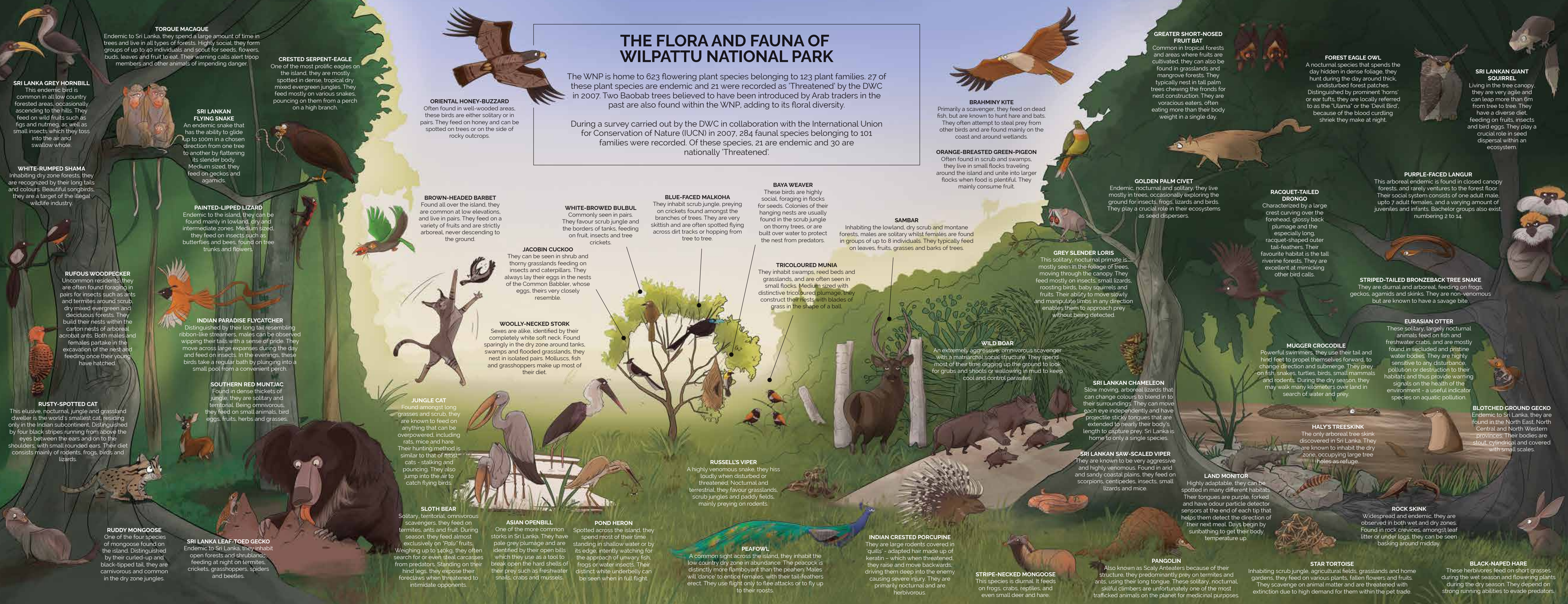


# WILPATTU NATIONAL PARK



## THE FLORA AND FAUNA OF WILPATTU NATIONAL PARK

The WNP is home to 623 flowering plant species belonging to 123 plant families. 27 of these plant species are endemic and 21 were recorded as 'Threatened' by the DWC in 2007. Two Baobab trees believed to have been introduced by Arab traders in the past are also found within the WNP, adding to its floral diversity.

During a survey carried out by the DWC in collaboration with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in 2007, 284 faunal species belonging to 101 families were recorded. Of these species, 21 are endemic and 30 are nationally Threatened.

**TOROUÉ MACAQUE**  
Endemic to Sri Lanka, they spend a large amount of time in trees and live in all types of forests. Highly social, they form groups of up to 40 individuals and scout for seeds, flowers, buds, leaves and fruit to eat. Their warning calls alert troop members and other animals of impending danger.

**CRESTED SERPENT-EAGLE**  
One of the most prolific eagles on the island, they are mostly spotted in dense, tropical dry mixed evergreen jungles. They feed mostly on various snakes, pouncing on them from a perch on a high branch.

**SRI LANKAN GREY HORNBILL**  
This endemic bird is common in all low country forested areas, occasionally ascending to the hills. They feed on wild fruits such as figs and nutmeg, as well as small insects which they toss into the air and swallow whole.

**WHITE-RUMPED SHAMA**  
Inhabiting dry zone forests, they are recognized by their long tails and colours. Beautiful songbirds, they are a target of the illegal wildlife industry.

**SRI LANKAN FLYING SNAKE**  
An endemic snake that has the ability to glide up to 100m in a chosen direction from one tree to another by flattening its slender body. Medium sized, they feed on geckos and agamids.

**PAINTED-LIPPED LIZARD**  
Endemic to the island, they can be found mainly in lowland, dry and intermediate zones. Medium sized, they feed on insects such as butterflies and bees, found on tree trunks and flowers.

**BROWN-HEADED BARBET**  
Found all over the island, they are common at low elevations, and live in pairs. They feed on a variety of fruits and are strictly arboreal, never descending to the ground.

**WHITE-BROWED BULBUL**  
Commonly seen in pairs. They favour scrub jungle and the borders of tanks, feeding on fruit, insects and tree crickets.

**JACOBIN CUCKOO**  
They can be seen in shrub and thorny grasslands feeding on insects and caterpillars. They always lay their eggs in the nests of the Common Babbler, whose eggs, theirs very closely resemble.

**WOOLLY-NECKED STORK**  
Saves are alike, identified by their completely white soft neck. Found sparingly in the dry zone around tanks, swamps and flooded grasslands, they nest in isolated pairs. Molluscs, fish and grasshoppers make up most of their diet.

**INDIAN PARADISE FLYCATCHER**  
Distinguished by their long tail resembling ribbon-like streamers, males can be observed whipping their tails with a sense of pride. They move across large expanses during the day and feed on insects. In the evenings, these birds take a regular bath by plunging into a small pool from a convenient perch.

**SOUTHERN RED MUNTJAC**  
Found in dense thickets of jungle, they are solitary and territorial. Being omnivorous, they feed on small animals, bird eggs, fruits, herbs and grasses.

**JUNGLE CAT**  
Found amongst long grasses and scrub, they are known to feed on anything that can be overpowered, including rats, mice and hare. Their hunting method is similar to that of most cats - stalking and pouncing. They also jump into the air to catch flying birds.

**SLOTH BEAR**  
Solitary, territorial, omnivorous scavengers, they feed on termites, ants and fruit. During season, they feed almost exclusively on 'Palu' fruits. Weighing up to 100kg, they often search for or even steal carcasses from predators. Standing on their hind legs, they expose their foreclaws when threatened to intimidate opponents.

**ASIAN OPENBILL**  
One of the more common storks in Sri Lanka. They have pale grey plumage and are identified by their open bills which they use as a tool to break open the hard shells of their prey such as freshwater snails, crabs and mussels.

**POND HERON**  
Spotted across the island, they spend most of their time standing in shallow water or by its edge, intently watching for the approach of unwary fish, frogs or water insects. Their distinct white underbelly can be seen when in full flight.

**PEAFOWL**  
A common sight across the island, they inhabit the low country dry zone in abundance. The peacock is distinctly more flamboyant than the peahen. Males will dance to entice females, with their tail feathers erect. They use flight only to flee attacks or to fly up to their roosts.

**INDIAN CRESTED PORCUPINE**  
They are large rodents covered in 'quills' - adapted hair made up of keratin - which when threatened, they raise and move backwards, driving them deep into the enemy causing severe injury. They are primarily nocturnal and are herbivorous.

**STRIP-NECKED MONGOOSE**  
This species is diurnal. It feeds on frogs, crabs, reptiles, and even small deer and hare.

**PANGOLIN**  
Also known as Scaly Antelope because of their structure, they predominantly prey on termites and ants, using their long tongue. These solitary, nocturnal, skilful climbers are unfortunately one of the most trafficked animals on the planet for medicinal purposes.

**STAR TORTOISE**  
Inhabiting scrub jungle, agricultural fields, grasslands and home gardens, they feed on various plants, fallen flowers and fruits. They scavenge on animal matter and are threatened with strong running abilities to evade predators.

**BLACK-NAPED HARE**  
These herbivores feed on short grasses during the wet season and flowering plants during the dry season. They depend on strong running abilities to evade predators.

**GREATER SHORT-NOSED FRUIT BAT**  
Common in tropical forests and areas where fruits are cultivated, they can also be found in grasslands and mangrove forests. They typically nest in tall palm trees chewing the fronds for nest construction. They are voracious eaters, often eating more than their body weight in a single day.

**FOREST EAGLE OWL**  
A nocturnal species that spends the day hidden in dense foliage, they hunt during the day around thick, undisturbed forest patches. Distinguished by prominent 'horns' or ear tufts, they are locally referred to as the 'Ulama' or the 'Devil Bird', because of the blood curdling shriek they make at night.

**SRI LANKAN GIANT SQUIRREL**  
Living in the tree canopy, they are very agile and can leap more than 6m from tree to tree. They have a diverse diet, feeding on fruits, insects and bird eggs. They play a crucial role in seed dispersal within an ecosystem.

**PURPLE-FACED LANGUR**  
This arboreal endemic is found in closed canopy forests, and rarely ventures to the forest floor. Their social system consists of one adult male, up to 7 adult females, and a varying amount of juveniles and infants. Bachelor groups also exist, numbering 2 to 14.

**RACQUET-TAILED DRONGO**  
Characterized by a large crest curving over the forehead, glossy black plumage and the especially long racquet-shaped outer tail-feathers. Their favourite habitat is the tall riverine forests. They are excellent at mimicking other bird calls.

**GREY SLENDER LORIS**  
This solitary, nocturnal primate is mostly seen in the foliage of trees, moving through the canopy. They feed mostly on insects, small lizards, roosting birds, baby squirrels and fruits. Their ability to move slowly and manipulate limbs in any direction enables them to approach prey without being detected.

**WILD BOAR**  
An extremely aggressive omnivorous scavenger with a matrilineal social structure. They spend most of their time digging up the ground to look for grubs and shoots or wallowing in mud to keep cool and control parasites.

**SRI LANKAN CHAMELEON**  
Slow moving, arboreal lizards that can change colours to blend in to their surroundings. They can move each eye independently and have projectile sticky tongues that are extended to nearly their body's length to capture prey. Sri Lanka is home to only a single species.

**SRI LANKAN SAW-SCALED VIPER**  
They are known to be very aggressive and highly venomous. Found in arid and sandy coastal plains, they feed on scorpions, centipedes, insects, small lizards and mice.

**LAND MONITOR**  
Highly adaptable, they can be spotted in many different habitats. Their tongues are purple, forked and have odour particle detector sensors at the end of each tip that helps them detect the direction of their next meal. Days begin by sunbathing to get their body temperature up.

**ROCK SKINK**  
Widespread and endemic, they are observed in both wet and dry zones. Found in rock crevices, amongst leaf litter or under logs, they can be seen basking around midday.

**HALY'S TREESKINK**  
The only arboreal tree skink discovered in Sri Lanka. They are known to inhabit the dry zone, occupying large tree holes as refuge.

**MUGGER CROCODILE**  
Powerful swimmers, they use their tail and hind feet to propel themselves forward, to change direction and submerge. They prey on fish, snakes, turtles, birds, small mammals and rodents. During the dry season, they may walk many kilometers over land in search of water and prey.

**EURASIAN OTTER**  
These solitary, largely nocturnal animals feed on fish and freshwater crabs, and are mostly found in secluded and shallow water bodies. They are highly sensitive to any disturbance, pollution or destruction to their habitats and thus provide warning signals on the health of the environment - a useful indicator species on aquatic pollution.

**BLOTCHED GROUND GECKO**  
Endemic to Sri Lanka, they are found in the North East, North Central and North Western provinces. Their bodies are stout, cylindrical and covered with small scales.

**STRIPED-TAILED BRONZEBACK TREE SNAKE**  
They are diurnal and arboreal, feeding on frogs, geckos, agamids and skinks. They are non-venomous but are known to have a savage bite.

**TROPICAL DRY MIXED EVERGREEN FOREST**  
This is the WNP's most dominant ecosystem and is characterized by its red-yellow latosol soil. A haven for fine-grained timber trees such as 'Weera', 'Palu', 'Burutha' and Ebony, it shows 4 distinct layers of vegetation; a 20 - 30m high tree canopy, a 15m high sub-canopy, shrubs up to 5m, and herbaceous plants up to 1m.

**DRY "PATHANA"**  
A uniquely Sri Lankan ecosystem, these grassy expanses of land devoid of thick forest cover consists of vegetation ranging from 0.1 - 1m in height. Despite its simple vegetative structure, this ecosystem plays an integral role in carbon storage, erosion control and climate change mitigation. Mostly confined to the Western region of the WNP, this ecosystem is associated with ancient human habitations, as indicated by the archaeological fragments found within them.

**TROPICAL DECIDUOUS THORN FOREST/SCRUBLAND**  
This ecosystem constitutes thick, thorny, resilient vegetation that is well adapted to the dry conditions of this region as well as towards receiving heavy structural damage by herbivores such as elephants. It comprises two distinct layers; thorny bushes that grow up to 4 - 6m and herbaceous plants that grow up to 5m.

**RIVERINE FORESTS**  
Thriving in an area as narrow as a few meters to over 10m, this ecosystem is found adjacent to minor streams, tributaries of rivers. They act as the frontline defense against stream bank erosion caused either by natural and/or human-induced factors. Well-developed riverine forests can be observed besides the Kala Oya and the Modaragam Aru. They provide convenient nesting sites for birds, bats, reptiles and amphibians.

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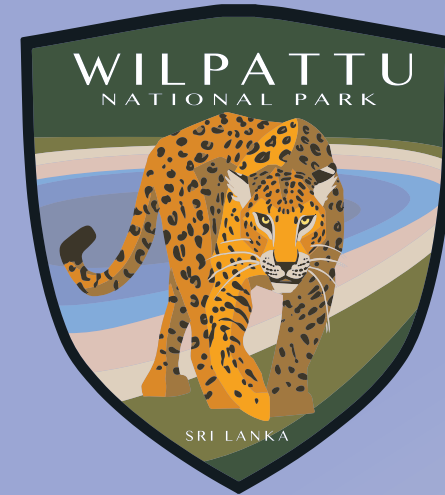
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OFFICIAL GUIDE TO THE BIODIVERSITY OF  
**WILPATTU**  
NATIONAL PARK  
& ITS INFLUENCE ZONE, NORTHWESTERN PROVINCE  
*Sri Lanka*

### INTRODUCTION TO THE WILPATTU NATIONAL PARK

One of the island's oldest and largest protected areas, the Wilpattu National Park (WNP) is shrouded in mystery. This ancient tract of dry zone forest once played host to some of the earliest habitations on the island - a rich cultural heritage dating back almost 2500 years. Located along the northwestern coast, the WNP lies wedged between Modaragam Aru in the North and Kala Oya in the South, with the Dutch and Portugal Bays providing sanctuary from the open ocean on the West, and agrarian communities to the East.

Named after its hallmark feature, the "Villu", this 'land of lakes' acts as a backdrop to a fascinating cast of animals that call this vast landscape of 131,678ha 'home'. Interspersed with several terrestrial ecosystems which include tropical dry mixed evergreen forests, dry pathana, scrub jungle and riverine systems, the WNP is a treasure trove waiting to be explored.

Receiving legal protection since 1905, the WNP consisted of a Game Sanctuary and Sportsman Reserves up until being designated as a National Park in 1938. With mesmerizing wildlife observations being made by researchers and enthusiasts, the 70's and 80's will long be remembered as the golden era of the WNP. Due to the adverse effects of the Sri Lankan terrorist conflict, the park was closed in 1988. Although it opened briefly during 2003, it was officially cleared and deemed safe to reopen for visitors in 2010. Since reopening, the WNP has gained a reputation of offering its visitors a holistic jungle experience with something for everyone.

Currently, access to the WNP is possible via the Department of Wildlife Conservation's (DWC) Hunuvilagama (WNP Headquarters) entrance and through a secondary gate at Eluwankulama. Two additional gates exist at Mullikulam and Thanthirimala. A dirt road from Puttalam to Mannar runs through the western side of the park but is often inaccessible to the public due to its rugged nature.

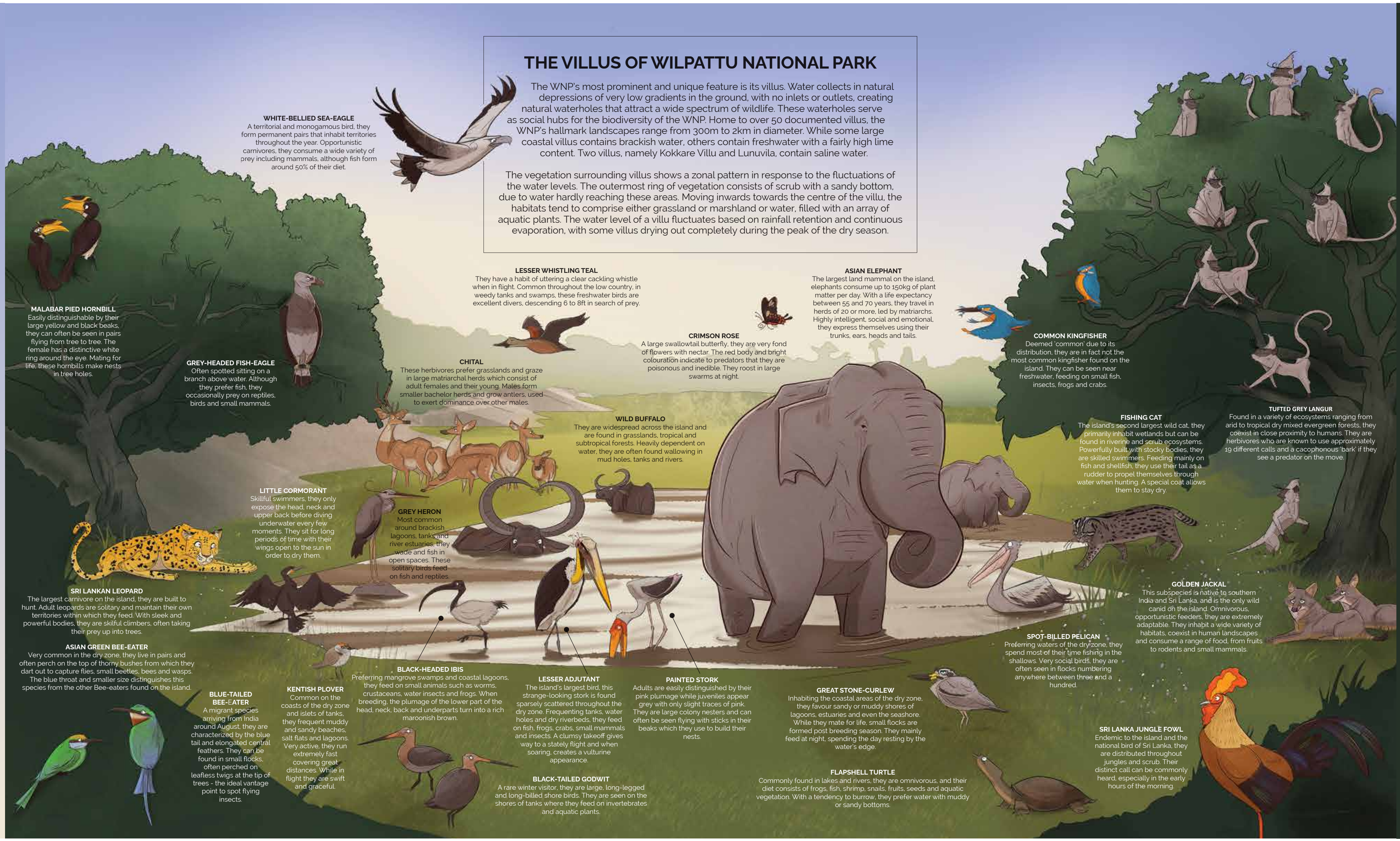
Approximately 34,000 people live in the WNP's influence zone. Their livelihoods are derived from a range of occupations with the majority of communities engaging in subsistence agriculture. An extent of 1.6km from the park boundary adjoining villages and other protected areas is maintained as a 'restricted development zone', ensuring there is a buffer of jungle cover.

Despite its importance, the WNP faces many challenges from illegal encroachment, poaching for wildlife and resources, climate change and related events such as droughts. Even though visitation to the WNP is limited to about 25% of the park's total area, it is critical to ensure the continued protection of this unique area of global importance through sustainable and responsible tourism.

### THE VILLUS OF WILPATTU NATIONAL PARK

The WNP's most prominent and unique feature is its villus. Water collects in natural depressions of very low gradients in the ground, with no inlets or outlets, creating natural waterholes that attract a wide spectrum of wildlife. These waterholes serve as social hubs for the biodiversity of the WNP. Home to over 50 documented villus, the WNP's hallmark landscapes range from 300m to 2km in diameter. While some large coastal villus contains brackish water, others contain freshwater with a fairly high lime content. Two villus, namely Kokkare Villu and Lunuvila, contain saline water.

The vegetation surrounding villus shows a zonal pattern in response to the fluctuations of the water levels. The outermost ring of vegetation consists of scrub with a sandy bottom, due to water hardly reaching these areas. Moving inwards towards the centre of the villu, the habitats tend to comprise either grassland or marshland or water, filled with an array of aquatic plants. The water level of a villu fluctuates based on rainfall retention and continuous evaporation, with some villus drying out completely during the peak of the dry season.



**MALABAR PIED HORNBILL**  
Easily distinguishable by their large yellow and black beaks, they can often be seen in pairs flying from tree to tree. The female has a distinctive white ring around the eye. Mating for life, these hornbills make nests in tree holes.

**GREY-HEADED FISH-EAGLE**  
Often spotted sitting on a branch above water. Although they prefer fish, they occasionally prey on reptiles, birds and small mammals.

**WHITE-BELLIED SEA-EAGLE**  
A territorial and monogamous bird, they form permanent pairs that inhabit territories throughout the year. Opportunistic carnivores, they consume a wide variety of prey including mammals, although fish form around 50% of their diet.

**LESSER WHISTLING TEAL**  
They have a habit of uttering a clear cackling whistle when in flight. Common throughout the low country, in weedy tanks and swamps, these freshwater birds are excellent divers, descending 6 to 8ft in search of prey.

**CHITAL**  
These herbivores prefer grasslands and graze in large matriarchal herds which consist of adult females and their young. Males form smaller bachelor herds and grow antlers, used to exert dominance over other males.

**WILD BUFFALO**  
They are widespread across the island and are found in grasslands, tropical and subtropical forests. Heavily dependent on water, they are often found wallowing in mud holes, tanks and rivers.

**ASIAN ELEPHANT**  
The largest land mammal on the island, elephants consume up to 150kg of plant matter per day. With a life expectancy between 55 and 70 years, they travel in herds of 20 or more, led by matriarchs. Highly intelligent, social and emotional, they express themselves using their trunks, ears, heads and tails.

**CRIMSON ROSE**  
A large swallowtail butterfly, they are very fond of flowers with nectar. The red body and bright colouration indicate to predators that they are poisonous and inedible. They roost in large swarms at night.

**COMMON KINGFISHER**  
Deemed 'common' due to its distribution, they are in fact not the most common kingfisher found on the island. They can be seen near freshwater, feeding on small fish, insects, frogs and crabs.

**FISHING CAT**  
The island's second largest wild cat, they primarily inhabit wetlands but can be found in riverine and scrub ecosystems. Powerfully built, with stocky bodies, they are skilled swimmers. Feeding mainly on fish and shellfish, they use their tail as a rudder to propel themselves through water when hunting. A special coat allows them to stay dry.

**TURTLED GREY LANGUR**  
Found in a variety of ecosystems ranging from arid to tropical dry mixed evergreen forests, they coexist in close proximity to humans. They are herbivores who are known to use approximately 19 different calls and a cacophonous 'bark' if they see a predator on the move.

**GOLDEN JACKAL**  
This subspecies is relative to southern India and Sri Lanka, and is the only wild canid on the island. Omnivorous, opportunistic feeders, they are extremely adaptable. They inhabit a wide variety of habitats, coexist in human landscapes, and consume a range of food, from fruits to rodents and small mammals.

**SPOT-BILLED PELICAN**  
Preferring waters of the dry zone, they spend most of their time fishing in the shallows. Very social birds, they are often seen in flocks numbering anywhere between three and a hundred.

**PAINTED STORK**  
Adults are easily distinguished by their pink plumage while juveniles appear grey with only slight traces of pink. They are large colony nesters and can often be seen flying with sticks in their beaks which they use to build their nests.

**GREAT STONE-CURLEW**  
Inhabiting the coastal areas of the dry zone, they favour sandy or muddy shores of lagoons, estuaries and even the seashore. While they mate for life, small flocks are formed post-breeding season. They mainly feed at night, spending the day resting by the water's edge.

**FLAP-SHELL TURTLE**  
Commonly found in lakes and rivers, they are omnivorous, and their diet consists of frogs, fish, shrimp, snails, fruits, seeds and aquatic vegetation. With a tendency to burrow, they prefer water with muddy or sandy bottoms.

**BLACK-HEADED IBIS**  
Preferring mangrove swamps and coastal lagoons, they feed on small animals such as worms, crustaceans, water insects and frogs. When breeding, the plumage of the lower part of the head, neck, back and underparts turn into a rich maroonish brown.

**LESSER ADJUTANT**  
The island's largest bird, this strange-looking stork is found sparsely scattered throughout the dry zone. Frequenting tanks, water holes and dry riverbeds, they feed on fish, frogs, crabs, small mammals and insects. A clumsy takeoff gives way to a stately flight and when soaring, creates a vulture appearance.

**BLACK-TAILED GODWIT**  
A rare winter visitor, they are large, long-legged and long-billed shore birds. They are seen on the shores of tanks where they feed on invertebrates and aquatic plants.

**KENTISH PLOVER**  
Common on the coasts of the dry zone and islets of tanks, they frequent muddy and sandy beaches, salt flats and lagoons. Very active, they run extremely fast, covering great distances. While in flight they are swift and graceful.

**BLUE-TAILED BEE-EATER**  
A migrant species arriving from India around August, they are characterized by the blue tail and elongated central feathers. They can be found in small flocks, often perched on leafless twigs at the top of trees - the black vantage point to spot flying insects.

**SRI LANKAN LEOPARD**  
The largest carnivore on the island, they are built to hunt. Adult leopards are solitary and maintain their own territories within which they feed. With sleek and powerful bodies, they are skilful climbers, often taking their prey up into trees.

**LITTLE CORMORANT**  
Skilful swimmers, they only expose their head, neck and upper back before diving underwater every few moments. They sit for long periods of time with their wings open to the sun in order to dry them.

**GREY HERON**  
Most common around brackish lagoons, tanks and river estuaries, they wade and fish in open spaces. These solitary birds feed on fish and reptiles.

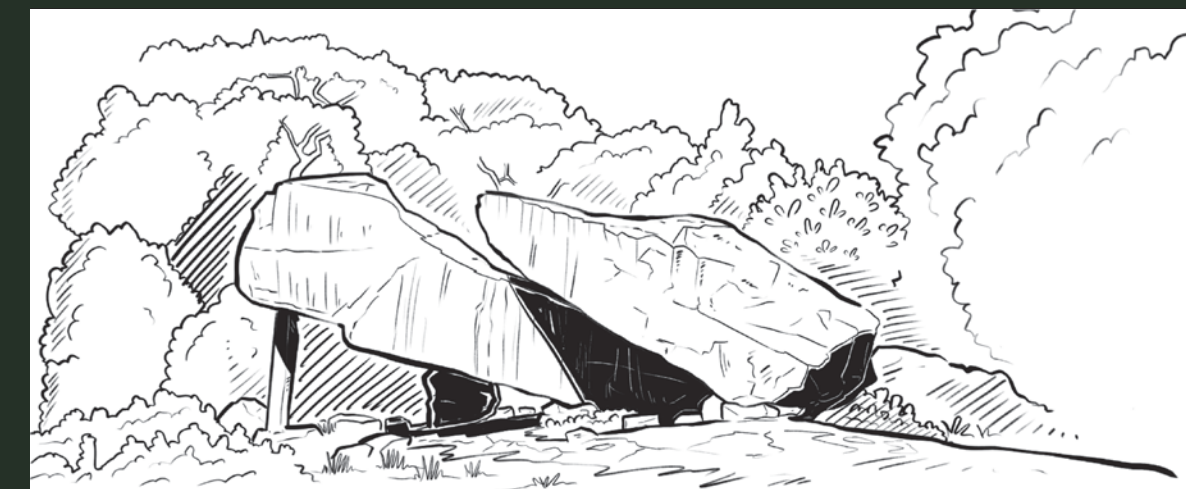
### CULTURAL HISTORY

Immersed in history and associated legends, the WNP and its immediate surroundings have resulted in a rich cultural heritage of over 2500 years, evident from the 68 archaeological sites which are located within the park.

The northwestern coast of the WNP boasts a cupreous coastline that many legends and myths speak of. However, the most widely known is that which involves Prince Vijaya, who is said to have landed at "Thambapanni" or "Kudiramalai" around 500 BC. It is recorded in the Mahawamsa and the Deepavamsa (ancient Sri Lankan historical chronicles written in Pali), that "Thambapanni" was the name given to the area by Prince Vijaya upon his arrival, due to the unique colour of this coastline.

Another popular geological myth is that this coastline, specifically the Kudiramalai Point, was the base of a meteor strike that took place many centuries ago. Justifiable by the burnt bed of rocks and bright copper hues visible when visiting this fascinating coastline.

Shrouded in myth and mystery, some legends suggest that Prince Vijaya took the "Yaksha" Princess Kuveni - whose palace lies in ruins at Kali Villu - as his partner, enabling him to become the ruler of this region and subsequently the entire island. The thick band of cotton trees surrounding Kuveni's palace ruins are symbolic, as it is also believed that Kuveni was engaged in spinning cotton when Vijaya first encountered her.



### ARCHAEOLOGICAL IMPORTANCE

As per adopted classifications, the archaeological sites of the WNP can be divided into five categories: fossil sites, prehistoric sites, protohistoric sites, monastic sites and irrigation/agricultural sites. Miocene era (26 - 27 MYA) fossils have been identified at several locations within the WNP, while eleven sites belonging to the prehistoric period have also been recorded, together with stone tools made with chert, clear quartz and pebbles. Pottery fragments, burial sites and ruined structures of monasteries belonging to the protohistoric period have been found in 43 sites, including at Pomparippu, the most famous urn burial site.

Of the eleven monastic sites recorded from within the WNP, Ochchappukallu (depicted above) and Veheragala, contain inscriptions. The name of the more significant site 'Ochchappukallu' is derived from the Tamil language, and literally translates to 'leaning stone'. A 2<sup>nd</sup> century rock-cut Brahmin inscription can be observed at this site on a drip-ledge cave, said to have belonged to the indigenous Veddah community, a testament to the ingenuity of our ancestors. Sadly, treasure hunters have damaged many, if not all archaeological sites that lie in these dense jungles. By now, many of them have been reclaimed by the forest and are frequented by animals, making them inaccessible to visitors.

Out of the 26 irrigation/agricultural sites that have been recorded, park authorities have successfully restored a few, and they continue to function to this day. The most notable of these is Periyavila, which is often mistakenly identified as a villu but is in fact a man-made tank. The remaining sites currently lay abandoned, as their bunds have been breached beyond recoverable measure.