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SRI LANKA NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY *e-Newsletter - No 1 of 2020*

Editorial

Corona virus, invasive species par excellence has brought the world to its knees. The global “lock down” and “social distancing” to combat its spread has resulted in unprecedented disruption to the day to day living of the entire human race.

Homo sapiens has received a jolt of gargantuan proportion from the smallest of all life forms (that’s if we consider a “lowly” virus to be a life form).

The symptoms of infection are, fortunately, relatively mild and of potentially fatal consequence only for the very old and infirm. It could have been very different indeed ! A virus of such infective capacity could have effectively put paid to the existence of the human race if it had been similarly virulent to young and old alike.

Just imagine, a small mutation in the RNA of this virus and we could witness Armageddon.

Life indeed hangs on a thread – of RNA in this case.

Members are encouraged to send in their snippets for publication in this newsletter to info@riscor.net

Chris Corea
Editor

GLOBAL LOCK DOWN

“Lock Down” has taken its toll on the activities of the Society and, like the rest of society worldwide, we lie dormant until it is safe to crawl out from under our respective rocks.


*Try not to get worried
Try not to turn on to, Problems that upset you, oh
Don't you know?
Everything's alright yes, Everything's fine
And we want you to sleep well tonight*
From Tim Rice's lyrics in “Jesus Christ Super Star”

The much looked forward to Walapane trip was postponed along with the lecture on Sinharaja by Savithri Gunathilake.

UPCOMING LECTURE



Sinharaja – Sri Lanka's Crown Jewel
by Prof Savitri Gunatilleke

POSTPONED



**SRI LANKA
NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY**
SLNHS Public Lecture 2020 #2

**“Sinharaja — Sri Lanka's Crown Jewel:
Understanding the ecology of its tree flora
towards lowland rain forest restoration”**
Prof. Savitri Gunatilleke
Formerly of the Peradeniya University



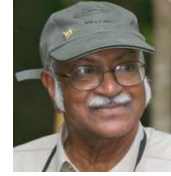
A grove of young *Shorea trapezifolia* ('S=Dun') canopy trees, depicting synchronized flowering.

**Monday
23rd March
6.30 pm**
Auditorium of the
Organisation of
Professional
Associations (OPA),
275/75, Prof. Stanley
Wijesundara Mawatha,
Colombo, 7

Name & car registration number to
lal_motha@yahoo.ca
if you wish to park inside the premises

ANNOUNCING THE LAUNCH OF www.docmalikfern.com

This site documents some of our Patron's numerous contributions to science. It is for those interested in animals and plants underwater off the coast of Sri Lanka. Do take a look – and I am sure he will appreciate your feedback.



99TH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The 99th Annual General Meeting of the Society was held at Hyde Park Residencies on 20th January 2020. Office bearers remained the same and were supplemented by three new Exco members namely Lester Perera, Enoke Corea and Padmini Seneviratne. After the formalities, Lester Perera delivered an illustrated lecture on Pelagic Birds based on his extensive observations on the subject. The proceedings were followed by dinner and fellowship at the poolside cafeteria as has been the practise for the past several years.

Pelagic Sea Birds by Naturalist and Past President Lester Perera (speaking at the AGM)

He commenced his talk describing what Pelagic Sea-birds are. They are a group of bird species whose habitat is the high seas, say 30 km and beyond the coast and rarely venture into land. When they do venture they are usually juveniles. Sri Lanka being surrounded by ocean has a high avifaunal diversity, but pelagic seabirds he said were the least studied due to constraints of conducting dedicated surveys at sea, mainly due to lack of funding and resources being made available. Most of the early seabird studies were at coastal viewpoints and occasional strandings but in the recent decades some data had been collected during boat based surveys into the ocean around Sri Lanka by study teams. The talk also gave the impression that there is inadequate data on their habitat including their breeding and nesting habits. At least 50 species have been identified and nearly all of them are migratory. Identification is usually possible from very good and clear photographs. He went on to say that the easiest means of observing Pelagic birds is by boarding whale watching boats or fishing trawlers.

Recognising that there are threats to the future well-being of the species, the talk conveyed the impression that we have inadequate data on this subject by way of specifics. While recognizing that human activity is the most obvious threat, climate change too is likely to cause major impacts although it is difficult to say at this stage, the directions it will take. The lecture was followed by a lively question and answer session.

RECENT LECTURES *Synopses by Asoka Siriwardena*

Commercial Bivalve Farming in Sri Lanka

by Prof. W. M. T. B. Wanninayake - Monday 24th February 2020 6.30p.m.

He commenced his lecture by explaining why this industry is important to Sri Lanka. We are a country hungry for food protein and spend large amounts in foreign exchange to meet this requirement when we have an enormous potential to develop aquaculture resources. He stated that we have many species in our country for bi-valve farming. Aquaculture is highly developed in other countries but in this country it is an almost untouched resource, which if developed can meet the protein requirement and improve livelihood of people.

The lecture was illustrated with a short film made by the French Embassy about 15 years ago on the species of oyster farmed in Sri Lanka which are edible. He stated that mangrove farming and oyster industry are related, and he explained the use of locally available material to collect spats (drifting bivalve larvae that are ready to settle). He also explained how we are losing the aquaculture resources due to pollution, tourism, leisure activities. The talk covered various aspects of oyster and mussel culture, including the technical qualities, environmental and economic characteristics, species identification including identifying pearls. Mussels, oysters are also an indicator of the environment conditions and water quality of given sites.

Speaking of the market size and feasibility he cited the large scale farming he witnessed in Thailand where huge quantities are being produced. He mentioned areas in Sri Lanka which can successfully grow this industry. He concluded his talk by identifying the strengths and weaknesses facing the industry in Sri Lanka. One important advantage we have he said is crystal clear water in contrast to certain other countries with highly polluted water. A drawback is the unfortunate lack of policy initiatives to support the industry at the government level. During the discussion it was established that mangroves should not be destroyed to establish bivalve or other farms.

Beetles of Sri Lanka with special reference to Tiger Beetles

by Dr. Chandima Dangalla of the Colombo University

The October Public Lecture was delivered on the subject of Beetles of Sri Lanka with special reference to Tiger Beetles. She commenced by talking about the insects of Sri Lanka and said that Sri Lanka has 31 insect orders out of 32 in the world. The beetle however has not been given much attention. She went on to say that beetles are the largest insect order -165 families in the world. There are 3033 beetle species out of 15 families in Sri Lanka. Blister beetles are a species that have been studied. She then dealt with certain other species of beetles namely,

- Red Weevil: A native to Sri Lanka but a pest in other countries, but not in Sri Lanka.
- Cabbage Flea Beetles
- Dung Beetles which have been studied (103 species have been recorded)
- Ground Beetles
- Tiger Beetles (63 species of which 39 are endemic)

She stated that Sri Lanka is ranked No 1 in countries which has the highest density of tiger beetles. They are bio indicators and have the potential of being bio-control agents (controlling other pests) as well. Then she described the diversity of the Ground Dwelling Beetles, describing the 21 species they have found. She also mentioned of published scientific papers on the subject and went on to mention the intent to publish a Field Guide to Tiger Beetles.

RECENT EXCURSION TO CHILAW

The one day Chilaw excursion was conducted on the 1st of March and enjoyed by all thanks to Ninel's painstaking preparation. Participants were Malik Fernando, Ninel Fernando, Lester Perera, Rohan De Soysa, Dharmin Samarajeeva, Arjun Gunawardena, Samantha Gunasekera, Nihal Ferdinando, Nandalal Ranasinghe, Enoka, Shenuka and Chris Corea, Nilwala de Silva, Jeevani and Amal Siriwardena, WP Somasunderam, Deepa Wimalasena and Shiranee Goonewardena.



Sanderling on the beach



AGM Speaker, Past President and Exco Member - Lester Perera

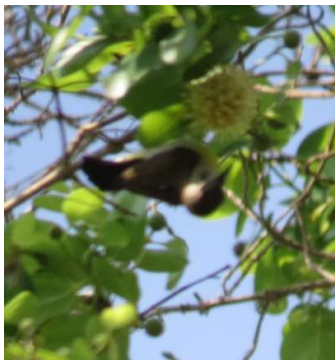
Leaving from Barnes Place, driving on the expressway and after a breakfast stop, we made it to the Chilaw sandspit a trifle too late to catch the full range of birds. However, the sanderlings did not disappoint and were seen pottering about the water's edge as usual. We walked right to the end of the sand spit which had been stabilised by enormous geotextile sandbags. These looked just like rocks and fitted in well with the scenery.

From there we headed for Annaivilundawa and it's usual repertoire of water birds in their idyllic setting. Participants walked up and down the scenic bund enjoying the company of a large number of water birds. Lester heard a white naped woodpecker and also identified Common Castor and Dark Wanderer butterflies.



Lester then “nosed out” a wayside restaurant serving lunch with excellent pork curry for the hungry travellers. Thus fortified we headed to Nawadamkulama. Here the party walked along the bund for quite a distance. After making careful inquiries about the habits of any local crocodilians, Chris took the plunge and cooled off amidst the fauna and flora of the tank. A booted eagle kept us entertained by its presence. Garganey were spotted in the distance along with large numbers of cormorants.

The return journey was punctuated by a stop at the Chilaw Rest House for toilet and tea sponsored by our Patron.



Common Iora - Navadamkulama



Large Cuckooshrike - Navadamkulama



Vanda tessellata - Annaivilundawa

