

# SLNHS Field Visit Report

## “Karavan” to Kalpitiya, Sri Lanka

### 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> November 2018



*Uchchimunai, the northern-most point of the Kalpitiya Peninsula*

#### Participants

Dr. Malik Fernando, Chris & Enoka Corea, Ninel Fernando, Rohan & Kamini De Soysa, Skanda De Saram, Bharatha & Damayanthi Attanayake, Yasmin Samarawickrema, Chanaka Senanayake, Mohan De Zylva, Sri Srikumar, Nelun Gunasekera, Ayoma Nethsinghe, Padmini Seneviratne and Lal Motha - a total of 17 happy souls venturing out together on the “Karavan” to Kalpitiya.

#### Travel Route

Colombo – Borella – Dematagoda - Kelani Bridge - Katunayake Expressway – Negombo – Chilaw – Madurankuliya – Palavi Junction – Norochcholai – Kalpitiya.

#### Theme

The main object of the field visit was to visit the isolated islands off the Kalpitiya coast, primarily Baththalangunduwa. In addition, a visit to the Uchchimunai beach-head, dolphin watching, historical sites in the Kalpitiya peninsula and bird watching was also envisaged. A detour to the Anawilundawa wetlands, along the way, was a fitting start. The cyclonic conditions in South India and the stormy weather predicted for the Jaffna District, which was expected to move towards Mannar and Puttalam, were climatic conditions of which we were constantly aware and took heed of in proceeding with our field visit.

#### 17<sup>th</sup> November 2018

We departed from Colombo, on time at 0545 hours, having picked up some participants along the way from designated spots around Colombo and four more along the way; making up a total of 16 participants and our driver, Mahinda, in our 20 seater “karavan”. Mohan joined us later in the evening at Kalpitiya. The mood was joyous, as usual, with many familiar faces and lively banter prevailed as we journeyed on. Enoka obliged by reading out excerpts from the book, “Sri Lanka a Wildlife Interlude” by S.D.Saparamadu (brought along by Chanaka), which was informative and well appreciated. We stopped at Thavalama Bojunhala for a hearty breakfast of local fare. The sanitary conditions of its washrooms left much to be desired and were avoided by many. The Bojunhala on the opposite side of the road was of a much better standard. The final stop-over at a Cargills Food City outlet in Chilaw was appreciated for last minute shopping and the clean sanitary conditions of its washrooms.

Enoka continued with further readings on Kollankanatta, Kudiramalai Point, Kalpitiya and Arippu from the Ceylon Gazetteer of the Puttalam District by Modder. Lively discussion ensued on the

pearl fisheries, dugongs and other related topics.

## ANAWILUNDAWA WETLANDS SANCTUARY

We drove past Chilaw and Arachchikattuwa, and turned off just past the 89<sup>th</sup> km post to reach the Anawilundawa wetlands around 0915 hours.

*Anawilundawa Sanctuary is one of the 6 RAMSAR wetlands in Sri Lanka, The sanctuary covers 1,397 ha lying between the coastal line and the Negombo-Puttalam railway line. This wetland consist of six large man made tanks and 3 peripheral tanks interconnected to create a complex irrigation system. The larger tanks are Pinkattiya, Maradansola, Anawilundawa, Mayawa, Surawila and Vellawali.*

*The history of these tank system goes back to 12th century and sadly the waterways which fed this system are lost without a trace and today these tanks are fed by the flood waters of the Deduru Oya brought to the area via the Sengal Oya scheme. These tanks have created a natural habitat which is ideal for birds while supplying water to the paddy fields around this area for over 800 years.*

*Today, this area is very popular among bird watchers and nature lovers. During the migration season a large variety of birds can be seen using this area as a feeding ground as well as a breeding ground .*

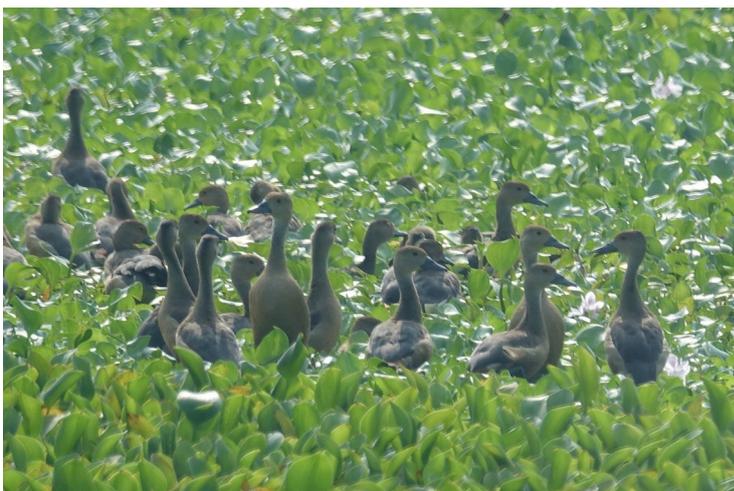
from RAMSAR

*“An ancient system of human-made cascading tanks or reservoirs, ranging between 12 and 50 hectares each and totaling some 200 ha, dating back to the 12th century, which help to sustain traditional paddy fields in the area as well as islets of natural vegetation.*

*In addition to being unique to the biogeographical region, the site harbours quite a few species of threatened fish, amphibians, birds, mammals, and especially reptiles and supports up to 40% of the vertebrate species found in Sri Lanka. The system serves as an important refuge for migratory birds and also supports about 50% of the country’s freshwater fish species, including at least three endemic species. Only 3 to 4 meters deep, it is a highly productive wetland with an array of zooplankton and phytoplankton, which also makes it extremely important for migratory fish.*

*The tanks store water, in this dry region, for irrigation purposes, and also play a major role in flood control, aquifer recharge, retention of pollutants and sediments, and nutrient export. Local communities have practiced sustainable traditional farming and fishing since ancient times, but extension of prawn (shrimp) farms in surrounding areas has resulted in mangrove destruction and pollution and eutrophication caused by wastewater releases; other potential threats derive from the spread of two species of alien invasive fish and four of plants and from the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides in nearby coconut plantations ..”*

SOURCE : INTERNET



Lesser Whistling Teal



Crested Serpent Eagle



Our bird sighting expectations were whetted by the sighting of a Crested Serpent Eagle, although somewhat dejected looking, seated on a power supply post close to the wewa. We disembarked and walked along the wewa bund observing the birds and the vegetation.



*Common Coot*



*Large Cuckoo Shrike*

Not many birds were seen since it was well past the choicest early morning bird watching time. The wewa was almost completely filled up by the Water Hyacinth (Japan Jabara) with very little open patches of water. Many shrill calls alerted us, from time to time, to the presence of Crested Serpent Eagles circling overhead. The Common Coot, Purple

Swamphen, Brahminy Kite, a large flock of Lesser Whistling Teal, Purple Heron, Grey Heron, Egrets, Cormorants, Black Hooded Oriole, Purple-rumped sunbird and Yellow Billed Babblers were the more common birds that were observed. Other birds seen were the Red Backed Woodpecker, Shikra, Brown Breasted Flycatcher, Large Cuckoo Shrike and Night Heron. The glimpse of a Cinnamon Bittern which took flight from close-by was an exhilarating experience. The number of birds seen was disappointing, given the usual richness of bird-life in this area. Ninel thoughtfully provided us with cooled fruit juice and iced coffee to quench our thirst after walking in the hot sun. We departed from Anawilundawa at about 1045 hours.

## LUNCH



*Lunch-time at Kincha*

We stopped for lunch at about 1230 hours at Kincha located at Madurankuliya, past the 101 Km post. It was a rather unappetizing rice and curry buffet with “something” soup (it turned out to be pumpkin and garlic). A few opted for, a rather expensive, fish and chips and others for vegetable sandwiches. Patrons are forewarned to obtain prior confirmation of the prices of their order since the prices of the off-menu items seem to be variable and subject to the wild fancies of the management. The only plus points were the clean washroom facilities, spacious dining area and adequate parking for vehicles.

## PALAVI SALTERNS

We stopped briefly at the Palavi Salterns to look at the few birds seated along the bund of the salt pans. Caspian Tern, Greater Crested Tern, Black Winged Stilt and Common Sandpiper were among the birds that could be readily identified while the others could not be seen clearly being further afield in the haze. Birds were very sparse in number due to the high water levels. So we journeyed on.



*Greater Crested Terns & others*

## KARADIYA REACH HOTEL, KALPITIYA

The smooth surfaced, carpeted road took us to our abode, for the duration of the trip, Karadiya Reach Hotel situated along the main road, before Kalpitiya Town, around 1445 hours. This hotel, though spaciouly set out, surrounded by water filled moats, with a suspension bridge to a block of chalet type rooms and having a small sitting area, a large dining area and a once well appointed out-house sitting area, is now well past its prime. A cursory look reveals something of its past glory which, due to subsequent and continuing neglect of even the most basic maintenance, has come almost to a grinding halt. One surmises that it now primarily serves as a reception hall for local functions and a “watering hole” for locals.



Well this was it; it was all that we had at our disposal and so we settled in somewhat reluctantly. Bathroom doors coming off their hinges, flooded bathroom floors which took ages to drain, entrance doors which were warped and jammed and which had to be shoved open quite forcefully were some of our travails. The suspension bridge was rickety with some of the floorboards missing and other planks which looked suspiciously incapable of carrying any weight at all. A few brave souls walked this rickety gangway, peering into the muddy waters below; others chose to take the long way round along a muddy path, avoiding a hair raising experience and to maintain their blood pressure at an even keel. Having bitten the bullet, we slogged on regardless, trying to make the best of it. Our sense of humour allowed us to maintain our spirits at a level above the mundane to assist us in our travails in these deary surroundings. It was later discovered that a few lucky ones had got much better rooms in the main building by the luck of the draw.



*Indian Roller*



*Common Redshank*



*Striated Heron*



*Blue Tailed Bee-eater*



*Wild Ass*

Around 1700 hours we drove down to the Kandakuliya beach, which was located close by. The sea was calm although the beach was somewhat littered with fishermen's debris. A few of us enjoyed a long dip in the warm waters of the sea while others walked along the long, sandy, uncrowded beach. We watched the setting sun which appeared to be setting south of us whilst the Indian Ocean was to our west, a disorientation which took us a while to figure out. As darkness descended we re-traced our steps back to our abode.



*off to the beach*



*in the Water & on the Sand*



*sunset at the beach*

We met up in the evening with our boatman for a discussion on the program for the following day, while poring over the one inch maps of the area thoughtfully brought along by Chanaka, and a time of camaraderie followed by dinner at 2030 hours.

### 18<sup>th</sup> November 2018



*at the Kalpitiya Jetty*

Morning dawned with clear skies as we woke up early and met up for tea and biscuits at 0615 hours. We left at 0640 hours by van to reach the Kalpitiya jetty area to rendezvous with our boatman, Priyantha De Almeida. It took him some time to get the three boats readied for our journey. We soon departed, travelling northwards along the inner aspect of the peninsula along the Dutch Bay, taking in the beauty of the ever changing scene along the coast.



*fishing boats at the jetty*

The lagoon was very calm allaying the fears of the "avomine" takers. We reached Uchchimunai, the northernmost end of the Kalpitiya peninsula and disembarked on its bare, almost barren beach. We enjoyed the breakfast which we had brought and walked about this sandy stretch of land taking in its solemn solitude with the vastness of the Indian Ocean on one side and the Dutch Bay on the other. The beach was littered with the broken shells of a large mollusc that is harvested for its meat. Our momentary daydreaming was disturbed as the boatman reminded us of the of the wonderful sights that still awaited us, up ahead.



*one of three boats, on its way*



*a multi-day trawler in the lagoon*



*church close to Uchchimunai*



*the beach at Uchchimunai*



*mollusc shells on the beach*



*breakfast at Uchchimunai beach*



*at the furthest point at Uchchimunai*



*a crab on the beach at Uchchimunai*



*a hermit crab at Uchchimunai peeps out of its shell*



*the beach at Uchchimunai with the SLNHS wanderers far away at the horizon*



*the SLNHS wanderers at Uchchimunai*

The Dutch Bay is an arm of the sea separating Wilpattu and Puttalam from the peninsula of Kalpitiya. It is about 18 miles long and about 2-6 miles broad. It is studded with several islands and sand banks, such as Bird Island, which are uninhabited. Portugal Bay lies north of Dutch Bay.

We journeyed on into Portugal Bay and on towards Battalangunduwa passing by the "moya kata", the lagoon entrance to the Indian Ocean.



*Spot Billed Pelican, Caspian Terns & others on a sand bank*



*Grey Heron*

## BATTALANGUNDUWA



*Battalangunduwa is an island which lies in the Portugal Bay around 38 kilometers off Kalpitiya. It is a thin and long island about 1km at its widest and about 7km lengthwise. It lies parallel to Wilpattu NP and is one of the few islands that are inhabited. Its main population consists of migrant fishermen, going upto about 1,200 families during the peak fishing season, with only about 25 permanent, registered households. There is a permanent Navy Camp, Police Post, several churches and an elementary school. Power is supplied mainly by a generator with a few using solar energy. All supplies (foodstuff, groceries, water, clothing etc) are brought by boat from the mainland. A boat plies daily to and from Kalpitiya to serve the needs of the local population.*

*The island is demarcated into several regions – Karaitivu, Periya Gundu, Sinna Gundu, Palli Thurai etc. These are situated on the wider stretched of the island and connected to each other by thin strips of sandbanks of varying width.*

*On a visit in 2005 a much wider beach was observed. Residents claim that the island is getting thinner but longer due to erosion, over a period of time.*

The sea continued to remain calm as the three boats sped on towards Battalangunduwa. We slowed down, when required, and observed the areas of interest that were pointed out by our boatman, Priyantha, and disembarked at Periya Gunduwa and Sinna Gunduwa. We visited the church and examined the discarded shells and dried up starfish lying in middens along the beach, remnants of the by-catch of the fishermen. Doc Malik and a few other picked up some shells for further study.



*the first view of Battalangunduwa Island at its southern-most point*



*the church at Palli Thurai*



*traditional fisherman on vallam*



*Sinna Gunduwa*



*the church at Periya Gunduwa*



*House Sparrow*



*Periya Gunduwa*



*Brown Headed Gulls*



*shells on the beach*

Thereafter, we crossed Portugal Bay towards the mainland, viewing Kudremalai Point in the distance, and journeyed south along the coast bordering the Wilpattu NP.



*riding across Portugal Bay*



*Wilpattu NP in the background*



*at the mouth of Pomparippu River*

We disembarked at the mouth of the Pomparippu River for a short while and then went inward through the river-mouth, observing the lush mangrove vegetation.



*into the Pomparippu River*



*mangroves with buttress roots*



*aerial roots*



*Baobab Tree*



*dead oyster shells*



*Bird Island*



*Crocodile - is it dead or alive*



*Pelican*



*Grey Heron*

Two Baobab trees close to the river bank were seen. The boatman reached deep into the muddy waters of the river and showed us clumps of oysters, most of which were dead due to the presence of excess fresh water after the rains. We returned to the bay and continued cruising along the coast and reached the Kalpitiya jetty around 1400 hours. No sooner than we were on land, it started to drizzle; with the rain getting more heavier and ending up in a veritable thunderstorm by the time we had reached the safety of the Elite Restaurant for lunch. The predicted rainy weather had reached us and so we were confined indoors to take rest at our abode for the rest of the evening.

We met up in the evening, as usual, for an initial period of camaraderie, followed by dinner. So ended a very eventful day with the visits to the islands being a first for most of us.

### 19<sup>th</sup> November 2018

The day dawned with clear blue skies as we had our early morning tea and biscuits at 0630 hours. We drove down to the Dolphin Wadiya and six of us took off by boat at 0730 hours to watch the dolphins. The rest explored the beach and the sand dunes for birds, crustaceans, molluscs and coastal vegetation before heading back for breakfast.



*the Dolphin watchers*



*more Dolphin watchers*



*the Coast Guard checks on us*

## DOLPHIN WATCHING



*the look-out*

The seafarers were lucky, in that within about 45 mins the Spinner Dolphins were sighted by our look-out. Thereafter they continued to be within our sight as they dived into the sea, from time to time, to feed and re-surfaced to breathe. The pods were quite large and in many instances they were quite close to our boat and even close enough to be touched. We spent about 1½ hours following their movement as they more or less circled about in the same area. The boatman informed us that the Dolphins were chasing and feeding on a large shoal of Tuna fish in the vicinity. The fishing boats which were also following the dolphins had good luck with their line fishing, which confirmed the boatman's assertion. Having had our fill of dolphin watching, we cruised back to shore at about 1015 hours.



*so close*



*so many*



*all over*



*up close again*



*still around*



*Tuna catch*

The van with driver, Mahinda, arrived and we went back to our abode to join the rest of our comrades. Having joined up we drove into Kalpitiya to visit the interesting sites thereat.

## OLD DUTCH FORT



*Enoka reads....*

The old Dutch Fort at Kalpitiya, built by the Dutch in 1667, is situated within the Navy encampment and is managed by them. Prior to entering the fort, Enoka obliged by reading relevant excerpts about this fort from the book "The Dutch Forts of Sri Lanka" by WA Nelson. This fort was very important as it controlled the trade that took place via the Kalpitiya port. By closing the port to shipping, other than to the Dutch East Indian Company, the Dutch were able to blockade the Kandyan kingdom and secure a monopoly.



*an informative display at the entrance*



*the date 1760 in Roman numerals carved on the wooden door at the eastern entrance*



*the entrance doorway at the eastern entrance*



*Black Rumped Flamebacks seen outside the Fort*

We were escorted into the premises and walked about the fort exploring its innards. It is a four-sided, four corner bastion type fort, built of coral masonry, 350 feet each way with 20 foot high ramparts. The main gateway, with the date 1776 and VOC emblem carved above and the date 1760 carved directly on the wooden gate, faces the quay and the jetty as the main aim of the fort was the protection and maintenance of trade along the water with other ports in the East, including India and the Indian Ocean. The main structures, consisting of a parade ground, barracks, warehouses, ramparts, bastions, 30 gun embrasures and sentry boxes were found to be in sound condition and were readily discernible. However, we could not explore the magazines as they were blocked off.



*the parade grounds*



*one of four corner guard-houses*



*rampart & storehouses*



OLD DUTCH CHURCH

Thereafter we visited the Old Dutch Reformed Church which was close by, within the town. The church had been renovated with a new roof. The old belfry was located in the walled churchyard which also contained many monuments. The inscriptions, both in Dutch and English, found on the large gravestones on the floor of the church were examined with interest.



*the renovated church*



*a gravestone on the church floor*



*an intricately carved gravestone*



*the bell tower on the left side*



*side verandah with monuments in the garden*

Thereafter we walked down to Elite Restaurant, which was close by, for lunch. After lunch we drove back to our abode. Since we had covered all that which we had planned to visit, a decision was taken to pack up and leave, cutting short our visit by one day. This move turned out to be wise since evening thundershowers set in a short while after we left.

OTHER INTERESTING SITES



*one of the very few remnants of ruins at Alirani Palace*

On the way we stopped to visit the ruins of the Alirani Palace, which turned out to be hardly of any interest - in fact we wondered if we were shown something else by the locals. Also a mosque at Palliwasala Thurai that bears a unique architectural style, featuring Dutch style verandahs, doors and windows, combined with wooden pillars with Kandyan style pekada, painted in green and orange. This mosque house the tombs of two muslim saints. The caretaker kindly obliged us by showing us the insides of the tombs and explaining their significance.



*at Palliwasala Thurai*



*Kandyan Style Pekada at Palliwasala Thurai*



*at Palliwasala Thurai*

Thereafter we continued our journey back home in the pouring rain, thankful that we had opted to return home instead of staying over for a further day. We stopped for tea/coffee and a light dinner along the way and reached Colombo by about 1900 hours.

## IN GENERAL

The weather was mostly hot and sunny but reasonably cool due to the constant strong breeze. The rains started on the second day and we left for home the next afternoon, avoiding the rainy weather. We were able to visit all the places and indulge in all the activities that we had planned. Bird life was sparse due to the high water levels. The negative comments on Karadiya Reach Hotel have already been made and we would most certainly not visit this place again in its present condition.

Our appreciation to :-

- SLNHS, especially Ninel, for the time and effort spent in organizing the trip and the logistics
- Chanaka for bringing along the one inch maps of the area and donating same to the NHS
- The management and staff of the Karadiya Reach Hotel
- The boatman, Priyantha, and his team, for taking us safely to and from the islands
- The boatman and the look-out on our dolphin watching expedition (from Dolphin Wadiya) for their courtesy and competence
- Coach driver Mahinda for his careful driving and bringing us home safe and sound
- All our participants for their pleasant friendly companionship and camaraderie which added greatly to an enjoyable trip.



This field visit report was compiled by Sri, supplemented by Enoka, with photographs by Sri. The views expressed are those of the writers and not necessarily those of the SLNHS.