

Brimming with life

■ Even in dry season Yala is alive



Bee eater



In a pensive mood



Ali Gala



Herd of deer, swift and illusive



Camouflaged wild buffalo 'bet you can't see me'



On top of the world

ards. K. Janaka Shantha Kumara, a wildlife ranger explained that leopards have a home range. No leopard would wander far from his territory and this eliminates the possibility of double counting. Therefore the number of leopards estimated is probably very accurate. Other residents of the Yala National Park include bear, sambar, Loris, fox, wild boar, the endemic toque macaque, golden palm civet and many more. Whether it is the estuarine crocodiles basking in the sun or fish wiggling in a dried up lake, everything in Yala has its unique beauty.

A part of the existing Yala National Park, earlier known as the Ruhunu National Park, was declared a sanctuary back in 1900 and the existing area of the park - an extent of 126,786 consisting 5 Blocks - was officially declared a National Park in 1983. Yala is a medley of ecosystems, including forests, reservoirs and bays.

Yala has clear seasonal changes. During September 15 to October 15 it is extremely dry in Yala. During which animals are at great risk because poachers make use of these extreme conditions to stake-out waterholes and shoot animals when they are most vulnerable and least alert. Consequently the whole workforce of the Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWC) is dedicated to protection of animals during this dire time. The Director General of DWC has the full authority to close off the park during this time of extreme drought, with the best interest of both animals and visitors in mind. Tourists may scare animals away from waterholes, in which case many animals could die of dehydration. Moreover thirsty animals are easily irritable and could cause harm to tourists.

March and April marks the breeding season in Yala. During colonial times this season was referred to as the 'closed season', during which hunting was prohibited. Hunting commenced again in the 'open season' after the populations increased.

Bordered by sand dunes from the south and the east, Yala has mammoth boulders some of which are 600 million years old. Just beyond Butawa Weva is Akasa Akasa Chaithyaya, a prominent land mark rising up to the blue Yala skies. In fact Akasa Chaithyaya, Sithulpawwa Rajamaha Viharaya, Magul Maha Vehera all vouches for Yala's historical significance. Parana Totupala marks the end of our tour, where pilgrims stop for nights during Paada Yaathra on their way to Block II - brief but exhilarating, the Yala tour is an excursion to remember.

Unfortunately the feeling of exhilarating was dampened when we observed some tourists smoking near Pathanangala beach. Many people, local as well as for-

eign, are apparently still unaware of the basic dos and don'ts of a National Park. Visitors are NOT permitted to get off their vehicles under any circumstance. This is not just to minimize the disturbance to wildlife, but to minimize danger to visitors by wild animals. Do NOT feed wild animals. This is very bad for their health. Moreover they might become too dependent on it that they may lose interest in foraging for themselves. Smoking and drinking is also prohibited in the park premises. Especially during dry season when the brush is dry and highly flammable a carelessly tossed cigarette butt could cause a major disaster, triggering a brush fire that would incinerate anything in its path, including the elephant you just saw, the two bear cubs and their mother and the leopard that crossed the road nonchalantly right in front of you, oblivious of the impending danger.

So next time you decide to take a chance, just remember you have the power to protect or destroy thousands of lives.

Pix : ANCL Library



No sunscreen required for the basking croc



Nobody messes with the great *Elphas maximus*



A colourful presentation



Going shopping eh we?



Idyllic scene from Yala



Bird diversity of Yala

