

# SLNHS Trip Report

## Whale Watching in Mirissa - 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> March, 2019

Text by Ninel Fernando - Photography by Cheryl Silva & Ninel Fernando

### Participants:

Rohan and Kamini de Soysa, Ayesha and Rashid Abdur-Rhaman, Aruni Gunawadana, Shayami Satharasinghe, Gauri Samarawickrama, Nelun Gunasekara, Damayanthi and Bharatha Attanayake, Cheryl Silva, Ayoma Nethsinghe, Damayanthi Siriwardena and Kamini Vitharanana, led by Ninel Fernando.

The party of fifteen trippers got off to a late start at 8.30 am from Queen's Court, Colpetty, proceeding south to the last pick up at Bellantara Rd, Dehiwala.

We took the Kahathuduwa interchange to the expressway and left at the exit to Weligama. We arrived at 11.30 am at the Surasa Beach Hotel on Beach Road, where we were to stay, and decided to have lunch across the road on the beach. Many beach-side stalls were available displaying the morning's catch. We were able to pick our fish and shellfish and have them cooked on the spot to give an appetizing lunch of fresh sea food, rice and veggies of our choice.

After checking into our rooms and taking a short nap, the party decided to take a small tour to see the old colonial period town houses in Weligama. These were seen to be somewhat different to the Galle town houses and had a charm of their own. Next, to see the Kusta Raja Statue, said to be that of a 13<sup>th</sup> c. king. A drive along the beach road brought us to the Weligama Bay and within 200 m of Count de Mauny's Island 'Taprobane'. Here we took a break to photograph the picturesque views in the mellow evening light.

Getting back to base for drinks and dinner, we had a relaxed meal by the flickering lights of the kerosene oil lamps of the beach restaurants. We retired early to bed—as an early start the next morning at 5.45 am was on the cards. So, early next morning we set out for Mirissa, 6 km away, to board our whale-watching boat operated by Viyana Marine Co which we had been informed was an ethical whale watching organisation.

Once on board, we had a wait to set out at 7am in convoy with 5 other whale-watching boats, each with about 100 passengers on board. We were headed south for the Devundara headland where, we were told, the krill was concentrated. These small crustaceans (of the order Euphausiacea resembling shrimps) formed the predominant component of the whales' diet—so where the krill swarmed, the baleen whales gathered.

Our first sighting, we were told, was an Orca or killer whale which made its appearance about an hour after we set out. Surfacing suddenly, and rolling over gracefully and then diving under with its tail up-ended was a treat to watch. Dolphins were there in pods jumping and skimming the water while accompanying the boats. Among them a few spinners in the pod of 10-15 performed their graceful pirouettes. Many other sightings – about ten in all were observed. Some animals only exhaling a plume of vapor on surfacing followed by a quick dive back into the depths, probably disturbed by the noise of five boat engines while others, if at a distance, would stay on the surface for a few minutes. A Blue whale was possibly among the many varieties we observed at a distance. After 3 hours of scanning the seas the boat turned back for the Mirissa harbour.

A mostly contented group of members reached Mirissa safely. We were lucky as on some days, we were told, the outing did not provide any noteworthy sightings, except for the ever-present dolphins.

We left Weligama for home after another enjoyable seafood lunch on the beach. **We would like to say a big thank you** to Surasa Beach Hotel for their clean rooms with good amenities at an affordable cost. The beach food stalls for relaxed meal-times with made-to-order fresh food and our driver Nandana, who drove us with a lot of care.



**A note of caution** regarding Whale Watching Tourism and its effects on our unique advantage of year-round whale presence is not out of place:

The Governmental authorities have recently started charging the boat companies a tax on tickets. We are happy to pay if it is to protect the whales and not as a cash cow for the authorities. It is hoped that there will be an officer accompanying the boats enforcing basic rules that will ensure the whales are not harassed. The boats remain within sight of each other so that order can be maintained. However, it was noted that once a whale was spotted, all five boats moved in more or less encircling the animal by about 250 degrees. They maybe be too close to give the animal enough space for manoeuvring and it was seen that they dived immediately, probably without inhaling deeply enough for a deep dive. Though the boats were kept stationary once a sighting was made, the engines were kept running. Whales and dolphins use sonar for food sourcing and communication and have very sensitive hearing systems. The extraneous noise is likely to interfere with the health, wellbeing and feeding of the whales and this may even see the animals relocate elsewhere.

Tourists should also be given a code of conduct with their tickets or a notice put up in the boats. Once a whale was sighted, people stood up, crisscrossed the deck obstructing the view of other passengers and even let out a great shout on spotting a whale!

Do we want to see/show/sell our whales at any cost - even at the cost of chasing them away? Do we want to deny the animals of their rightful territory and feeding grounds, in other words, “kill the goose that lays the Golden Egg”?

We are lucky to have committed Sri Lankan scientists working full time in our waters in the interests of our unique whale-friendly environment. As nature lovers, what can we do in this regard?

Ninel Fernando

NOTE: The opinions expressed are solely those of the writer and do not in any way reflect the views and opinions of the Sri Lanka Natural History Society.

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## Picture Gallery



Count de Mauny's Island 'Taprobane' — Weligama (Photo: Ninel Fernando)





(Photos: Ninel Fernando)

A mixed group of passengers



Departing Mirissa harbour



Returning to Mirissa



(Boat Photos: Ninel Fernando)



The boats

(Dolphin & whale photos: Cheryl Silva)



A pod of dolphins accompanying the boat (l)



A spinner dolphin pirouettes (r)



There she blows!



Whale diving sequence (clockwise from top left)