

Day Tour #1.19 — Kodigahakande, Horana

26 January, 2019



Participants:

Rohan and Kamini de Soysa, Hafiz Zainudeen, Ayesha and Rashid Abdur-Rahman, Ayoma Nethsinghe, Nimali Seneviratne, Errol Anthonisz, Dharshana Ranathunga, Marisa Fernando, Anya Fernando, Nihal Ferdinando, Shiyana Ferdinando, Pathum Perera, Bharatha and Damayanthi Attanayake, Gauri Samarawickrama, Nelun Gunasekara and Mohan Wijesinghe led by Ninel Fernando

History of the site:

Kodigahakande, a scrub jungle in the low country wet zone, was a privately-owned forest and coconut plantation of about 1000 acres, dominated by a 378-foot peak, the highest point in that part of Sri Lanka. Visible from the summit are Colombo and Kalutara on one side and Ratnapura and Adam's Peak on the other. It was a *trig station*, a triangulation station set up by the Survey Department—hence its name, Kodigala, from which is derived Kodigahakande.



The gateway leading to the property still stands

In 1972, under legislation that established the Land Reform Commission it was subdivided among six parties. Despite the environmental and historical importance of the area, widespread quarrying of the rocky outcrops on the land commenced in 1984. Shortly thereafter, Mr Rohan de Soysa, feeling that it was an ecologically important site purchased 18 acres of jungle clad land and has retained it without disturbance to this day. In 2017 it was declared a sanctuary by government gazette.

A party of 20, consisting of 15 members and their guests including 7-year old Anya, set out on the low-level road from Colombo to Kodigahakanda, situated 35 km away in Horana. After a delayed departure it was a smooth, and at times misty, 40-minute drive. On reaching the village of Gonapola we turned left onto a small road, damaged by heavy trucks plying with loads of rocks. These had sadly been quarried from the mountain destroying the forest and disturbing its water retention abilities. A short walk from the bus enabled us to reach the Mihithala Mithuro Centre, an Eco-NGO of local folk set up with the objective of protecting the forest and also using forest products in a sustainable manner for their livelihood.

We were welcomed with mugs of delicious *kolakande* and *kurundu* infused tea, after which we set off to do some bird watching. We ascended on to the flat roof of the unfinished building that is intended to house a dormitory, sales centre and office, from which we were able to observe many birds. After an hour we all trooped down for a sumptuous home cooked, healthy, vegetarian breakfast. Thereafter, the party split into 3 groups: those who were very adventurous chose the rigorous hiking trail, others a shorter and less strenuous climb. A few stayed back to stroll around the area and enjoy a leisurely morning. The accounts of the three groups are narrated below.



Damayanthi Attanayake, who took the physically demanding route to the summit of Kodigahakande writes:

The hikers were accompanied by two school children, a girl and a boy, who showed the way. The trail was not easy. We climbed to a point where we had to choose between a more adventurous stony path up a huge rock and an easier one around the rock. Some decided on the difficult trail. We had to push through tangled vines while crawling almost on our bellies. Descending down the rock clinging on to vines was a real adventure. 7-year old Anya was ahead of us, enjoying every minute of it. The party that took the path around the rock had reached the mid-range and was waiting for us. Thereafter the trail was mostly downhill until we came on to a gravel road on the northern boundary. From this location we had a beautiful view of the surrounding area. After walking some distance on the gravel road, we entered the forest again, climbing up to the summit of Kodigahakande to meet the second group. After exchanging our experiences and resting awhile, both groups climbed down together. The climb to the summit took about one and a half hours.



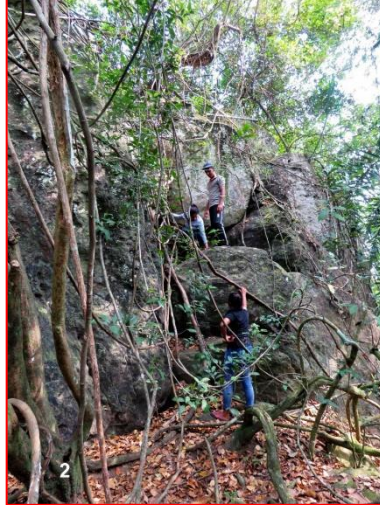
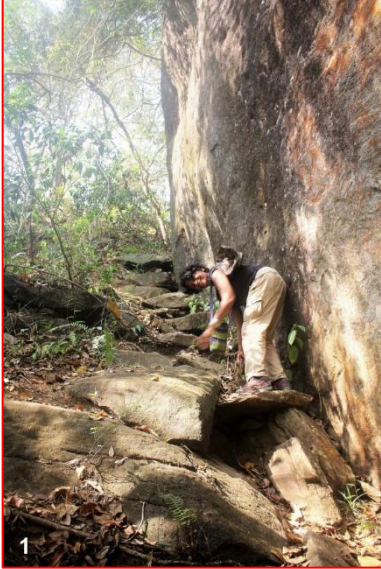
Ayoma and Ninel took the easier route to the top. This is their account.

The route was said to be shorter and easier, but far from it, as the photos show. Helped, tugged and steadied by Mr. Munagama - an elderly village gentleman, and Rusiru - a young man, we climbed along a steep, rough stone pathway with a vertical rock wall on one side. Nihal, with his keen eyes spotted a lesser yellow-naped woodpecker, flower peckers, tailor birds, barbets and many more. At the top, just below the summit was a smooth and rounded rock which was even more difficult to negotiate, as there was nothing to hold on to except our able guides.

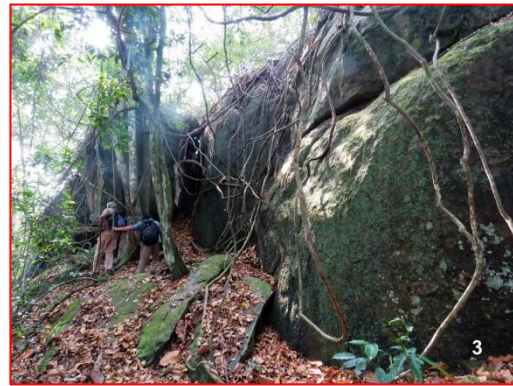
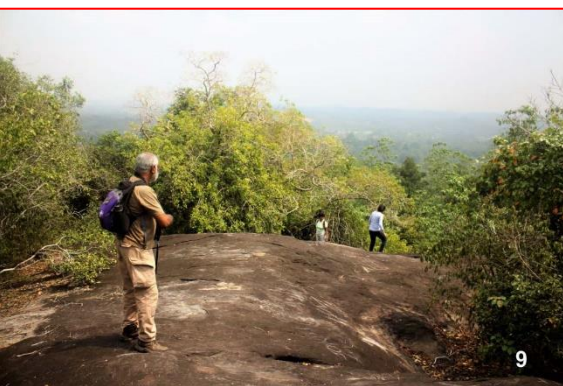
The thicket beyond, towards the summit, was a haven for birds and butterflies. The Jerdon's leafbird, and many others, including the crested serpent eagle was on a large branch at its lookout post. The Ceylon shama was heard but not seen. After catching our breath, we moved on and reached the summit with its platform for the 'Kodigaha'. This trail took about 45 mins for us to get to the top.



Ayoma explores the socket for the *kodigaha*



No. 1: Ayoma scrambles up the 'easier' route.
Nos. 2 & 3: the rigorous route.
No. 4: Into the thicket near the top.
No. 7: Ninel on the summit rock with her *kodigaha*.
No. 8: A helping hand on the descent. Hafiz looks on.
No. 9: Up to the top and down the *pallang*. Dharshana admires the view.



After a while, the first group of hikers reached the summit of the Kodigahakanda, where the remains of a stone platform built by the Survey Department in 1920 is all that remains of a system where a beam was cast from a mast and was picked up at Adam's Peak. This enabled measurements to be taken to note ground movements in the terrain between the peaks.

We indulged in some relaxing and sitting around, watching in wonder at the flashes of metallic blue from the large number of ceruleans in flight—small butterflies with drab-coloured wings on the underside which act as a camouflage when settled and brilliant blue upper sides seen in flight. Forty minutes or so later, both groups together walked and scrambled back down the trail. On the way we stopped to visit the estate bungalow of the late Sir Charles Henry de Soysa, who was the original owner of the property—in extent almost one thousand acres that included the hill and the land around the house. It is sad to see that the bungalow is locked up and neglected. [See Photo] The present owners have leased the property to companies only interested in quarrying the massive rock and destroying part of the forest.



#12: Common mime form *dissimilis*; #13: Dark cerulean laying eggs on *Crotalaria verrucosa* (S: Nil-adanahiriya); #14: *Common cerulean*. Photography by Ninel



Gauri's note from those who remained at base camp.



We strolled in the vicinity and walked up the road to the magnificent old estate bungalow of Sir Charles (at left), imaging what it must have been like in days gone by. A quiet walk back to the centre, and the idea on everyone's mind was to enjoy a nap under the shady trees. Sometime later we were motivated to play some traditional games by members of Mihithala Mithuro, some of which were new to us city folks. The games were more puzzles than games of skill, requiring a lot of mental work. The Royal stable, shovel with trash, something similar to a Rubik's cube, coconut shells with rope to name a few, all said to be traditional old village games. The challenges accomplished, it warranted another short nap. Then, it was time to join the others at base camp to enjoy a wonderful traditional lunch. About 2 hours after lunch it was tea time, with *lavariya*, *wandu-appa* and bananas washed down with plain herb-infused tea.

We visited a display and sale of food and medicinal products made by the community that was nearby—our members eagerly snapped up ayurveda medicinal products and aloe vera items for their personal use. A well-earned rest followed, with an exchange of route experiences. We were treated to a sing-song by the Girl Guide Rangers from Samudradevi Balika Vidyalaya, who happened to be there on an educational trip. Thereafter, we re-entered the van and headed back to Colombo after a very rewarding and exhilarating experience. Many of us would like to go back again.

Acknowledgements

Our thanks go to Mr. Rohan de Soysa for his efforts in preserving the forest for future generations, for encouraging us to make this visit and helping with logistics; to Mihithala Mithuro Environmental Development Foundation (MEDEF) for preserving the forest and also for the amazingly appetizing, authentic country food they served us and, last but not least, their surefooted guides without whom we could not have done the climb.

This trip report was compiled by Ninel Fernando from the notes of Damayanthi Attanayake, Ayoma Nethsinghe and Gauri Samarawickrama, edited by Malik Fernando. Photography is by Ninel Fernando, Rohan de Soysa and Ayoma Nethsinghe. The bird photography is by Nihal Ferdinando.

END

The climbers





Brown breasted flycatcher



Jerdon's leafbird



Lesser yellownape



Pale billed flowerpecker



Purple sunbird



Yellow fronted barbet

Bird photography by Nihal Ferdinando