

Wasgamuwa

the best

National Park

to get to

By Chandeeep Corea.

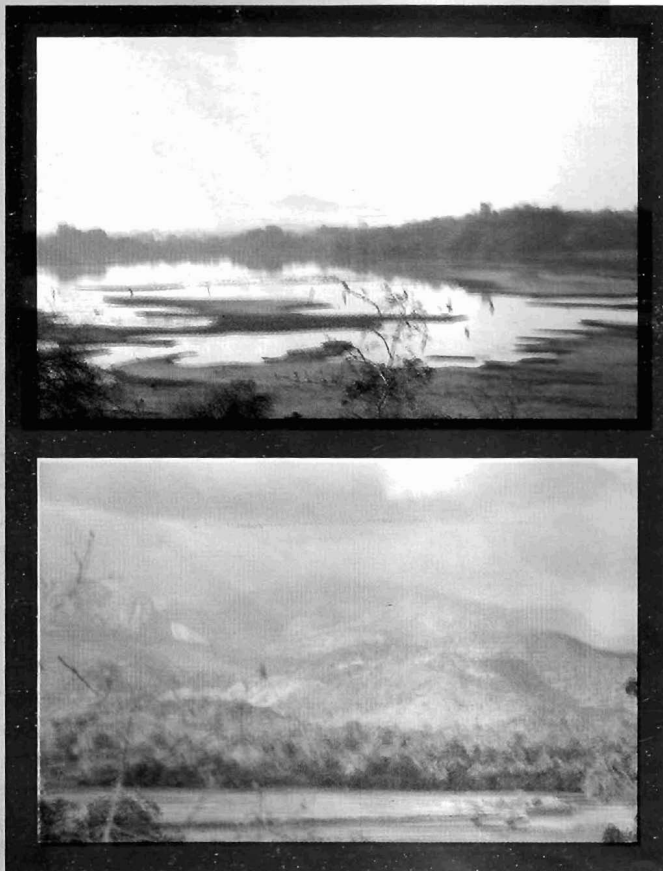
Like all other parks Wasgamuwa National Park (WNP) has plenty of elephants except in the driest months. Leopard and bear are easier to see here than in Uda Walawe, but much rarer than in Yala. During the wet season the park has probably the most fantastic off roading experience in Sri Lanka's National Parks and has got us to spend much time pulling ourselves out of the mud. That's about all I can really say about the park itself - even though I've worked in the vicinity for the past 7 years and traveled there about 20 times this year alone.

What is awesome and unique about Wasgamuwa National Park is actually getting to it. The shortest route takes a shade more than 5 hours and the longest about 6. All the routes have their uniquely intriguing features and so let me take you through each of 4 routes to the park.

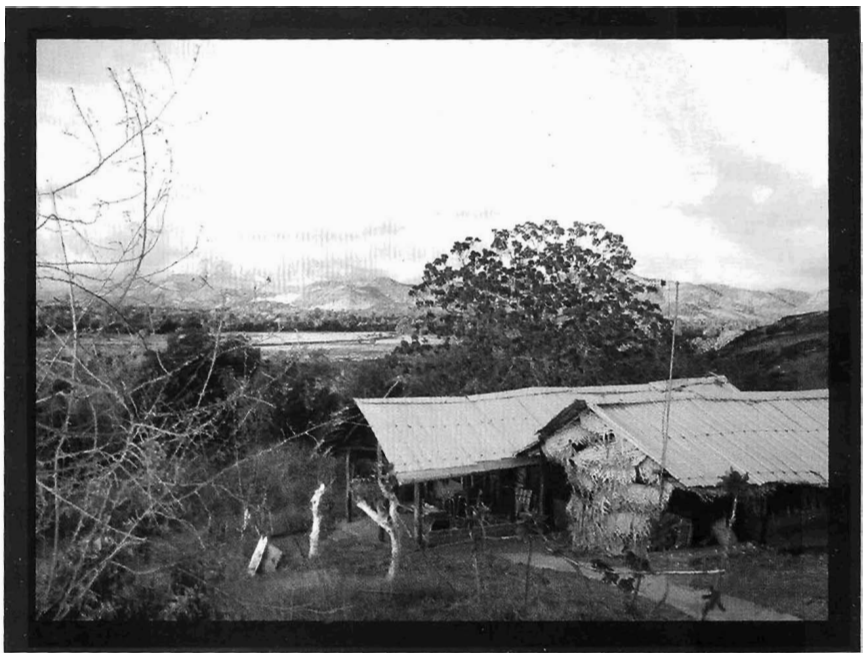
Most people travel to Kandy, or Kurunegala and get to Matale (around 3 hours - if you don't get caught in Kandy or Kurunegala traffic) from where they turn onto the Rattota road (B38) over Lagalla over the Knuckles range. This road travels over the Northern Knuckles range, which is some of the most pristine areas left in the country. Once you pass the telecom tower at the top of this route you are rewarded with the magnificent vista of eastern Sri Lanka, and two wonderful national parks: Wasgamuwa and Maduru Oya. Unfortunately this is the longest and most uncomfortable route. It takes about 2 ½ hours from Matale. If you get here by about 10am there is a beautiful swimming spot after the beauty of the Knuckles Range awaits you. You will come to a bridge near a Forest Department bungalow - an ideal spot to have "Brunch" and a cool relax swim in the Kalu Ganga before you travel the last hour or so to WNP.

The shortest route is through Dambulla. From Dambulla take the A9 route towards Kandy and turn left at Naula - 20Km from Dambulla (25/1 mile post on A9). This is the Elahera road (B312) which goes through the Elahera Wildlife Range and skirts the western boundary of WNP for much of the distance to Lagalla. This route has few vehicles and is in good shape for much of the way. Along the B312 make sure you turn down and to the right at about the 23rd mile post (just past Elehara) otherwise you will end up in Giritale.

Just before Lagalla you will see a road on the right going west (53/6 mile post) this is the Rattota road that goes over the Knuckles range - which I described earlier. You should cross the bridge here over the Kalu Ganga and head down to Hettipola where you would need to turn left at the T- Junction to travel the last 20Km to Wasgamuwa National Park.



Two routes are through Kandy and Mahiyangana. One is the main Kandy-Mahiyangana road through Digana, Mahiyangana and down the 18 hairpin-bends to Hasalaka. This descent is the best part of this route because of the stunning views off the cliff face. Unfortunately there is a lot of traffic on this road and it is not in good shape at all. Early morning and in the rainy season there is a very good chance of thick fog blanketing the last few kilometers of this road, which makes travel extremely slow. At Hasalaka you could turn left near the police barrier to Hettipola or go an extra 10 kilometers to Mahiyangana and travel to Hettipola on a much more comfortable route.



Travel along the Hasalaka-Hettipola road offers an interesting piece of engineering where a river flows over a canal.

For the last route to WNP which is what I least want to reveal to you. Passing Kandy before you get on to the A26 Mahiyangana road there is a major checkpoint. At this junction you get the new Regency Hotel, a bridge across the Mahaweli, and the A26 to the Left, on the Right is the Victoria-Randenigala Road which is also known as the Kandy-Badulla main road. This route has the least traffic and villages but the best surface, widest road and highest possibility of seeing elephants and other wildlife before you get to WNP.

It takes about 2 1/2 hours from Kandy which makes it only a 4 1/2 hour drive from Colombo depending on what time you leave, and if you get through Kandy before traffic starts.

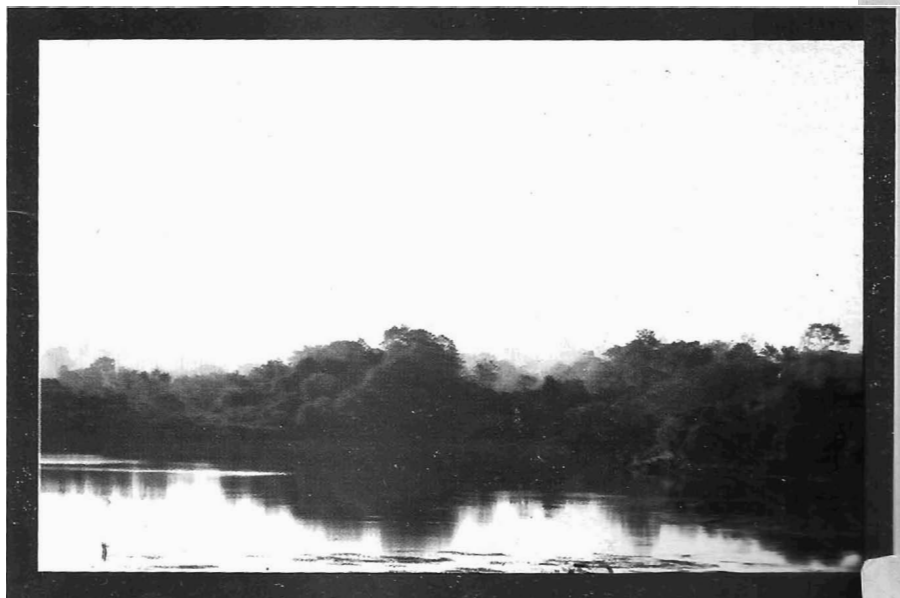
You should time it so that you are near Randenigala Dam by about 1 hour from Kandy) because there is a good chance of seeing one of the few herds of wild elephants left at this location in Sri Lanka. Most of the area you travel through is densely populated and goes through the Victoria-Randenigala Sanctuary.

After past the Randenigala Dam (closed from 6pm to 6am), you will see a road to the left and down with a sign posted as Mahiyangana. Do not take this as the surface is bad and there is a much better road that takes the same amount of time to travel along some beautiful birding spots. Instead, continue along the main road and past the Rantambe Dam until you get to the T-Junction. Right here is to Badulla. Left is to Mahiyangana. This excellent road to Mahiyangana goes along the bund of Loggal Oya Reservoir and Wellawa Reservoir, both of which afford excellent birding opportunities.

At Mahiyangana town turn right at the roundabout and then in 100m take a left

onto the Girandurukotte Road. Passing Girandurukotte(17Km from Mahiyangana) you get a left turn on the "Japan Palama" this is the future Ampara-Colombo Highway. Follow this road past the Bridge (some 10km) and onto Hettipola. The bridge is the probably the worst designed in Sri Lanka and you will understand what I mean as you try to look at the mighty Mahaweli River as you go over it 1/4 However just after the bridge you can put your foot down on the accelerator as you travel on probably Sri Lanka's most perfect Stretch of road - for about 10Km. It is not only perfect in surface and embankment but has a truly magnificent vista that can't be matched by the equally excellent Suriyawewa-Hambantota road.

All the routes mentioned here join in Hettipola, which is the last town to fill up on Diesel/Petrol and is the last town with electricity. WNP is some 20Km from here, and the route follows the canal and many small wewas on the way. On the other side of the canal (i.e. to your left) is mostly WNP/Forest Dept Range



are no roads.

At about the 38th mile post you will find an electric fence on the **Right of the road** - this is a part of Sri Lanka's first community integrated elephant conservation program. It seeks to separate the villages and their crops from elephants by protecting the crops and village rather than fencing the elephants into the park. It allows the elephants mobility and keeps the villages lives and livelihoods intact. The village people maintains the fence.

Just after the Dunwila Weva, which is at about the 40th Mile Post, you will find the Kinjou Safari Village and the "Willy's" Hotel. The former gives you an excellent Chinese meal, which you could enjoy in the park ¼ it also, has "Container" rooms, which are hot during the day, but they do afford an excellent view and are very clean. Officially the land that it is on and all the land from here to the park entrance is part of WNP's legal boundaries. Right now it is good primary and secondary forest that is often visited by elephants during the dry season while on their nightly raids into the village. The **park entrance** is about 5km from here.

Now that you are in the park, and whether or not you see elephants or other wildlife during your visit to WNP. I can almost guarantee that you would have enjoyed the trip to the park. Going back if you take a different route from that which you

the least known areas of Sri Lanka - outside of the north-e-

If you are feeling adventurous you could visit Maduru C National Park - about 45Km or 45mins away along Dehiattakandia Road. Or during the dry season visit Minneriya or Kaudulla Herds - 120Km or 2 ½ hours away. Either of these would add only about 2 hours to your total travel time.

While you are there; there is a unique opportunity to visit Sri Lanka Wildlife Conservation Societies projects in the area. We are active in a 'wholistic' approach to conservation combining community development by HEC mitigation through electric fences, teaching of English through foreign volunteer research into the elephant densities and biodiversity of the area and community based tourism. We can show you around our projects and let you become a 'researcher' for the day with our local field staff and if you want experience a night in a hut like a villager trying to protect his crops. Our aim is primarily to let you see the other side of the elephants which is quite unlike the usual loveable elephant in a National Park. Contact info@slwcs.org or 0777-885330.

This is the uniqueness of Wasgamuwa National Park, which makes it the Best National Park in Sri Lanka.

