March 2010. In this article, he advocated a Sri Lankan Big Four. Since around 2008, I had focused on branding Sri Lanka as the Ultimate Island Safari (see www.srilanka.travel for a free pdf) and I had not devoted time to overtly branding a Sri Lankan Big Five, or Four or Three. However, the idea for a Big Five had been forming in my mind. A catalyst for articulating this was a conversation I had in March 2010 with Shiromal Cooray. She had returned from the world's largest travel trade fair, the ITB, and commented that the mainstream tour operators were looking for fresh ideas. She was not aware of Miththapala's article, but quite co-incidentally asked me whether we could look at a Sri Lankan Top Three or something on those lines for developing an itinerary. I suggested a Sri Lankan Big Five branding, which we had used as a visual theme on the cover of a pdf titled 'Sri Lanka: The Ultimate Island Safari', published a few months earlier.

The choice of species agrees with Miththapala's article and that of others who have referred to 'Big Lists' before, but with the addition of the Sperm Whale. In this article I will explain why I think we should brand a Big Five and also explain selection criteria and the 'strike rate'.



Tusker at Yala National Park



Sloth Bear at Yala National Park

Blue Whale off the coast of Mirissa





WHY A BIG FIVE?

There were two strong reasons why I felt if we were to brand and market a 'Big List', we should go for a Big Five. Firstly, creating a Sri Lankan Big Five creates a 'symmetry of phrase' with the African Big Five. Secondly, Sri Lanka is the best safari destination outside Africa and it makes sense to maintain a 'symmetry of phrase' as the large continent of Africa and the tiny island of Sri Lanka are Big Game safari counterparts. Outside Africa, no other country or continent can boast of five, big charismatic animals which also offer a good strike rate and a chance to see all of them in one trip. I have in the last few years begun branding Sri Lanka as the 'Ultimate Island Safari'. An A4, sixteen page, pdf publication on this topic is available on www.srilanka.travel. The more I have discussed this pdf, the deeper the realization has been that this small island, is the Big Game safari counterpart for the entire continent of Africa. On 21 July 2010, with Leia Morales of the British company Representation Plus, I met the famous TV birder, wildlife presenter and author Bill Oddie and journalist Liam Creedon. I gave them a briefing before they flew out to Sri Lanka.

I explained once again why outside Africa, Sri Lanka is the best wildlife safari destination for being able to serve up an alternative Big Five. Therefore because of the symmetry of phrase and Sri Lanka being an island counterpart to the definitive safari continent, it makes sense that Sri Lanka Tourism adopts a Big Five safari branding. Conversations such as this and my discussions with professional wildlife tour operators and tour leaders in the UK as well as discussions with tour operators and game lodge owners from India, prompted me to write this article to serve as a press brief.

People may ask why India is not the best counterpart to Africa. India certainly has the charismatic Tiger. The Asiatic Lion can be seen and with some difficulty so can the Indian Rhinoceros. But large distances will need to be covered. Surprisingly, the Asian Elephant is not so easy to see and Leopard and Sloth Bear are almost impossible for a tourist to see. Indian wildlife enthusiasts and photographers have now begun to visit Sri Lanka to see Leopard, Sloth Bear, Asian Elephant, Blue and Sperm Whales as word spreads that for big, enigmatic animals, Sri Lanka in the right season, offers a virtually guaranteed opportunity to see these animals. In India, they are not easy to see and in most other places in the world, they are almost impossible to see. The Sri Lankan Tourism industry now needs to get the word out to the world at large, that for Big Game Safaris, Sri Lanka is the best outside the African Continent.

Leopard drags Buffalo carcass away from Crocodile at Yala National Park



Sperm Whales off Kalpitiya

SRI LANKA'S BIG FIVE

My nominations for the Big Five would be as follows.

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| Big Blue | The Blue Whale, the biggest animal which has ever lived on the planet. |
| Big Tooth | The Sperm Whale, the biggest toothed whale species in the world. |
| Big Cat | The leopard, the biggest cat in Sri Lanka, the third biggest in Asia and the top predator in Sri Lanka. |
| Big Ele | The Asian Elephant, the biggest terrestrial mammal in Asia. |
| Big Tropical Bear | One of the biggest bears in tropical latitudes. The Sloth Bear may well be the largest bear in tropical latitudes, but data on Asian bears is not sufficient at the time of writing to be conclusive. |

I will develop this article along three areas. Firstly, why we should include the Sperm Whale to the list, because no one who has previously written about or discussed a Sri Lanka Big List has included the Sperm Whale. Secondly, I wish to articulate some selection criteria to make the process objective as possible. Thirdly, I wish to emphasize the importance of the strike rate, which decides whether the nominees for the Big Five are sellable as a tourism product.



Sperm Whale tail fluke off Kalpitiya



THE DEVELOPMENT OF MARINE WILDLIFE TOURISM AND WHY THE SPERM WHALE SHOULD BE IN THE BIG FIVE

I believe it is imperative that both the Blue Whale and the Sperm Whale feature in Sri Lanka's list of 'must see and can see' list of large animals because it reinforces the fact that Sri Lanka is an oceanic island. What is more, the South of Sri Lanka is the best place in the world for seeing both Blue Whales and Sperm whales in one whale watching trip. In May 2008, drawing on a research insight by Dr Charles Anderson and following a lot of field work by me and data gathered by people who worked with me, I took the story to the world that Sri Lanka was the best place in the world for seeing Blue Whales. In March 2010 in the Sunday Times and Hi magazine I broke the story that the Kalpitiya Peninsula is very good for seeing Sperm Whales. This was once again inspired by a suggestion by Dr Anderson. Records of sightings which are now beginning to come in suggest that Kalpitiya could comfortably be in the top five or top seven sites in the world for reliably seeing Sperm Whales during the viewing season. It is possible that with a more focused search around the 400m depth isobar (E 079 35) which runs parallel to the peninsula, it may rank as a top site behind Kaikoura in New Zealand and the Azores. However, at this stage it is best to conservatively list Sri Lanka as being amongst the top ten places in the world for seeing Sperm Whales.

To have been a good site for either the largest baleen whale or for the largest toothed whale would have been good. To be one of the top locations in the world for both is remarkable. Having both of these species in the Big Five reinforces the fact that Sri Lanka is remarkably rich for marine mammals. This has been echoed by visiting researchers in research vessels including the Odyssey and the Tulip in recent decades and whalers from centuries past. However of all the big wildlife stories, marine mammal tourism was the last frontier to be crossed by tourism professionals. In 2001, we began to brand Sri Lanka for its Leopards (for a history see Hi Magazine March 2009) and The Gathering of Leopards (see Hi Magazine December 2008). Other animal groups such as primates were also publicised for tourism. Birds had been developed for eco-tourism for some time thanks to the pioneering efforts of Thilo Hoffmann and his team. However within bird watching there was still room for brand labels such as the Sinharaja Bird Wave to be created for specific phenomena which had been studied by conservationists and scientists such as Professor Sarath Kotagama (See Hi Magazine May 2009).

Between 2001 and 2007, the Leopards, Elephants, Primates, Butterflies and Dragonflies (see Hi Magazine August 2009) had entered the vocabulary of tourism. However marine mammal tourism, for which the country was so ideally situated, eluded our efforts because of the cost of access. Taking a boat out to sea meant negotiating with a fisherman to compensate him for a day's catch. The field work required to develop marine mammal tourism was prohibitively expensive. Marine mammal fieldwork was confined to a few researchers who could gain grants to run a boat out to sea. However, after 2006, affordable access to the sea, especially for me and my team at Jetwing Eco Holidays dramatically changed on two fronts.

Firstly, the setting up of Mirissa Water Sports after the Boxing Day Tsunami which provided me with low cost access to the Blue Whales in the southern seas. After my first whale watching trip on 1st April 2008, I negotiated with the boat crew to take me out for the cost of diesel in exchange for the promise that I would put Mirissa on the world map for Blue Whales. In 2008, the crew would struggle to get a booking and on several days had just me chartering the entire boat for Rs 3,000 of diesel for a research sailing. Two years later, it can barely cope with the demand during the season. No less than five operators were whale watching during the 2009/2010 season.

The second front was the support by Dallas Martenstyn and his co-investors to me, which dramatically changed how the Kalpitiya Peninsula will be viewed. In 2008, they had established it as a top site for watching spinner dolphins. I was able to come up with sightings and credible reasons as to why Kalpitiya can also be a whale watching hot spot (see Sunday Times 07 March 2010). It also allowed me to pursue a long held dream to find a top spot in Sri Lanka for seeing rare pelagic seabirds (see Sunday Times 25 April 2010).





Leopard at Wilpattu National Park © Riaz Cader

In March 2010 we handled Andrew Sutton and Chris Waller who filmed and took still photographs of Blue and Sperm Whales in the seas South of Mirissa. The link to their images travelled around widely by email and many more underwater film makers and photographers are likely to come to both Mirissa and Kalpitiya in the future. More and more people are aware of marine mammals and with the advent of digital photography every month more and more Sri Lanka wildlife enthusiasts are up-loading images of cetaceans photographed in Sri Lankan waters to flickr.com and other picture sharing websites.

So in my view, having the Blue Whale and Sperm Whale in Sri Lanka's top list of 'animals to see' makes sense. This is because we are a reliable location for seeing these highly desired animals and they underline that Sri Lanka is an oceanic, tropical island and one with the potential to be one of the leading marine mammal watching destinations in the world. The case for including the Sperm Whale also brings me to articulate a set of criteria for making the top list.

CRITERIA

An animal that makes it to the Big Five list must satisfy the following criteria.

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| 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 a waterhole in Yala National Park

I do not include in the criteria that it must be unique to Sri Lanka as animals such as the Blue Whale which is our biggest positive international media story is widespread (although difficult to see elsewhere). Rarity is not a good criterion as rare animals cannot be shown easily to tourists. If rarity was a criteria there would be hundreds of rare rainforest animals jostling for a place on the list. The requirement for a reasonable strike rate means that rarities are excluded in the Big Five.

The requirement that it is a big animal means that the Spinner Dolphins which are much loved and desired does not make the list. Furthermore there are other places in the world where they can be viewed in large numbers. The Buffalo is big but does not make the list because of doubts about its origins and also because it is not so desirable that people would want to travel to Sri Lanka to see it. But they would for all of the other animals on the Big Five list.

THE STRIKE RATE

One of the most important criteria for big, desirable animals is the strike rate. There is limited tourism value in creating a brand association between an animal and a destination if visitors are not likely to see it. Let me run through my nominees for the Sri Lankan Big Five and explain why the island is one of the best, if not the best place in the world in which to see it.

Almost everyone in the world, dreams of seeing a Blue Whale. With Blue Whales we have now established that during the season the strike rate is over ninety per cent, off Mirissa. Nowhere else in the world can Blue Whales be seen in such numbers and with such ease.

For Sperm Whales, between Mirissa and Kalpitiya, the strike rate is good enough for marine wildlife tourism where visitors engage in multiple visits to sea. Given that Sri Lanka is one of the best places in which to see this animal and the other factors such as its popularity, it qualifies for the list. I believe Kalpitiya is the place in which to focus the search for Sperm Whales, based on the data during the first quarter of 2010.

With the Leopard, I was the first to begin the mantra that Yala National Park in Sri Lanka is one of the best places in the world to see and photograph leopards and that five game drives offered a ninety per cent chance. This has been proven over the years. The leopards have also now become so habituated to vehicles that the strike rate is probably even better than what I quoted initially. At present, 3 game drives seem to offer a 95 per cent strike rate. Every year one or more sets of cubs perform for the cameras and it has now become almost too easy to photograph leopards. The re-opening of Wilpattu National Park will see another point of focus for leopards as the park is managed and the animals become habituated.

The Asian Elephant is found in 13 countries. But it is not an easy animal to see other than in Sri Lanka which is the best place in the world for seeing it. There is only one place in Asia where a visitor is guaranteed to see an elephant on a game drive. This is Uda Walwe National Park. Given how popular elephants are, it is surprising that we don't brand Uda Walawe National Park more strongly enough as the best place in the world in which to see a wild Asian Elephant with a hundred per cent strike rate. In addition, Sri Lanka also has the spectacular Gathering of Elephants, a seasonal event in the Minneriya (and Kaudulla) National Parks. At times, I have observed 300 elephants gathered within a one kilometer quadrat. However, it is more likely that one may see between 100-200 elephants, from one vantage point, on a good viewing. There are possibly two places in Africa, where more elephants may gather together in times of drought. But The Gathering of Elephants in Minneriya (and Kaudulla) is the largest gathering of elephants which recurs, predictably each year, albeit seasonally. In short it is the largest recurring or seasonal gathering of elephants in the world which is can be offered as a tourism product.

Ironically it is easier to see a leopard in Yala than it is to see a Sloth Bear. But then again there is always an individual or mother Sloth Bear with cubs in any given year which is tolerant of vehicles and provides a reasonable chance of seeing a Sloth Bear to serious wildlife enthusiasts who undertake three to five game drives. When the Palu Trees begin to bear ripe fruit in June and July, bears can be seen on almost every game drive. Wasgomuwa National Park is believed to have the highest densities of Sloth Bear in Sri Lanka. However due to habituation, the nature of the terrain, the density of Palu Trees (a factor during the fruiting season) and other factors yet to be determined, Yala is the best place for viewing Sloth Bear. In fact it is the best place in the world for seeing the Sloth Bear. Wilpattu National Park, is the next best location for Sloth Bear although more data needs to be accumulated to gain an idea of strike rates.

The concept of a Big Five label has its advantages in appealing to a broader tourism market through the big tour operators who can feature a Sri Lanka's Big Five tour. In parallel, I would like to see the branding for Sri Lanka as the Ultimate Island Safari. This enables the serious wildlife enthusiasts and photographers and writers who will travel with the smaller specialist tour operators to understand that Sri Lanka's riches extend beyond the Big Five.

Blue Whale surfaces off Mirissa





HOW SRI LANKA'S BIG FIVE RANK FOR EASE OF VIEWING

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



STRIKE RATES WITHIN SRI LANKA FOR 'SRI LANKA'S BIG FIVE'

| Species | Strike Rate for Game Drives/Sailings |
|----------------|--|
| Blue Whale | 90% during season off Mirissa |
| Sperm Whale | Provisionally, somewhere between 1 in 3 and 1 in 5 from Kalpitiya during February/March. More data needs to be gathered to see if the rate is better and the span of the viewing window. |
| Asian Elephant | 100% in Uda Walawe and during The Gathering at Minneriya (and Kaudulla). |
| Leopard | 1 in 3 at Yala. There are periods when it is 1 in 2. |
| Sloth Bear | 1 in 5 in Yala. Improves to 1 in 3 during fruiting of Palu in June/July. |



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The many people who have helped me over the years are more fully acknowledged in the books I have written. In the specific context of this article I would like to thank Dr Charles Anderson and Dr Shyamala Ratnayake for answering questions. I would also like to thank Chitral Jayathilake and Srilal Miththapala for supporting and in some cases taking the lead subsequently for some of the ideas I have introduced on positioning Sri Lanka for The Gathering, Leopard Safaris, Best for Blue Whale, Primate Safaris, etc. Sri Lanka's rise to eminence for whale watching would not have taken place if Dr Charles Anderson had not shared his research insights with me giving me the opportunity to engage in field work and become the bridge between science and commerce.

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Sloth Bear at Yala National Park

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, Asiatic Buffalo are some of the other mammal species seen.



Leopard at Wilpattu National Park © Riaz Cader

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 a 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 Elephants with the highlight being the 10-12 large Tuskers that roam around the park. The park is also good for birds like Indian and Great Thick-knees, Sirkeer and Blue-faced Malkohas and Malabar Pied Hornbill which are dry zone specialities. A day's birding in the park, during the northern winter, can yield a 100 species.

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).



Large bull elephant in the open plains at Minneriya National Park

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 a hotel in Colombo for one night. Relaxation in the evening.

Day 15 After breakfast, transfer to International Airport.



Elephants at Minneriya National Park



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