



LUCY MCROBERT

Nature's economics

Sri Lanka is full of avian riches and perfectly safe to visit, so let's help this island nation become a top-flight ecotourism destination, says **Lucy McRobert**.

When you say you're holidaying in the north of Sri Lanka, you're met with one of two responses: "Are you sure it's safe?" from your dad. Or "You'll need to go south for the birds," from birders.

The long and short of it: 'yes' and 'no'. Yes, the north of Sri Lanka is perfectly safe. All that remains of the civil war is a scattering of military bases and a Sri Lankan determination to forget what happened.

And the wildlife? Sri Lanka presented a crash course in international-level birding: a riot of colour, sound and smell. On the way to our resort on the Kalpitiya peninsula, our poor driver pulled over, reversed and slammed on his brakes repeatedly as we saw more and more exciting species.

We stayed in Dolphin Beach Resort, an idyllic tented hotel just feet from the Indian Ocean. Once they learned of our enthusiasm for wildlife, the resort staff couldn't do enough to help us explore. We enjoyed a tour around the neighbouring lagoon, a day-long trip up north to Mannar (which yielded an additional 30 species) and an impressive two-night stay in Wilpattu National Park, where we watched a young Leopard for 45 minutes in seclusion.

But the place that really stole our hearts was a little-frequented reserve just to the south of the resort: Anaiwilundawa Sanctuary. I couldn't have been less prepared for such bio-abundance. Thousands of ibises, herons, kingfishers, egrets, cormorants and storks lined every branch of every tree. Terns, treeswifts and swallows skimmed across the vast stretches of water. Above our heads bulbuls, bee-eaters, babblers, sunbirds and goodness knows what else joined in a frenetic chorus. Kites and eagles swooped overhead. Even the pigeons were sexy.

Anaiwilundawa once echoed with guns. Since its designation as a sanctuary, though, the birds have rebounded.

Wildlife and economics

Many developing countries are attractive wildlife tourism destinations, and as birders we can help those places avoid making the same mistakes that the western world has



The subspecies of Green Bee-eater found on Sri Lanka is endemic to the island.

“Birders can help developing countries avoid making the same mistakes that the western world has made for the past 200 years”

made for the past 200 years. There's time to ensure that their economic progression and social development places wildlife at its heart.

Sri Lanka is emerging from a conflict that shook the country to its core, and tourism is already a big part of that recovery process. As whale watching, birding and safaris crash onto the tourism scene, there's the threat that unethical and unsustainable practices will develop unchecked. That's partly due to the operators, but more often driven by the desires of uneducated tourists.

Local people, businesses and politicians need to understand what it is we want from our wildlife experiences and how we want to see them practised. Birders are often seasoned travellers and therefore well placed to help guide this process, both by talking to operators, hotel owners and locals about why they're visiting and by championing good practice and sharing their experiences and expectations. We have a responsibility to voice our concerns and to offer support where we can.

If you visit Sri Lanka, don't miss out on the north. It's truly amazing and the people need your help in turning it into a hot-spot birding destination. ■

Lucy McRobert returns in September.