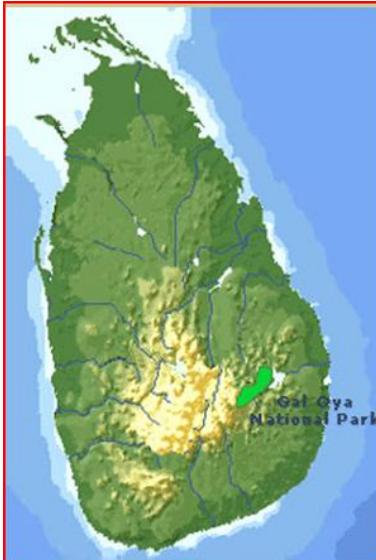


## Gal Oya Boat Safari

Five in the morning is never an enthusiastic time to get up wherever you are in the world and in Sri Lanka it is still dark. Muddle headed, as I had slept in so many different beds this trip, I could not sort out where I was as the light round the door and the chinks in the window were in strange places but there was no mistaking the urgent bleeping of the alarm. Time to begin the day.

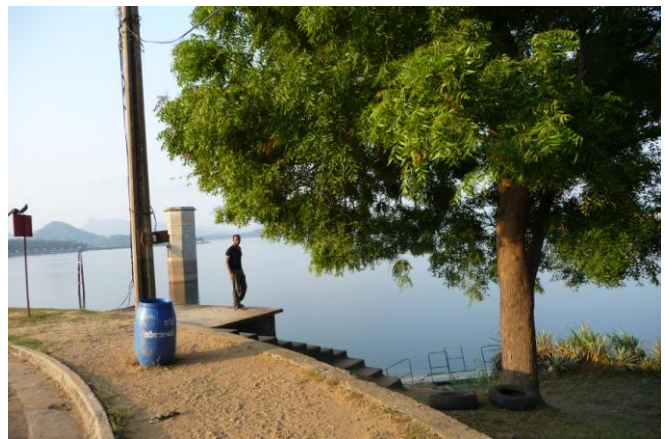


No breakfast or even a cup of tea, we scrambled to leave Bibile and were on the road and dodging the jogging platoons of soldiers flanked by white clad PT instructors, armed guards, an ambulance and support trucks by 5.30am. Even at that time it was very hot and I did not envy the soldiers in full combat gear and huge rucksacks with guns slung across their chests. Dawn keen reptiles dotted the road, sleepy dogs who had hogged the central position all night on the hot tarmac and startled birds put up by the sound of our engine, were all a backdrop to our journey to Gal Oya and the Boat Safari.

Gal Oya National Park lies in the southeast of Sri Lanka and to the west of Ampara. It was established in 1954 by the Gal Oya Development Board mainly to protect the catchment area of the 'Senanayake Samudra' Reservoir and then handed over to the department of Wildlife Conservation in 1965. It is rich in flora and fauna and about 45% of the park is covered by evergreen forest and a further 33% is taken up by savanna areas. The 25,900 hectare park has about 32 species of mammals including common langur (monkey), endemic toque macaque, leopard, sloth bear, elephant, wild boar, water buffalo and three species of deer.

We arrived at the Wild Life Office to pay for our safari by 6.0am to find the place locked up and everyone still asleep so it took a while to get this trip organised but then, armed with a huge piece of paper with many terms and conditions writ small, we motored onto the dam embankment to meet our guides. Dawn had now broken and the light golden and glorious.

The men had yet to appear so we chatted with the policeman who we had bought an ice cream the day before in return for the chance to drive across the dam and take photos of the lake.

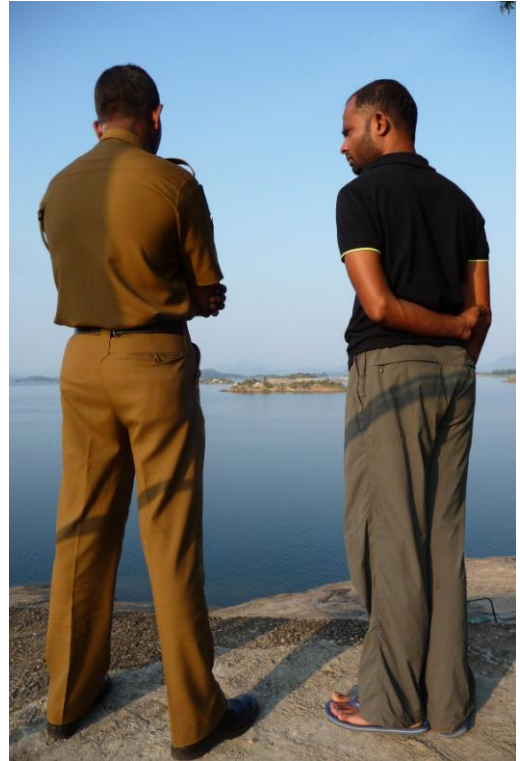


It was a beautiful morning, mellow with golden light, hushed with no wind and mirror perfect. It seemed a shame to disturb the surface with a boat..... Then guides arrived and while we waited for them to locate the petrol, shove the boat further into the

water and check the life jackets we chatted some more to the avuncular officer. Life goes very slowly in this haven of tranquility....

While he stood and basked in the glow of what must be one of the most wondrous places to work in this part of the world, the policeman told us about the elephants we would see, the variety of birds and gave us the back story about the statue behind and above us of a famous previous president of Sri Lanka who coincidentally was the grandfather of a man we were due to meet the following week.

Languorous minutes later we clambered aboard and off we went in a surge of foam and waves, to approach the first bird island in a gentle curve which took in the huge expanse of water before us.



Approximately 150 of Sri Lanka 's 430 species of birds have been observed seen in this region of many small islands covered with forest and outcrops which are haven to elephants and birds. The 'Kurulu Dupatha' or the 'Bird Island ' and some of these islands are 'infested' with birds as a great many varieties in their entire splendor swarm these islands. You can step on to this Bird Island and walk through the forest up to the outcrop. From here, you can see many bird's nests, some with eggs and some even with fledglings who are unable to fly away even when they spot you.





Elephants have made these islands their own as they are the best swimmers of all the mammals in the park. As our boat idled quietly towards the shore we hardly dare breathe as we lapped nearer and nearer to a bathing elephant. It lazily splashed water over its shoulder and sighed heavily as it sank into the cool lake, leaving a tide line across its back. Another grazed behind, lumbering ponderously as it flicked grass into a ball and fed in the morning light. Here elephants exist without any intrusions and swim from island to island in search of greener pasture.



Whilst not an ornithologist, I could not help be awed by the displays of abandoned free flying by the hosts of birds as they swooped and wheeled in telepathic unison above us.



We breakfasted on cheese crackers, oranges, dry biscuits and sipped what was now hot bottled water on a pristine island in the shade. It might have only been about 10.0am but there it was beating hot. The white rocks reflected heat and the glare made seeing painful without sunglasses but in this spot on the lake, nothing could be more perfect.



Conversation, translated both ways by Sid, was about life in the west and contrasts to the east. Misconceptions about the golden life in foreign parts from both our perspectives were corrected and broad daylight camp fire tales were told about our previous travels and adventures in Sri Lanka. The guides lamented the lack of tourists in the area yet appreciated the lack of intrusion - a dilemma many face in these wild parts of Sri Lanka.

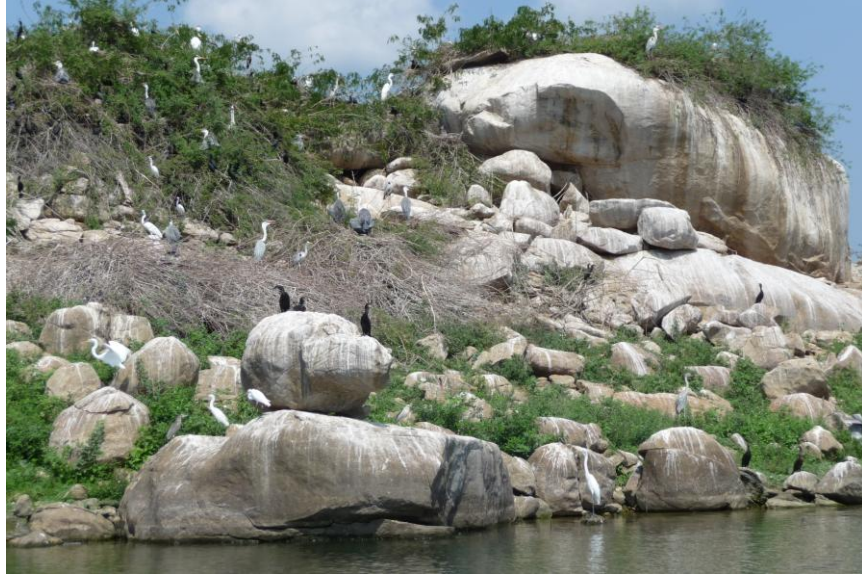
Once back aboard we struggled with the now intense heat radiating off the water and all went quiet while we motored across the entire width of the lake to creep up on a baby elephant testing its limits on a remote shore. No mother in sight, the baby seemed oblivious to us and played and ambled with joy.



On the last lap now, we skirted the final island, awash with birds, splattered with guano, excited screeching and cawing filling the air. We circled quietly, hardly making an noise at all, while we were treated to a close up of these birds in their natural habitat.



With a sudden cry, one of the guides stood up in the boat and pointed urgently. A great brown log moved, then shifted so fast it was all over in a few seconds and much before anyone could aim a camera. A crocodile, at least 12 feet long, disappeared into the bushes. We raced off round the island to see if we could find it coming out the other side, but it was too well hidden.



So three hours after we set off, subdued and exhilarated with being so close to wild life, we moored at the dam, where another party of Sri Lankans with enough gear for an expedition, were waiting to use the boat so they could go out and camp for a night on one of the islands.

But we were sated, filled with the sights and sounds of safari, knowing we had got nearer to birds and elephants than ever we would by foot or land rover. It was an immense privilege.

If you would like to go on this Boat Safari and see Gal Oya, please contact Sid on: [sidabode@yahoo.com](mailto:sidabode@yahoo.com) (Sri Lanka) or [sue@thebaodetrust.com](mailto:sue@thebaodetrust.com) (UK).

