

# SLNHS Field Visit Report

## The IFS-Popham Arboretum, Dambulla, Sri Lanka

### 20<sup>th</sup> & 21<sup>st</sup> June 2015

#### PARTICIPANTS

Dr. Malik Fernando, Ninel Fernando, Asoka Siriwardena, Srikumar, Ayoma Nethsingha, Enoka and Chris Corea.

#### DAY 1 – Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> June 2015

We gathered at the Barnes Place residence of our Patron, Dr. Malik Fernando, commencing 0530 hours. Parking was available within the premises and two of us quite conveniently left our cars parked within. The seven of us with Driver, Ajith at the wheel, left by a nine seater air conditioned van, at 0555 hours passing through Borella, Dematagoda and Peliyagoda and then along the Katunayake Expressway onto Ja Ela. Most of us were old acquaintances and friendly banter prevailed all along the way. We turned onto the Minuwangoda road and stopped at Mankada, just past Giriulla town for breakfast at 0730 hours. Buffet breakfast had the usual Sri Lankan fare in addition to many varieties of boiled lentils. The place was airy, clean and comfortable and the service was good. A cup of tea or coffee and we were on the move by 0800 hours. Our next stop was a comfort stop at the NLDB farm shop passing Melsiripura at 0935 hours. We had cups of delicious yogurt and then proceeded on towards Dambulla. Just before Dambulla town we turned right towards the Matale Road and proceeded towards Matale upto the Kalundeva Junction where we turned left and proceeded about 5 kms to reach Diyabubule at about 1100 hours.

#### Diyabubule of Laki Senanayake



Diyabubule is the present residence and retirement home of renowned artist Mr.Laki Senanayake. Upon entering the property one immediately takes in the tranquility of its surroundings. We were met by our host, the amiable Laki Senanayake, who set us at ease and engaged us in lively conversation. The large pond in front of his dwelling with many large fish and brass sculptures was a beautiful sight to behold and one wonders why we continue to slog day in and day out in the hot, dusty streets of Colombo instead of moving into similar blissful surroundings far away from the maddening rat race of society. Well, for Laki Senanayake this call came over 30 years ago and he moved in and developed this property into the heavenly place which became his home. It was not that he ran away from modern day technology but he used it to great effect. The surround sound speakers mounted on the tall trees around rendered amazing sound effects to the music from his amplifier, and was a tribute to his skills. A cooling system of dripping water to cool the rocks around his open plan abode and other eco friendly alternatives were evident around the premises. He chided us for getting late and missing out on the early morning live serenade by the birds that graced his property; a natural sound and light show. Nevertheless we were able to spot a few birds around the tall, imposing trees around the large pond. We bid farewell to him, at about 1200 noon, promising to return at a more appropriate time to watch birds. We proceeded a bit further along the same road and reached Kalundeva Retreat which Laki said was just next door and since Chris was known to the proprietor.



### Kalundeva Retreat

The Kalundeva Retreat is an eco friendly luxury resort catering for 12 to 15 pax in luxury cabanas spaced out over the large property. The property was planted with many fruit trees such as mango, guava etc. and was surrounded by paddy fields and distant mountains giving it a rural and laid back atmosphere which was found to be very relaxing.



The manager was kind enough to drive us around through the property in an electric golf cart which we appreciated very much. Thereafter we headed back towards Dambulla, reaching the Kandalama turn off and proceeded a short distance until we reached the Basanayake restaurant for the pre-arranged lunch by about 1315 hours. The rice and curry buffet lunch was topped off with ice cream. Bottled drinking water was available for those who wanted to stock up for the rest of the trip. A further 50 meter drive and we turned right to reach our destination for the day, the IFS-Popham Arboretum.

### IFS-Popham Arboretum

The IFS-Popham Arboretum, until recently Sri Lanka's only dry zone arboretum, was established by Mr.F.H.(Sam) Popham in 1963 on 7.5 acres of abandoned scrub jungle/chena land. It is located in Dambulla on the Kandalama Road. Sam, a retired tea planter, thereafter commenced his life's most cherished work of restoring the wasteland to nature to conserve the unique biological diversity of the dry zone.

In 1989, Sam Popham gifted the property to the Institute of Fundamental Studies (IFS) Kandy for use in conservation, research and education. In the same year a further 27 acres were added on to the arboretum. In 1994 Mr.Jayantha Amarasinghe was appointed by Ceylon Tobacco Co to

assist Sam. He was thereafter appointed its Curator in 1999 on Sam leaving the country. In May 2005 the Tree Society of Sri Lanka (Ruk Rekaganno) commenced managing the property on behalf of IFS.

Sam's method was influenced by his fondness for nature and his policy was not to plant trees but to release tree seedlings from competition by the suppression of thorny scrub and creepers. Through this method the predominantly mana grassland and shrubland was transformed into its former glory of a dry zone evergreen forest of native trees. The degraded shrub and grasslands were slowly converted into a woodland of indigenous trees. Sam Popham lived in a mud cottage which is now being renovated to be converted to an office. The new cottage was designed by our famous architect Geoffrey Bawa and is being used as an office and residential quarters for the manager. These buildings are to be converted into a museum. The two cabanas and the dining room close by completed the picture.

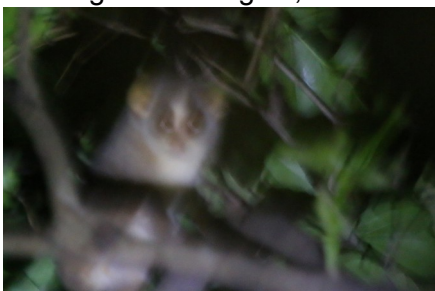


We were housed in two cabanas with three beds each. The 3 ladies had the added privilege of an attached internal bathroom and a more spacious interior. The 4 gents contended themselves in the smaller cabana with an external attached toilet with one of us sleeping on the ground on a mat. The rooms were clean with cemented floors and ventilated by a stand fan. Clean bed linen, pillows with pillow cases and towels were made available. The wash rooms were tiled and clean and fitted with a commode, hand bidet, washbasin and a shower with a good head of water. It was much better than had been anticipated and quite adequate to house 6 guests in comfort.

We unpacked and settled into our rooms. Some of the more energetic ones amongst us immediately went walking out through the many foot paths with their cameras and binoculars whilst a few decided to take a short nap. It was delightful to be walking along the colour coded paths with progressive numbers under the shade of the many trees which covered the entire property. We met up at the wattle and daub dining hall at about 1545 hours for a cup of warm belimal, made on a wooden fire by Jamis, and served with sweet dosi (herbal toffee).

Thereafter we walked into the forest again observing the many familiar trees which had little identification boards near their base, looking out for wild life. Many birds were seen and photographed. As it got darker we headed back to the dining room for a refreshing cups of tea or coffee and were briefed by Jayantha on the much anticipated night safari to see the grey slender loris.

Jayantha and Jamis accompanied us for the night walk through the trees armed with red light head set torches for spotting the loris at about 1930 hours. We were armed with torches to light up the way which we were advised to keep to a minimum and focused always on the ground to avoid alarming the elusive loris. After long winding walks along the many pathways, through the trees, flashing the red lights, we were rewarded by the sighting of the solitary loris on two occasions.



Photographs were taken without using the flash with the loris in indirect light. Well the photos were not at all great and a ghost like image of the loris can be seen. We had no intention of disturbing or harming the loris by flashing brights lights merely for the sake of obtaining a photographic trophy. A rare day time sighting of the loris would be the ideal opportunity for a good photograph. We also sighted two mouse deer close to our lodgings. We finally concluded our night safari at about 2100 hours and returned to our lodgings.

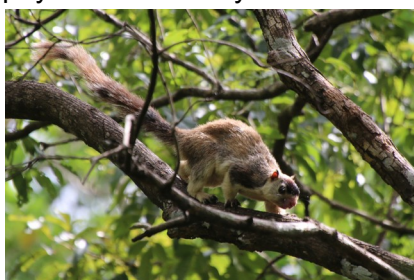
We showered to be rid of the dust and sweat. A few brave gents bathed in the open in their birthday suits to speed up the process of sharing the sole shower. It was “loris mode” while they bathed with no lights allowed at all. The gents finished up with a brief shower in the wash room before we met at a dining room for reminiscing about the events of the day. The dinner of red string hoppers, kiri hodi, full boiled eggs, pol sambol and tinned fish curry was greatly appreciated. The meals were provided from a house nearby which was chosen with the aim of fostering the local economy. Dr.Malik obliged by producing love cake for dessert. We went off to bed at about 1030 hours.

## DAY 2 – Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> June 2015

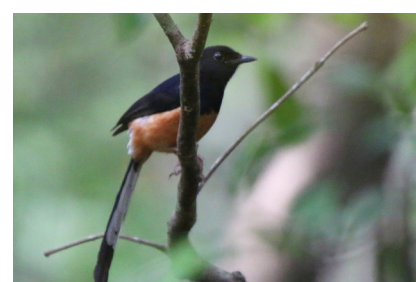
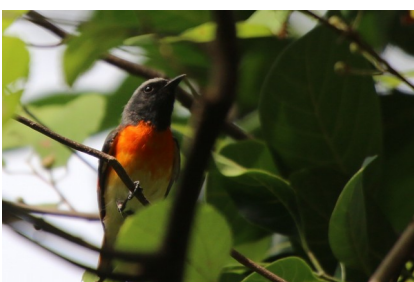
We were up early and gathered at the dining room at 0545 hours for tea or coffee and biscuits before setting off on an early morning walk along the paths and through the trees. Many birds were heard as we walked along and a few were seen. An open area on a large granite rock was found to be good for observing birds so we spent some time there. By 0730 hours our hunger pangs dragged us back to the dinning area where we waited patiently for our breakfast. The boiled green gram with scraped coconut, pol rotti and katta sambol were very welcome. We topped this off with tea or coffee.

We were free for the rest of the morning. Some of us chose to walk around the premises looking out for birds. A large flock of Sri Lanka Jungle fowls and hens were seen close to the dining room where they came to feed on the rice strewn on the ground. We also had a long discussion with Jayantha on what needs to be done to support the arboretum. The lack of finance to fund activities was a major issue. Areas requiring funding were noted down for finding future sponsorship support. Pophams is really a very small place and, although visitors get the feeling that they are in the depths of a large forest, ice cream carts and sound systems are sometimes heard!. This is indeed most unfortunate and it would be great if the arboretum could be expanded to encompass the adjacent crown land.

The Founder, Sam Popham, now 92 years old resides in the UK and would be delighted if his life’s work could be enhanced and continued. Ayoma will be in the UK in a few days time and will try to pay him a courtesy call.



We walked around one last time along the pathways though shade by the trees. We walked into the plant nursery where Jayantha briefed us on the plants that were being grown there. Some of us purchased plants to be taken back home. A brief time for packing up our bags and we were ready for a rice and curry lunch at about 1230 hours. After lunch we loaded our baggage and plants into the van and were ready to leave.





We bade our fond farewells to the obliging Manager, Jayantha and his assistant Ranjith and left from Pophams at 1315 hours. We drove along the road to Dambulla taking a short cut onto the Kurunegala road. A sign posted road to the right led us to Ibbankatuwa at Thalgashena.

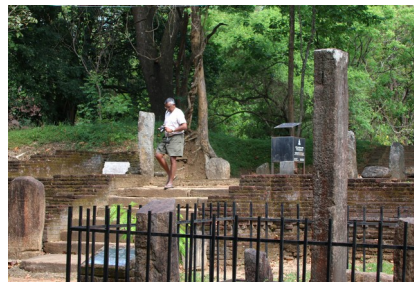
### Ibbankatuwa

Ibbankatuwa is an ancient burial site dating from 900 - 700 BC. The ruins consist of grave sites made of rectangular granite stone sides and a granite stone slab on top. These contained the burial urns. The entire area is stated to have been a burial site but only a small part remains visible to visitors since the rest of the area is occupied by the houses and gardens of villagers. We spent some time photographing and looking around. Ninel explained to us about the discovery of these ruins and their subsequent excavation.



We got back on to the Kurunegala Road at about 1345 hours. We travelled along the Kununegala road and turned left onto the Kalundeva road. A little sign post directed us towards the Manikdena archaeological site along the Weliwitiya road.

### Manikdena



The beautiful Manikdena Ruins are sited at the base of a small mountain with a serene lake in front. It consists of the five prominent ruins - chaitya, bodhigara, sabasalawa, pilimage and uposathagara with the arboretum (maintained by Trinity College) at the rear extending into the mountain. We walked among the ruins observing and photographing them. The ruins seemed to be

of greater antiquity than those at Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. Thereafter we left for Colombo at about 1500 hours.

We retraced our path back to Colombo through Kurunegala where we drove past the large rocks of Aandagala, Kuruminyagala, Ibbagala and Athaagala. Sri narrated the folklore story of the old woman who lived by the wewa who when surrounded by many animals searching for water during a severe drought invoked upon the gods who turned these animals into stone. We turned right towards Narammala passing through Narammala, Giriulla and Minuwangoda and then onto the Katunayake expressway. From there we motored on through Peliyagoda, Dematagoda and Borella back to Barnes Place which we reached at about 1930 hours. We waited around for a while until the trip accounts were finalized, settled our balance dues and departed home by about 2000 hours.



An altogether enjoyable and informative trip, having the additional privilege of visits to Diyabubule of Laki Senanayake, Kalundeva Retreat, Ibbankattuwa ancient grave site and Manikdena ruins. Pophams Arboretum was the centre point of our visit and was well worth the time spent. Many wished to have stayed a day longer in its salubrious tree covered surroundings to be immersed further with nature. The grey slender loris, spotted deer, mouse deer and land monitor were seen within the premises. A large number of forest birds were seen in addition to woolly necked stork, black headed ibis, brahminy kite, crested serpent eagle and little egrets seen in flight above the trees. The birds observed included the Sri Lanka Jungle fowl, paradise fly catcher (brown), small minivet, yellow billed babbler, spotted dove, common iora, white rumped shama, tickels blue flycatcher, oriental magpie robin, golden fronted leaf bird, tawny bellied babbler, common myna, red vented bulbul, little green bee-eater, blue tailed bee-eater, emerald dove, rose ringed parakeet, brown headed barbet, white bellied drongo, lotens sunbird, common wood shrike and the Sri Lanka spot winged thrush. Quite a tally restricted as it was to forest dwelling birds.

The friendly companionship and camaraderie among the participants added greatly to an enjoyable and memorable trip. The co-operation among the participants made it possible by and large to keep to our time schedules. Our appreciation to SLNHS for the time and effort spent in organizing the trip and to the logistical arrangements made whilst on the trip. Our grateful thanks to our van driver Ajith for his careful driving and bringing us home safe and sound.



Very special thanks to Ismeth Rahim who, on the eve of our departure, kindly initiated the invitation to visit Laki Senanayake's and also suggested to Chris that we visit Ibbankatuwa and Manikdena on the way.

This trip report was compiled by Sri, reviewed and added to by Chris with photographs by Sri. The views expressed are those of the writer and not necessarily those of the SLNHS.