

## SLNHS Field Visit Report Jaffna, Sri Lanka 28<sup>th</sup> February to 4<sup>th</sup> March 2018

### Participants

Ninel Fernando, Malik Fernando, Chris Corea, Enoka Corea, Sri Lal and Vajira Motha, Prasantha Jayasekara, Errol Anthonisz, Heshan Fernando, Nihal Ferdinando, Jeevani Siriwardene, Aruni Gunawardene, Shayami Satarasinghe, Damayanthi and Bharath Attanayake and Vasantha Dias – a total of 16 members along with Driver Kalum and Conductor Nalin.



### Travel Route

Colombo – Borella – Kelani Bridge – along the expressway towards Katunayake – Negombo – Chilaw – Puttalam – Nochichiyagama – Anuradhapura – Medawachchiya – Vavuniya – Kilinochchi – Elephant Pass – Chundikulam - Jaffna

and on the return journey

Jaffna – Sangupiddy Bridge – Pooneryn – Paranthan – Kilinochchi - Medawachchiya – Anuradhapura – Padeniya – Narammala – Giriulla – Negombo - along the expressway towards Colombo

### Theme

The main theme of the field visit was to observe and experience the unique natural ecosystems of Jaffna and the migrant bird species.

### Jaffna



The Jaffna peninsula has an area of just over a 1000 sq km and consists of four administrative districts namely, Thenmarachchi, Vadamarachchi, Valikamam and the Jaffna Islands. The Jaffna city is surrounded by the Jaffna lagoon on its West and South, Kokkuvil and Thirunavelli to the North and Nallur to the East. This land mass was submerged during the Miocene period and is composed of the sea bed of that time, and now, in its decayed condition, is found to be of gray or yellow porous limestone. The peninsula is flat and has many

areas below sea level. This accounts for the large number of lagoons and wetlands which support large numbers of waders and sea birds especially in the migratory season, from Sept to March each year. Palmyrah groves (*Borassus flabellifer*) are a notable feature.

The Northern Province has a number of lagoons, the largest being Jaffna Lagoon, Nanthi Kadal, Chundikkulam, Vadamarachchi, Uppu Aru, Kokkilai, Nai Aru and Chalai lagoons. Water is extracted from open dug well for domestic and



agricultural purposes. Paddy, chillie, onions, tobacco, potato, vegetables and banana are produced in large quantities.

The climate falls within the tropical, monsoonal range with the NE monsoon affecting the entire land mass from Oct – to Jan. The average annual precipitation ranges from 700 mm to 1050 mm.

(Adapted from Field Ornithology Group)

### Delft Island

Neduntivu Island or Delft Island is roughly oval in shape, 8km x 6km, with a total extent of approximately 50km<sup>2</sup>. It is located 10km off the mainland. The current population is about 4800 Tamils. Mean annual rainfall is 750mm. It is generally flat and less than 5m above mean sea level. The island features a tropical, semi-arid vegetation cover dominated by palmyrah palms, thorny shrubs and grasses. Geologically, the island consists of deposits belonging to Eocene, Upper Miocene and Pliocene eras consisting of limestone at the base, passing upwards into sandstone, indicating a change from deep to shallow water sedimentation. Basically, Delft island is an elevated seabed, consisting primarily of coral. Surface is covered by porous coralline soil which is very shallow and highly salinized making it less suitable for agriculture. Water is extracted from shallow wells and is slightly brackish. It has been inhabited since ancient times and there has been total destruction of the native vegetation with replacement by pasture land, agricultural land. In addition, a baobab tree (*Adansonia digitata*) and the feral Delft ponies have been introduced by Arabs and Portuguese, respectively.



The natural habitats include dry pasture lands, wet pasture lands, mixed thorn scrub jungles, *Phoenix* dominated thorn scrub jungles, managed home gardens, abandoned home gardens,



palmyrah woodlands, coastal woodlands, coral rock and seashore vegetation and sandy shore vegetation.

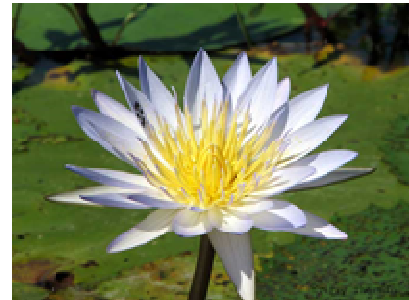
DAY 1 – Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> February 2018

Participants were picked up along the way and the final lot embarked at the residence of Dr. Malik Fernando at Barnes Place at which parking was made available. We departed at 1530 hours in a 15 seater AC van. Traffic was heavy up to and beyond Negombo. Spirits were kept up by the asparagus rolls, patties and beli juice provided by participants. We reached Mango Mango in Anuradhapura for a sumptuous dinner that nearly broke the budget. From there it was a faster run to Vavuniya where we clocked in at Vanni Inn for a much needed night's rest.



DAY 2 – Friday 1<sup>st</sup> March 2018

We were up for tea, coffee and biscuits at 0600 hours. Then off to Chundikulam. Cheese and garlic bread was served in the bus. There was a stop at Elephant Pass to pick up some eats and do some bird watching from the station platform. Unfortunately there were no waders to be seen as there was a lot of human activity in the salterns. However, a few birds were spotted by Nihal including Ashy prinia and Blyth's reed warbler. After the Pass we took a turn to the right and drove on to Chundikulam. The vegetation turned to arid scrub jungle with some tantalizing roads heading toward the sea. We caught a fleeting glimpse of blue faced malkoha and francolin. A lovely pool with manel including the national flower *Nymphaea nouchali* was a refreshing sight contrasting with the surrounding heat and dust. Please note that this endemic manel is pale blue to white and is not the purple nil manel, popular as flower offerings in temples, which is introduced.



We arrived at the pleasant Chundikulam Nature Reserve by its own water body. It was too hot to do any strenuous walking so most settled down to a lazy morning, with some opportunistic bird watching. Yellow wagtail was seen. We were informed that the water body is full of birds in August. After lunch we returned to Elephant Pass and took the long road to Jaffna, stopping at Iyakkachchi to fill up our 20 L can with pure water – the best water in Sri Lanka according to Prasantha.

Finding our booked accommodation in Jaffna not to our liking we finally settled in at Park View Hotel which we had to ourselves, after persuading the rather reluctant caretaker. The ladies took over the kitchens and served delicious tea and coffee. Then we drove down past the fort to the Pannai causeway enjoying the beautiful scenery including the nets. At Doc's request we diverted to Mandativu island and were rewarded with the sight of small jellyfish in the wetlands, *Cassiopea* cf. *xamachana*. Left, upright and right, feeding while inverted. Right extreme, edible plant.







After refreshing baths we headed out to Mango (singular this time) for a vegetarian thosai feed. As so to bed (for most of us). Jeevani was busy on the phone trying to ensure our berths on the ferry to Delft.

### DAY 3 – Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2018

We were up again for tea, coffee and biscuits at 0600 hours, after which we set off to Punguduthivu via Kayts island and on to the Kurikadduwan jetty. The drive was very scenic over two causeways but the bird life was ignored as we were keen to be on time for the ferry. Enoka read out excerpts from the IUCN occasional paper on the “Sustainable development of Delft Island: an ecological, socio-economic and archaeological assessment” which was very informative. We were lucky to get standing room only for the 45 minute ride on the RDA ferry which was very smooth. We met our guide who has a house just near the jetty and were treated to a sumptuous thosai feed.



Then we took to the two jeeps for sightseeing. We visited the dove cote in the centre of some ruined British administrative building, the ruins of the Portuguese fort, the ruins of the stupas from the Anuradhapura era, the stables of Lt. Nolan where we saw ‘Adam’s footprint’. The plains where the wild horses roam border the sea. We saw a few of the wild horses. The guide took us to the Queen’s tower which was once a lighthouse of sorts (reflecting light rather than producing light). After a quick look at the Baobab tree we sped back for a quick lunch.

Due to the short stay, we were unable to do any serious bird watching or spend a long time at each place. It would be good to return, one day, to stay overnight and spend more time on foot appreciating the unique habitats and flora and fauna of this island.



We managed to squeeze into an already overcrowded trawler for a hazardous ride back, open to the elements.



However, since we were back early, we could spend some time along the causeways enjoying the abundance of bird life including spot billed duck and shoveller.

#### DAY 4 – Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2018

We were joined by our guide Gaya. She suggested we start along the causeway to Kayts. We moved slowly along the causeway stopping frequently to identify mangrove plants and bird life. Along the turn off to Araly we spotted a large flock of flamingo in the distance and decided to return to the causeway to get a closer look. Along the way we also saw an unusual sight of a large flock of common coot.

We then drove back along the causeway and turned to Mandativu. This was an interesting ride and terminated at the fishing wadiya. Doc and some others went on foot to collect specimens of by catch from the nets while the rest of us enjoyed a round of iced coffee. After a while they adventurers returned bearing shells, starfish and other flotsam and jetsam.

After returning to the mainland we decided to have a snack lunch of vadais while taking the road to Karainagar (Jaffna - Ponnalai road). The fishing factory area was full of black kite. We had another good sighting of flamingo on the causeway to Karainagar. Since many of our number had never been to Jaffna previously we decided to have a look at the famous Casuarina beach. Sand dollars were aplenty in the soft sand. The beach was fairly crowded with adults and children enjoying the water, in spite of it being almost midday. We took a different route back so that we could drop Gaya



off. We were just in time to visit the Jaffna Fort and agonize over the destruction caused to the historic Governor's Palace and the Dutch Church and also made a detour to the Nallur Kovil. After returning home for a quick cup of tea we packed our swimming stuff and headed to Chaddi beach on Kayts island for a refreshing swim.

Unfortunately, our dinner plans for Jaffna Kool came a cropper and we had to settle for Naan and accompaniments at the US Hotel that was kind enough to stay open late for us.

#### DAY 5 – Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> March 2018

After settling our bills we set off for home, taking the Sangupiddy bridge across to Pooneryn. The environs of the bridge were stunningly beautiful. The road to K point, branching off the end of the bridge, was tempting. However, after a while we realized that the van was unlikely to be able to make the trip and turned back, reluctantly, after vowing to return someday.



Pooneryn was a quiet town with a ruined fort. Then on to Paranthan and Kilinochchi. In Kilinochchi we were treated to a massive breakfast of freshly baked goodies, courtesy of Vasantha's office which supplies the Sri Lankan army. Well fortified, most of us did not need any further meals on the trip back, though we stopped to give the driver and conductor lunch and tea.

A bonus was the sighting of an Amur falcon and booted eagle.



We reached Colombo by 7 pm after a very smooth trip.

#### IN GENERAL

The accommodation in the Northern Province was very basic and it is important to carry your own towel and covering sheet as these are not provided. Swim wear and a spare towel is required as there are many tempting places for bathing. Sadly, many beauty spots were littered by previous visitors. Water may be brackish so it is best to carry a large water can for drinking purposes.

Eating places close down early so early dinner is recommended.

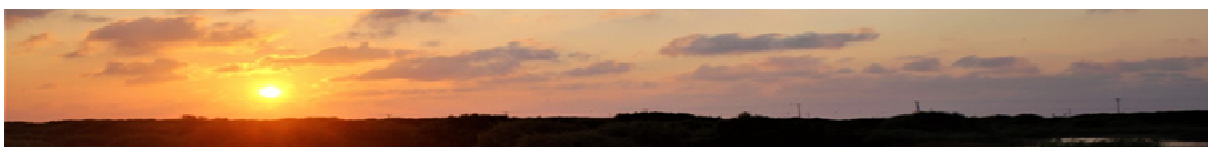
The weather in some areas was very hot so a hat and plenty of drinking water is mandatory. Jaffna town, at this visit, was relatively cool and a fan at night was adequate.

The general atmosphere was very lively and cheerful with pleasant chatter. The co-operation among the participants made it possible to agree on and keep to schedules.

Our appreciation to :-

- SLNHS and specially to Ninel for the time and effort spent in organizing the trip and the meticulous, yet flexible, logistical arrangements
- Van driver Kalum for his careful driving and bringing us home safe and sound and Nalin for his helpfulness
- Our guide, Gaya, for agreeing to take time off to spend with a rather motley group of people and for her expert guidance.
- All our participants for pitching in with their own talents and expertise, whether it was in price negotiation, tea making, networking, bird spotting or damage control and the special food and drink treats Also for the friendly companionship, camaraderie and tolerance of each other's foibles which made the trip an enjoyable and memorable one.

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



Pacific golden plover  
 Little ringed plover  
 Kentish plover  
 Lesser sand plover  
 Whimbrel  
 Red shank  
 Red wattled lapwing / Yellow wattled lapwing  
 Painted stork  
 Collared dove  
 Spotted dove  
 Little cormorant  
 Indian cormorant  
 Great cormorant  
 Asian open bill  
 Eurasian spoonbill  
 Blue tailed bee-eater / Green bee-eater  
 Brahminy kite  
 Black kite  
 Spot billed pelican  
 Brown headed gull  
 Wood sandpiper  
 Common sandpiper  
 Broad billed sandpiper  
 Curlew sandpiper  
 Marsh sandpiper  
 Lesser whistling duck  
 Garganey  
 Northern shoveler  
 Northern pintail  
 Spot billed duck  
 Eurasian wigeon  
 Little grebe  
 Black headed ibis  
 Glossy ibis  
 Greater flamingo  
 Whiskered tern  
 Common tern  
 Gull billed tern  
 Caspian tern  
 Little tern  
 Grey francolin  
 Indian peafowl  
 Striated heron  
 Purple heron  
 Grey heron  
 Indian pond heron  
 Cattle egret / Little egret/ Intermediate egret/ Great egret  
 Indian roller

mynah  
 Jerdon's bushlark  
 Paddyfield pipit  
 Black headed oriole  
 White breasted kingfisher  
 Pied kingfisher  
 Green shank  
 Common red shank  
 Eurasian curlew  
 Red rumped bulbul  
 White bellied sea eagle  
 Booted eagle  
 Changeable hawk eagle  
 Shikra  
 Oriental honey buzzard  
 Common moorhen  
 White breasted moorhen  
 Common coot  
 Great thicknee  
 Black winged stilt  
 Barn swallow  
 Black tailed godwit  
 Rose ringed parakeet  
 Asian koel  
 Black drongo  
 White bellied drongo  
 Asian palm swift  
 Ashy wood swallow  
 Barn swallow  
 Brown shrike  
 Asian paradise flycatcher  
 Jungle crow / House crow  
 Ashy prinia  
 Yellow billed babbler  
 Oriental magpie robin  
 Indian robin  
 Pale billed flower pecker  
 Purple sunbird  
 Scaly breasted munia  
 Yellow wagtail  
 Pompadour green pigeon  
 Blue faced malkoha  
 Amur falcon  
 Wooley necked stork  
 Blyth's reed warbler  
 Black rumped flameback

