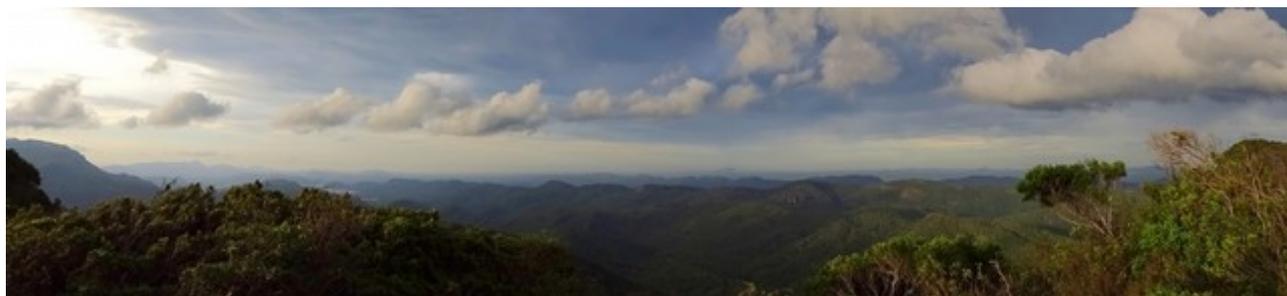


SLNHS Field Visit Report

Rivers of Riverston, Sri Lanka

24th to 26th June 2017



Panaromic view from the edge of Pitawala Patana

Participants

Malik Fernando, Ninel Fernando, Chris, Enoka & Shenuka Corea, Asoka Siriwardena, Magdon Jayasuriya, Kumar Perumal, Heshan Fernando, Sri Srikumar, Chandanie Wanigatunga, Shevanthi Jayasuriya, Shaksika, Skanda De S, Errol Anthonisz and Lal Motha - a total of 16 happy souls venturing out together into the cold, misty mountains of the Knuckles range.

Travel Route

Colombo – Borella – Kelani Bridge – Wattala – Kandana – Gampaha - Yakkala - Nittambuwa – Pasyala – Warakapola - Ambepussa – Kegalle – Mawanella – Kadugannawa – Madawala – Wategama – Elkaduwa – Rattota – Bambaragala.

Theme

The main theme of the field visit was to observe and experience the various natural ecosystems and unique life forms in a part of the Knuckles region. The handout provided by Dr. Magdon Jayasuriya, our expert resource person on this journey, is reproduced below.

ECOSYSTEM DIVERSITY IN THE KNUCKLES (prepared by Dr. Magdon Jayasuriya, June 2017)

Classification: Jayasuriya, Kitchener & Biradar (2006) – Gap Analysis in Protected Areas (Ministry of Environment & Natural Resources)	Classification : Bambaradeniya & Ekanayake (2003) – Biodiversity of Knuckles (IUCN)
Montane Evergreen Forest > 1500 m	Montane Forest (Cloud Forest) > 1300 m
Mid-elevation Evergreen Forest 900 – 1400 m	Sub-montane Forest (Wet Sub-montane Forest) 600-1300 m
Transition Forest <i>Special species: Litsea ligustrum, Actinodaphe stenophyllia</i>	Dry Sclerophyllous Sub-montane Forest
Moist Mixed Evergreen Forest < 900m	Semi-evergreen Forest < 700m
Lowland Wet Evergreen Forest < 900 m rare – occurring under special conditions	
Sparse and Open Forest part natural = part anthropogenic: dynamic	Scrubland
Savanna Grassland = Hill Savanna 300-500 m Talawa	Savanna
Pygmy Forest (Elfin Forest) +/- 100 m <i>Special species: Davidsea Attenuata</i>	
(Dry) Riverine Evergreen Forest	Riverine Forest
Rock Outcrop Forest	Savanna
Dry Patana Grassland 600-1660 m	Patana Grassland < 1000 m
Short Grass Patana 570 m <i>Special species: Brachstelma lankana, Dipcardi montanum</i>	Carpet Grassland

This classification provided us with a useful aid to observe and study the different natural ecosystems that we experienced on our journey through the Knuckles range. Dr. Magdon Jayasuriya informed us that we would be able to observe and experience the vegetation in the above natural ecosystems on the road journey from Rattota through our base at Bambaragala to Illukkumbura.

DAY 1 – Saturday 24th July 2017

Some of our participants were picked up along the way and the rest of us joined at the residence of Dr. Malik Fernando at Barnes Place. We departed on time at 0530 hours in a spacious AC Van with luggage loaded at the back and on the last seat.



The comfort stop and breakfast was at 0800 at P & S, Ambepussa. Along the way, Dr. Enoka Corea read out excerpts from a publication by P.G.Cooray on the Knuckles Expedition of 1956 on which members of SLNHS had also participated. This was much appreciated and it set the correct perspective to our field visit. As we journeyed on, Dr. Magdon Jayasuriya described the many different climatic zones and plant life of prominent landmarks along the way such as Bible Rock. On the road to Katugastota a road accident delayed us by over half an hour, as motorists (in true Sri Lankan style) swarmed on both sides of the road creating a gridlock until saner counsel prevailed to slowly unravel the knotted traffic. Our visit to Sembuwatte Lake was aborted since the vehicle could not proceed upto the lake due to road maintenance. We journeyed on and reached Sanasuma Holiday Resort at Bambaragala for a late lunch at 1500 hours and settled in our lodgings.



Bambaragala Holiday Resort - Entrance



going uphill to Riverston gap – wet, wet, wet...

At 1600 hours we commenced our afternoon field visit. The varied climatic conditions and corresponding vegetation were elaborated on by Dr. Magdon Jayasuriya. The pygmy bamboo plants *Davidsea Atenuata* which had adapted to the highly windy conditions at Riverston Gap were observed. Riverston gap is the climatic boundary between the wet and dry parts of the Knuckles. We disembarked at Pitawala Pathana and walked up the gentle incline to the abrupt drop on top. Dr. Magdon Jayasuriya explained on the short grass pathana and its unique plant life, soil conditions and life forms such as the flat frog *Nanophrys Mamorapa* which is usually seen during the wet season under flat rocks. The three species of carnivorous plant known to be present were also not seen due to the relatively dry conditions. Dr. Magdon Jayasuriya described to us the Pathan Ala *Brachystelma Lankana*, a unique plant, the only plant of its genus in Sri Lanka found there in December. As light faded we returned through the mist covered hills back to our lodgings.



going downhill from Riverston gap – Dry....

Just about 10 mins after we disembarked at our base, a loud crashing noise was heard, immediately followed by a shower of sparks flying off the power cables along the road - a large ginisapu tree had fallen right across the road we had traversed just 10 minutes before! The road was blocked but three wheelers managed to creep through the gap underneath the tree alongside the embankment. The tree trunk was cleared and power supply restored only in the following morning; meanwhile we were availed of a generator for our use that night.



trekking up Pitawala Pathana



discussions at Pitawala Pathana



crash, bang and cleared next morning



evening discussions with Dr.Magdon Jayasuriya



view down the slope from Pitawala Pathana

We gathered at 2000 hours for a talk by Dr. Magdon Jayasuriya on the natural ecosystems we had seen and their unique vegetation. Dinner followed at 2100 hours. The absence of mosquitoes, probably due to the strong winds, foretold us of a sound sleep in the cool environment of the Knuckles range.

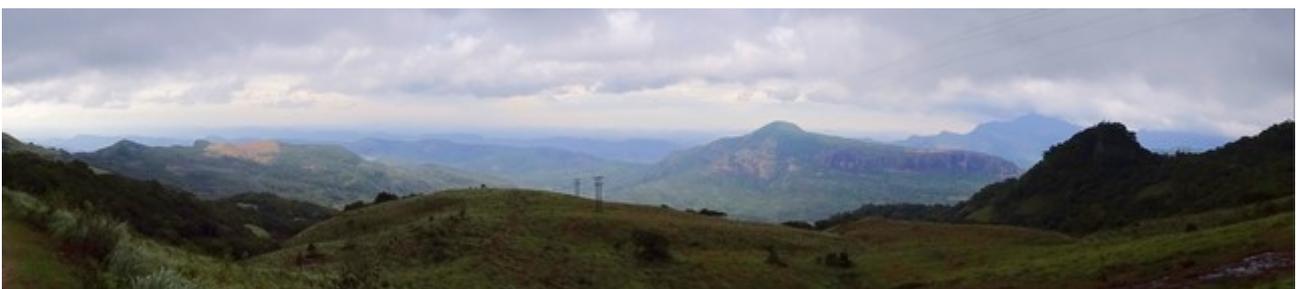
DAY 2 – Sunday 25th July 2017

Tea/Coffee with biscuits was served at 0600 hours after which those interested walked along the road observing the vegetation and looking out for birds. It was very windy and the ever-present mist made us wet. A shower of rain followed and we hurriedly retreated to base.

After breakfast at 0730 hours we drove down to Pitawala Pathana again, through Riverston Gap, stopping along the way to take in the beautiful scenery and capture memories in photographs. Hot roti and vadai at Riverston Gap was a treat we could not pass by. At Pitawala Pathana we trekked up to Little World's End and were greeted by the majestic sight of the valley far down below stretching out into the faraway mountains.



morning tea/coffee with biscuits



going downhill from Riverston gap – the brown patch towards the left is Pitawala Pathana, Mani Gala is seen slightly right of centre



capturing Photo Memories



Pitawala Pathana up closer



Pitawala Village in the valley down below



first arrivals at Little Worlds End



panaromic view from Little Worlds End

We continued our journey through the scenic valley, down the many hair-pin bends hills towards Illukkumbura and stopped at Thelgam Oya for packeted lunch of rice and curry by the river bank. A few of us enjoyed a dip in the cool waters of the river. After a while we drove on further observing the vegetation of the transition forests. As darkness approached we drove up the mountains of the Knuckles Range, back to base for a discussion on our observations for the day, followed by dinner.



Thelgam Oya



panaromic view from Pitawala Pathana



Thelgam Oya

DAY 3 – Monday 26th July 2017

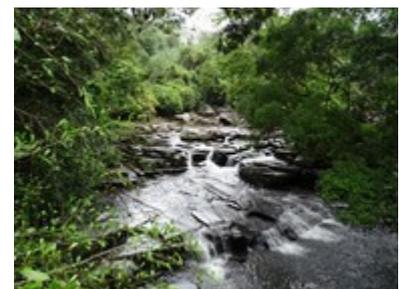
Tea/Coffee with biscuits was served at 0600 hours after which a few of us walked along the road observing the vegetation and looking out for birds. It was very windy and misty as usual. The inevitable shower of rain followed and we rushed back to base. After breakfast at 0730 hours we drove down to Pitawala Pathana again through Riverston Gap.



wild Jambu tree in bloom



Pitawala village by the side of Mani Gala



Veddah Pani Ela



rural enchantment - with the saddle of Mani Gala

We journeyed on down into the valley and disembarked in the rural atmosphere of the Pitawala village. We walked parallel and quite close to the long rock mountain of Mani-gala down to the waters of Veddha Pani Ela observing the birds along the way. We were entranced by the typical village scenery of extensive paddy fields viewed against the backdrop of the huge rock face. We chatted to the village folk who reminisced about times past. We retraced our route for the last time up the hills to base, for lunch after which we packed up and departed on our journey back home.

We stopped at Bambara Kiri Ella along the way, close to Rattota. These falls were very beautiful and the crossing was along a suspension bridge. A hot drink of Ranawara with jaggery pieces and we were on our way again.



Bambara Kiri Ella



Bambara Kiri Ella



the suspension bridge across the river

The comfort stop, tea and pastries was at Narammala after which we proceeded to Kurunegala and reached Colombo by about 2100 hours.

IN GENERAL

The accommodation at the Sanasuma Holiday Resort was basic and adequate for our needs. Meals were quite tasty and served warm. The weather was mostly wet, windy and misty. The almost constant cloud cover lifted from time to time to reveal the beauty of the distant hills and valleys. Brief periods of shaded sunlight filtered through the clouds in the rapidly changing weather and the sun was never seen. It rained on and off but fortunately remained dry whilst we were out on our longer walks.



Grey Headed Canary Flycatcher



SL Dull Blue Flycatcher



Asian Paradise Flycatcher

The dull light, mist, tall trees and windy conditions were not conducive to bird watching. The Hill Myna, SL Layards Parakeet, SL Hanging Parrot (Lorikeet), Grey Headed Canary Flycatcher, SL Dull Blue Flycatcher, SL Brown Capped Babbler, Crested Serpent Eagle, Large Minivet, Oriental White-Eye, Asian Paradise Flycatcher, Scaly Breasted Munia, White Rumped Munia and White Breasted Drongo were among the birds that were observed.



Crested Serpent Eagle

The general atmosphere was very lively and cheerful and the pre-dinner chatter amusing. The co-operation among the participants made it possible by and large to keep to our time schedules.

Our appreciation to :-

- SLNHS and specially to Ninel for the time and effort spent in organizing the trip and the meiculous logistical arrangements
- Dr. Magdon Jayasuriya for sharing his valuable knowledge on climatic systems and unique vegetation which was very interesting and educative
- Van driver Kalum for his careful driving and bringing us home safe and sound and to his assistant Tharindu for cheerfully helping out when required
- The management and staff of Sanasuma Holiday Resort, Bambaragala for looking after our creature comforts
- All our participants for their pleasant friendly companionship and camaraderie which added greatly to an enjoyable and memorable trip.



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



the participants at Pitawala Pathana