



**SRI LANKA:  
ISLAND ENDEMIC, WINTERING SPECIALTIES,  
AND BLUE WHALE PELAGIC**

**09 - 22 JANUARY 2023**

**08 – 21 JANUARY 2024**



*Sri Lanka Frogmouth can often be found during the daytime.*

This exclusive small-group birdwatching tour of Sri Lanka explores the picturesque continental island situated at the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent where we go in search of the country's mouthwatering endemic birds and wintering specialties.

Sri Lanka is home to 34 currently recognized IOC endemic species, with some of the most impressive ones including the rare **Sri Lanka Spurfowl**, the gaudy **Sri Lanka Junglefowl**, **Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot**, **Layard's Parakeet**, the shy, thicket-dwelling **Red-faced Malkoha**, the tiny **Chestnut-backed Owlet**, the common **Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill**, **Yellow-fronted Barbet**, **Crimson-fronted Barbet**, **Yellow-eared Bulbul**, the spectacular **Sri Lanka Blue Magpie**, the cute **Sri Lanka White-eye**, and the tricky, but worth-the-effort trio of **Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush**, **Sri Lanka Thrush**, and **Spot-winged Thrush**. We will also look for the relatively recently discovered (2001), Endangered (IUCN), range-restricted, and endemic **Serendib Scops Owl**, which we will hopefully find on its day roost, as we hope to do with the shy and secretive **Sri Lanka Bay Owl** too.



*Serendib Scops Owl* was discovered only in 2001 and is one of over 30 endemic target birds on this tour.



This tour is also timed to coincide with the presence of several overwintering species in the country that are difficult to find at their breeding grounds; these include the boldly patterned and highly skulking **Pied Thrush**, the pretty **Kashmir Flycatcher**, and the simply stunning **Indian Pitta**. There are also plenty of other exciting species possible, such as **Lesser Adjutant**, **Indian Blue Robin**, **Indian Peafowl**, **Legge's Hawk-Eagle**, **Orange Minivet**, **Indian Paradise Flycatcher**, **Forest Wagtail**, **Malabar Trogon**, and **Sri Lanka Frogmouth** (surprisingly not a Sri Lankan endemic, given its English name; it also occurs in southern India in the Western Ghats, as do a couple of the other birds listed above such as the trogon). Furthermore, Sri Lanka is the westernmost representative of Indo-Malayan flora, and its abundant birdlife also shows many such affinities.

This tour also offers plenty of wildlife-viewing opportunities with **Asian Elephant**, the Sri Lankan endemic subspecies of **Leopard** (*Panthera pardus kotiya*), and **Blue Whale** all being possible, along with a range of monkeys, squirrels, and deer. The itinerary covers a variety of habitat types, including lowland, monsoon and cloud forests, grasslands, lagoons, coastal mudflats, fresh and brackish waterbodies, imposing riverine woodland, and forest, and will include a pelagic trip off Sri Lanka's southwest coast into the sparkling Indian Ocean.



*Found only in Sri Lanka and the Western Ghats (in India), **Malabar Trogon** is sure to delight.*

You could combine this tour with our exciting **Birding Tour India: Andaman Islands Endemics**, designed specially to follow this Sri Lanka tour. This extension will look for numerous endemic birds, including **Andaman Serpent Eagle**, **Andaman Masked Owl**, **Hume's Hawk-Owl**, **Andaman Hawk-Owl**, **Andaman Woodpecker**, and many more!

We have many other Indian tours following after this tour, details of which can be found [here](#).

**Itinerary (14 days/13 nights)****Day 1. Arrive in Katunayake and transfer to your hotel near the airport**

Arrival in Sri Lanka at the Bandaranaike International Airport in Katunayake and transfer to your nearby hotel with the remainder of the day at leisure. We will have a group dinner together in the evening, our first of many wonderful local meals; the food in Sri Lanka is great!

Overnight: Katunayake

**Day 2. Kitulgala for lowland endemics and specialties**

We will leave the hotel after breakfast, heading toward the west to our first birding base, the lush lowlands of Kitulgala.

Roadside birding in Sri Lanka is refreshingly good. **Blue-tailed Bee-eater, White-throated Kingfisher, White-bellied Drongo, Indian Roller, Sri Lanka Swallow, Scaly-breasted Munia, Brown Shrike, Indian Jungle Crow, Yellow-billed Babbler, Oriental Magpie-Robin, and Ashy Woodswallow** are often seen perched on wires. Though we will no doubt see them again and again, these wayside temptations will be hard to resist. The odd **Crested Serpent Eagle** and **Changeable (Crested) Hawk-Eagle**, sentinels on posts, will almost certainly bring our vehicle to a halt. The more common waterbirds such as **Red-wattled Lapwing, Indian Pond Heron, Eastern Cattle Egret, Intermediate Egret, Black-winged Stilt, and Asian Openbill** will certainly not be ignored either.



*Changeable (Crested) Hawk-Eagle is one of a number of raptors to see on this tour.*

With all these leg-stretching stops it will be close to midday by the time we reach our overnight accommodation, nestled in a well-wooded garden and overlooking the Kelani River, the setting for the renowned '50s Hollywood blockbuster “The Bridge on the River Kwai”.

After enjoying our first of many rice-and-curry lunches we will commence our quest for the island's endemics in the well-wooded garden of our lodge. The resonant call of **Yellow-fronted Barbet** is likely to demand our attention first – a common element in the soundscape of the wet Sri Lankan hinterland. The gregarious **Orange-billed Babbler** with its constant chattering will be easier to locate. A gem of a bird, **Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot** – with its specific name *beryllinus* named after beryl, a semi-precious stone found in Sri Lanka – may require scope views to properly take in its scarlet forehead and rump patch against a greener body.

Our night bird tally is likely to get ticking with the adorable **Chestnut-backed Owlet** at a stakeout. The well-wooded, home-garden-type birding, combining several patches of habitat, will add a mouthwatering array of birds to our tally in the form of the newly raised-to-endemic **Sri Lanka Swallow** (perched views on wires), **Sri Lanka Green Pigeon**, **Chestnut-headed Bee-eater**, **Square-tailed Bulbul**, **White-browed Bulbul**, **Yellow-browed Bulbul**, **Tickell's Blue Flycatcher**, **Orange-billed Babbler**, **Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill**, **Golden-fronted Leafbird**, **Black-rumped Flameback**, **Black-headed Cuckooshrike**, **Sri Lanka Hill Myna**, **Common Iora**, **Purple-rumped Sunbird**, **Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike**, **Orange Minivet**, **Brown-breasted Flycatcher**, **Asian Brown Flycatcher**, **Forest Wagtail**, and perhaps **Layard's Parakeet**, named after E. L. Layard, a 19<sup>th</sup> century British civil servant, who added an astonishing 136 species to Sri Lanka's avian inventory.

Overnight: Kitulgala

### Day 3. Full day birding in Kitulgala for lowland endemics and specialties

**Spot-winged Thrush** may greet the new day with its rhythmic dawn chorus, and it may perhaps come hopping in to find an easy meal at first light. The “pretty-dear” call, likely to be heard in the undergrowth, may betray a flock of **Brown-capped Babblers** moving low. The Himalayan delight, **Indian Pitta**, might also be not too far, if you scan well. With more light of the day the dawn chorus may peak with additional tunes of **Green Warbler**, **Large-billed Leaf Warbler**, **Tickell's Blue Flycatcher**, and the aforementioned thrush, with harsher greetings from **Chestnut-backed Owlet**.

Our morning's birding will add a huge boost to our trip list with the likes of **Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher**, **Sri Lanka Drongo**, **Lesser Yellownap**, **Indian Paradise Flycatcher**, **Black-naped Monarch**, **Black-capped Bulbul**, **Oriental White-eye**, and **Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill**.

We will cross the Kelani River in search of rarer gems. Foremost among these is the **Serendib Scops Owl**, discovered in 2001 and with an estimated population of only 200 – 250 birds in the wild. We will look for it at a daytime roost. The ultra-secretive **Sri Lanka Spurfowl** may require patience, as it is highly wary of people. **Crimson-backed Flameback** also occurs in this forest and is a gorgeous woodpecker. During the return journey we will pause at a forest patch to look for a roosting pair of **Sri Lanka Frogmouth**, which is a South India and Sri Lanka endemic.

Overnight: Kitulgala



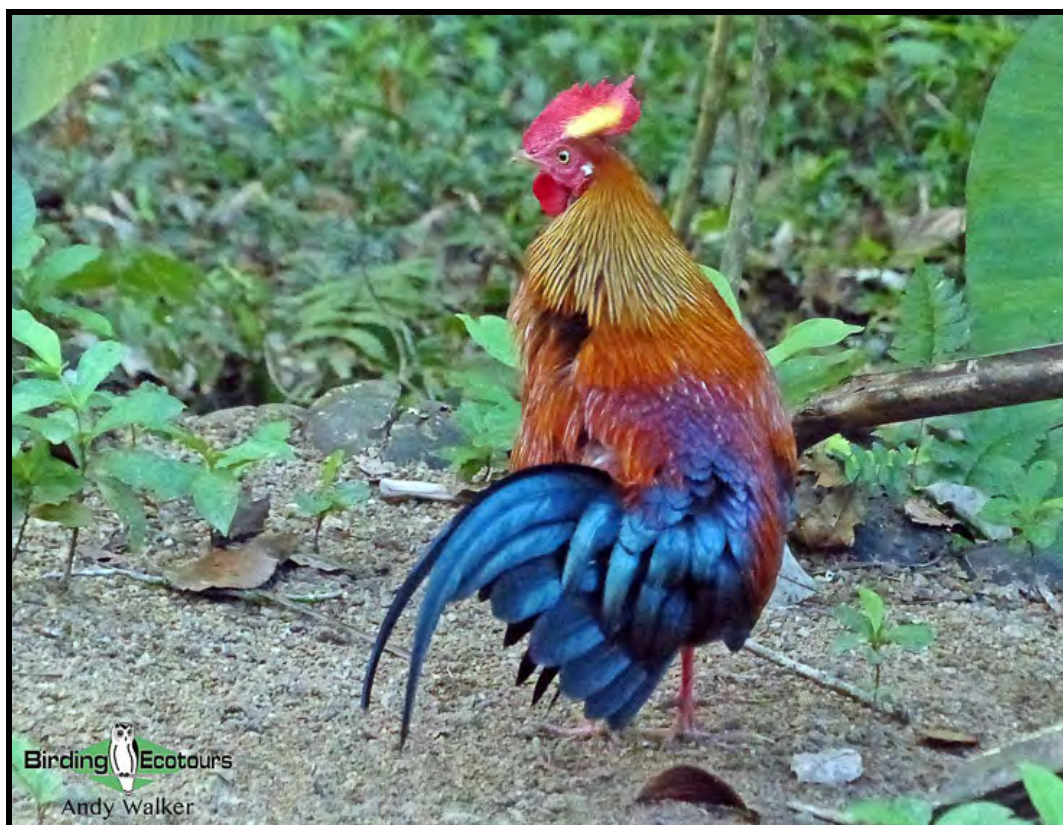
#### Day 4. Drive to the endemic hotspot Sinharaja Forest Reserve

After some early morning birding and breakfast we will drive to the amazing Sinharaja Forest Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which represents the largest expanse of lowland rainforest in Sri Lanka and the premier site for endemics, where we will get started on the birds listed for days 5 and 6.

Overnight: Sinharaja

#### Days 5 - 6. Two days birding Sinharaja for lowland endemics and mixed-species flocks

We will have two full days in this birding hotspot, and we are sure to see many great birds. A highlight of birding in Sinharaja is seeing mixed-species bird flocks, which is a strategy adopted by birds in the tropics to maximize feeding efficiency and to reduce the risk of predation; these flocks are likely to be led by **Orange-billed Babbler** and **Sri Lanka Drongo**. The star of this coterie of flock-associated specials is the enigmatic **Red-faced Malkoha** – a canopy-dwelling endemic, found typically at heights of 25-35 meters (82-115 feet), with a remarkable ability to melt away into dense thickets. **White-faced Starling** too keeps to the canopy. **Ashy-headed Laughingthrush**, in comparison, is found in bottom levels of the flock, often scratching the forest floor for insect prey, and **Malabar Trogon** hawks insects in the subcanopy and remains largely silent.



*No ordinary chicken! A regal Sri Lanka Junglefowl looking back at our group*



*The secretive **Sri Lanka Thrush**, another highly sought endemic that skulks along the ground*



***Sri Lanka Blue Magpie** is gorgeous and can at times be quiet as it moves through dense vegetation, giving occasional great and close views.*

Further target birds we will look for include the montane endemic **Sri Lanka Wood Pigeon**, which descends to Sinharaja in search of seasonal fruits. With the right technique more



bonus birds will come our way in form of **Sri Lanka Thrush**, **Sri Lanka Blue Magpie**, **Sri Lanka Hill Myna**, **Indian Blue Robin**, **Slaty-legged Crake**, and **Indian Cuckoo**.

Finding an **Indian Paradise Flycatcher** sporting its white ribbon-like tail streamers that are nearly a foot in length may be a possibility if we encounter a good flock. **Chestnut-winged Cuckoo**, another migrant that joins flocks, may, however, present a tougher challenge, as it is not as regular. We will also try for forest raptors like **Besra** and **Crested Goshawk**, which lurk behind flocks to catch birds. During the day we may perhaps hear the blood-curdling screams of **Sri Lanka (Grizzled) Giant Squirrel**, which would betray the presence of more formidable forest raptors such as **Legge's Hawk-Eagle** and **Black Eagle**, soaring high above the canopy. In addition to the above we will try to obtain improved views of the endemics already seen and try to again experience the magic of mixed-species bird flocks.

Overnight: Sinharaja



*We will hope to get great views of the rare and secretive **Sri Lanka Spurfowl**.*

### Day 7. Sinharaja and travel to Mirissa

After a final morning birding in Sinharaja we will head to the beautiful southern coast of Sri Lanka at Mirissa to get into a suitable location for the pelagic trip tomorrow.

Overnight: Mirissa

### Day 8. Morning whale-watching tour, afternoon travel to Tissamaharama

We will be up early for a really exciting prospect, the chance to go whale watching in the stunning Indian Ocean for the morning. Our main target species is the largest mammal on the



planet – the magnificent and unrivaled **Blue Whale**, which can reach lengths of over 30 meters (over 100 feet)! Seeing these huge creatures will be hard to beat, although we could also possibly find **Sperm Whale**, **Bryde's Whale**, **Orca** (Killer Whale), **Short-finned Pilot Whale**, **Risso's Dolphin**, **Spinner Dolphin**, or **Long-beaked Common Dolphin**. A range of seabirds are possible (e.g. **Bridled Tern**, **Pomarine Jaeger** (Skua), **Wilson's Storm Petrel**, **Brown Noddy**, etc.); however, our main focus of the pelagic is on the sea mammals.



***Brown Noddy** should be seen on our whale-watching tour.*

After the pelagic trip we will move up the coast to Tissamaharama, our base for a couple of nights as we explore this excellent area for a wide range of birds. On arrival in the area we will head into some wetlands to start looking for some of the birds listed below.

Overnight: Tissamaharama

### **Day 9. Morning birding at Bundala National Park, afternoon Yala National Park**

We will spend the morning birding the fascinating habitats of Bundala National Park, Sri Lanka's first Ramsar site. This is the premier site for waterbirds, and you can often get close to the birds in the vehicles to get very good photographic opportunities.

We will get there as early as possible to maximize our time in this wonderful set of habitats. Some of the species possible here are **Black Bittern**, **Yellow Bittern**, and **Cinnamon Bittern**, **Watercock**, **Great Stone-curlew**, **Indian Stone-curlew**, **Eurasian Curlew**, **Marsh Sandpiper**, **Wood Sandpiper**, **Green Sandpiper**, **Lesser Sand Plover**, **Greater Sand Plover**, **Little Ringed Plover**, **Little Stint**, **Kentish Plover**, **Red-necked Phalarope**, **Small Pratincole**,

Western Reef Heron, Striated Heron, Little Egret, Black-headed Ibis, Glossy Ibis, Eurasian Spoonbill, Black-necked Stork, Little Cormorant, Indian Cormorant, Oriental Darter, Spot-billed Pelican, Yellow-wattled Lapwing, Black-tailed Godwit, Garganey, Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler, Caspian Tern, White-winged Tern, Whiskered Tern, Common Tern, Greater Crested Tern, Lesser Crested Tern, Little Tern, Brown-headed Gull, and Greater Flamingo. Other species possible in the area include Clamorous (Indian) Reed Warbler, Eurasian Hoopoe, Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark, Brown Fish Owl, Yellow-crowned Woodpecker, and Ashy Drongo.



*Cinnamon Bittern can be seen at Bundala National Park.*

Further species we will look for include **Barred Buttonquail**, **Painted Stork**, **White-bellied Sea Eagle**, **Grey-headed Fish Eagle**, **Greater Painted-snipe**, **Terek Sandpiper**, **Orange-breasted Green Pigeon**, **Grey-bellied Cuckoo**, **Blue-faced Malkoha**, **Sirkeer Malkoha**, **Chestnut-headed Bee-eater**, **Indian Pitta**, **Forest Wagtail**, **Oriental Skylark**, **Yellow-eyed Babbler**, **Rosy Starling**, **Streaked** and **Baya Weavers**, and **Indian Silverbill**. There really is a huge list of potential species here, and we are bound to have a great time.

In the afternoon we will move the short distance into the nearby Yala National Park for a game drive to look for the Sri Lankan endemic subspecies of **Leopard**. Here we will also likely come across some of the birds found at Bundala (listed above) and at Udawalawe (listed below). There is also a good chance of finding **Asian Elephant** here, which is always a treat.

Overnight: Tissamaharama



### Day 10. Drive to Udawalawe National Park for dry-zone specialties

In the morning we drive to the dry lowlands of Udawalawe National Park. After checking in at the accommodation we will explore this fantastic park in search of dry-zone birds, which abound here.

The birds on offer here include **Sri Lanka Woodshrike**, **White-bellied Sea Eagle**, **Green Bee-eater**, **Blue-faced Malkoha**, **Coppersmith Barbet**, **Yellow-eyed Babbler**, **Rosy Starling**, **Jacobin Cuckoo**, **Grey-bellied Cuckoo**, **Jerdon's Bush Lark**, **Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark**, **Indian Pitta**, **White-browed Fantail**, **Little Swift**, **Brahminy Starling**, **Paddyfield Pipit**, **Blyth's Pipit**, **Orange-breasted Green Pigeon**, **Spot-billed Pelican**, **Yellow-wattled Lapwing**, **Painted Stork**, **Woolly-necked Stork**, **Indian Peafowl**, **Indian Robin**, **Black-winged Kite**, and **Indian Stone-curlew**. Migrant species like **Red-rumped Swallow** (with paler red belly and rump), **Western Yellow Wagtail**, **White Wagtail**, and **Citrine Wagtail** may show up too.



*Painted Stork can be seen in Udawalawe National Park.*

Other birds we will be on the lookout for at Udawalawe National Park include dry-zone specials such as **Malabar Pied Hornbill**, **Sirkeer Malkoha**, **Indian Silverbill**, **Barred Buttonquail**, **Lesser Adjutant**, and if lucky **Brown Fish Owl**. With its vast open expanses the park also harbors a rich diversity of exciting raptors, such as **Changeable (Crested) Hawk-Eagle**, **Crested Serpent Eagle**, **Grey-headed Fish Eagle**, **Western Osprey** – a local rarity, **Pallid Harrier**, **Montagu's Harrier** – another rarity, **Booted Eagle**, **Shaheen** – the resident subspecies of **Peregrine Falcon**, **Common Kestrel**, **Crested Honey Buzzard**, and **Shikra**. In addition to excellent birds a visit to Udawalawe also presents a good opportunity to observe **Asian Elephant** and **Wild Water Buffalo**, both of which are found in good numbers in the park.



*Green Bee-eater is one of the species we hope to encounter in Udawalawe National Park.*

As dusk approaches we will look for **Indian Nightjar** and **Jerdon's Nightjar** in the scrub near our accommodation, likely serenaded by a chorus of **Indian Pittas** as the sun sets.

Overnight: Udawalawe

### Day 11. Transfer to Nuwara Eliya and high-elevation birding

After some more early-morning birding in the Udawalawe area we will commence our ascent to reach the cooler interiors of Nuwara Eliya at 1,890 meters (6,200 feet). We will stop for any good birds noted along the way, but principally the morning is for driving today. Nuwara Eliya is the most famous hill station in Sri Lanka, named by some “Little England”, as it still bears evidence of its colonial past with its English-style holiday homes, an urban park, a few pubs, flower gardens, and a fine 18-hole golf course. As we ascend vast stretches of tea gardens dominate the landscape, a cash crop introduced by the British, which is currently the country's third-highest revenue earner. A serious drop in temperature of around 10-15 degrees Celsius (50-59 degrees Fahrenheit) at Nuwara Eliya will necessitate sweaters!

Once we reach the town we will explore Victoria Park. Established in 1897 to commemorate the 60<sup>th</sup> coronation jubilee of Queen Victoria, this urban park is the prime location for Western Himalayan migrants, including **Kashmir Flycatcher** and **Pied Thrush**, which winter almost exclusively in Sri Lanka. **Indian Pitta**, **Indian Blue Robin**, **Forest Wagtail**, **Sri Lanka Scimitar Babbler**, **Indian Blackbird**, and **Sykes's Warbler** are some of the other good birds to be found in this park.

At the end of the day we will reach our cozy highland lodge, where we will stay for two nights.

Overnight: Nuwara Eliya





*The stunning **Indian Pitta** spends its non-breeding season in Sri Lanka.*



*We will look on the ground for the gorgeous **Indian Blue Robin**.*

**Day 12. Nuwara Eliya, looking for montane endemics and other specials**

We will have an early start with a picnic breakfast to get to the high-elevation Horton Plains National Park, where we will spend time in the forest looking for high-value montane targets: **Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush**, **Sri Lanka Bush Warbler**, **Yellow-eared Bulbul**, **Dull-blue Flycatcher**, **Sri Lanka White-eye**, and **Sri Lanka Wood Pigeon**. Mixed-species bird flocks are to be found in this forest, comprised of both white-eye species, **Orange Minivet**, **Velvet-fronted Nuthatch**, **Grey-headed Canary-flycatcher**, and **Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike**.

In the afternoon we will descend back to near Nuwara Eliya, where we will reach a patch of habitat close to our accommodation in time to anticipate the arrival of the ultra-secretive, montane, endemic **Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush**, which is one of two Endangered (IUCN) Sri Lankan endemics.

Overnight: Nuwara Eliya



*The endemic **Dull-blue Flycatcher** is found in the mountains of Sri Lanka.*

**Day 13. Drive to Kandy, in the afternoon local birding**

In the morning we will be birding for any missing montane specials before driving to Kandy at an elevation of 477 meters (1,565 feet), the last Sinhalese kingdom in Sri Lanka, which was ceded to the British in 1815. En route we will pause at a tea factory to see the recently split **Hill Swallow**, which nests inside the factory. After a cuppa we will reach our accommodation, which is a hotel situated close to birding sites and the sacred city of Kandy, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



In the late afternoon we will go birding within our ample hotel grounds close to Kandy to look for any missing targets. We will also look for several special birds here, namely **Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher**, **Crimson-fronted Barbet** and **Common Hawk-Cuckoo**.

A noisy colony of **Indian Flying Foxes** will be hard to ignore, and we could see them in their thousands in several large trees next to the river, with constant fights over landing rights.

Overnight: Kandy



*Green-billed Coucal is a secretive endemic and we will be constantly looking for one.*

#### Day 14. Birding around Kandy, transfer to Katunayake for departure

We will finish the tour with some optional pre-breakfast birding around the wonderful gardens of the hotel area. After our final breakfast of the tour we will travel back to Katunayake near Colombo before the tour comes to an end with your afternoon international departure.

If you would like to add some further island endemic birds to your travels you might like to consider our **Birding Tour India: Andaman Islands Endemics** which runs straight after this tour, during which we will look for **Andaman Woodpecker**, **Andaman Serpent Eagle**, **Andaman Masked Owl**, **Andaman Scops Owl**, **Hume's Hawk-Owl**, and **Andaman Hawk-Owl**, among many others. Alternatively you may like to consider our **Birding Tour India: The North – Tigers, Amazing Birds, and the Himalayas**, where we look for **Bengal Tiger** and some incredible birds such as the monotypic pair of **Ibisbill** and **Wallcreeper** and a great deal of other exciting birds such as **Cheer Pheasant**, **Indian Courser**, and **Indian Skimmer** to name a few.

Overnight: Not included

*Please note that the itinerary cannot be guaranteed as it is only a rough guide and can be changed (usually slightly) due to factors such as availability of accommodation, updated information on the state of accommodation, roads, or birding sites, the discretion of the guides and other factors. In addition, we sometimes have to use a different international guide from the one advertised due to tour scheduling.*

**Duration:** 14 days  
**Group Size:** 4 - 8  
**Dates:** 09 - 22 January 2023  
08 – 21 January 2024  
**Start:** Bandaranaike International Airport in Katunayake  
**End:** Bandaranaike International Airport in Katunayake  
**Prices:** US\$6,044 per person sharing – based on 4 - 8 participants (2023)  
US\$6,649 per person sharing – based on 4 - 8 participants (2024)  
**Single Supplements:** US\$1,015 (2023)  
US\$1,116 (2024)

**Price includes:**

All accommodation (as described above)  
Meals (from evening meal on day 1 until breakfast on day 14)  
Drinking water – two bottles of mineral water per day per person from our tour vehicle, please bring a refillable water bottle (if taken from the hotel this will be at your own cost)  
Expert tour leader  
Local bird and wildlife guide fees  
National park/birdwatching reserve entrance fees  
Safari jeep services  
Pelagic boat trip for whale watching  
All ground transport and tolls while on tour, including airport pick-up and drop-off

**Price excludes:**

Flights to/from Bandaranaike International Airport in Katunayake, Sri Lanka  
Visa  
Items of a personal nature, e.g. gifts, laundry, internet access, phone calls, etc.  
Optional tours (e.g. monument entrance fees and associated additional travel expenses)  
Any pre- or post-tour accommodation, meals, or birding/sightseeing/monument excursions  
Soft/alcoholic drinks  
Camera (still/video) permits  
Personal travel insurance  
Visits/entrance fees to cultural monuments  
Gratuities, e.g. porters, waiters, park guides, jeep drivers, coach driver, guides, etc.