

## Postcard from Sri Lanka

One of the more endearing aspects of birding in Sri Lanka is the presence of many small and quaint monasteries tucked away in remote parts of the island nation. Dedyagala (6.175°N, 80.418°E) is one of them. It's a magical place. Picture a motley assortment of spartan dwellings amidst forested foothills, with a modest but colorful Buddhist temple at its core. Add some crystal-clear hill streams crisscrossing the woods, teeming with native fish, and interrupted by small waterfalls and rapids. Play the sound of monks solemnly intoning verses in the background. That's Dedyagala.

The rigour of getting there adds to its sense of remoteness. Two hours of a back-breaking pillion ride on a scooter left me feeling like a worn-out rag, whereas my local birding buddy Pavan Bopitiya seemed none the worse for wear, obviously having endured the ordeal before. After some stomping and stretching to ease numbed limbs, we started our bird walks, one crisp October morning.

With intermittent restrictions and lockdowns amidst the raging Covid-19 pandemic, our time window was narrow. Pavan was eager to proudly show me some of his nation's wonderful endemics. He chose this spot, being not far from the town of Matara (Southern Province), where we were based, for good reason. The Buddhist monks, Pavan said, revere nature, and have practiced a time-honored tradition of feeding the birds and other local wildlife. If you are pressed for time in your quest for forest endemics, what better place than a spot where the birds come to you?

And so there we were, standing still on the side of a forest hut that morning, waiting for the rising sunlight to filter through the rainforest. Brown Boobooks *Ninox scutulata* uttered their final boobooks before retiring into the canopy. An avian parade started at the crack of dawn. First to emerge from the gloom was a splendid Sri Lanka Junglefowl *Gallus lafayettii* cock, which walked with trepidation into a little clearing, lined with small earthen pots of rice and other foods. Perhaps the presence of humans sans orange robes bothered him, but he eventually got reassured and started to peck away at the rice. A pair of more daring Spot-winged Thrushes *Geokichla spiloptera* joined him, followed by a stately male Sri Lanka Grey Hornbill *Ocyeros gingalensis* and some noisy Yellow-browed Iole *Iole indica* and Black-capped Bulbuls *Rubigula melanicterus*. Unseen overhead and all around, Sri Lanka Drongos *Dicurus lophorinus*, and Sri Lanka Scimitar Babblers *Pomatorhinus melanurus* unleashed a torrent of loud duets. That's six endemics in a few minutes! What a treat for both

the observers and the observed. Later that morning, as we slowly walked around the huts and into the trails, we were entertained by a pair of the endemic Green-billed Coucals *Centropus chlororhynchos* hopping and running through low branches and bushes, grabbing gastropod snails and gobbling them up, shells and all. By the end of the day, Pavan helped me see a third of the island's 30-odd endemics (Kannan 2020; webpage

URL: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S74344107>).

A cloudburst forced us to seek cover under the eaves of a hut. In a classic display of Sri Lankan hospitality, the monks invited us inside their well-appointed kitchen, and treated us to a sumptuous breakfast of rice, noodles, an assortment of tasty curry dishes, and the inevitable *Sambol*, a traditional condiment of freshly grated coconut, chili peppers, and other ingredients. Pavan said that people living in the area often leave food for the monks. And the monks in turn invite anyone visiting their remote domain to partake of the food. After a long morning of productive and exciting birding, I could not have hoped for anything better.

Little did I know that I was in for a rude shock! That afternoon, as we were staking out the feeders, a plump domestic cat lunged out of nowhere, and to our horror, grabbed a Spot-winged Thrush. I yelled and dashed towards it. The cat dropped the bird and fled. The thrush fluttered and hopped clumsily into cover, leaving behind a tattered pile of feathers.

Later, we talked to the monks, whose veneration for life is legendary. Evidently, the cat has been a welcome addition to their remote outpost. I showed the feathers to the chief monk and explained that this Near Threatened bird is a national treasure, whose entire world population is found only in a small area of his island. He shook his head sadly and said that the cat has "killed over 500 birds" since it arrived a few months back, and that birders used to see a lot more birds in the feeding area until the cat arrived. But strangely, he seemed resigned to the inevitability of this and showed no desire to rein in the cat. When we suggested that, he shrugged his shoulders and said something like the other monks would not like curtailing their beloved cat's freedom. We felt helpless and frustrated. When people with a declared respect for life can look the other way, how can we expect others to stop this atrocity?

The incident dampened our spirits and marred what was otherwise a great birding day. I could not eject the predatory cat out of my mind, even when Pavan stopped on the way back at a clear-as-glass mountain stream and showed me some delightfully coloured endemic barb fishes. Horror stories abound in conservation biology textbooks on what havoc domestic cats can wreak in fragile island ecosystems. Even a *single* cat can be deadly. In my ornithology course, I narrate the tragic history of a single lighthouse owners' cat that is said to have wiped out an *entire species* of bird, the Stephens Island Wren *Traversia lyalli* (of New Zealand). Even if exaggerated, a count of 500 kills by one domestic feline in an insular and endemics-rich area was unconscionable.

After my return to Matara, I e-mailed every Sri Lankan naturalist I knew, lamenting about the cat's depredations, and imploring someone to do something. What followed was grassroots conservation at its best. Pavan teamed with our friend and top birder, Moditha Kodikara Arachchi, and went back the very next weekend. They grabbed the cat and, with the monks' reluctant permission, put a belled collar on it, much like the ankle bracelet worn by south Indian dancers [24]. While the perfect solution is to keep the cat indoors, this alternative will hopefully give birds a critical second or two to escape the cat's jaws.

Now back in Arkansas (USA), I tell this story to my cat-loving students. I vicariously take them back to this enchanting place and end with the hope that the cat stays belled, and that Spot-winged Thrushes and other endemics are allowed to live freely in their highly restricted earthly domain.

—Ragupathy Kannan



Moditha Kodikara Arachchi