



EXPEDITION DIARY Sri Lanka 2005

By Marian Sutton

27 August

Tomorrow Dr. Matthias (Hammer, the boss) and I fly out to Sri Lanka, so today we are both in Germany (this expedition originates from the German office), checking equipment and packing expedition kit into aluminium trunks.

When we arrive in Sri Lanka we will travel from Colombo to base camp, where I will spend the next five days making final preparations for the expedition. Matthias and Pruthu will spend some of this time at base camp, and some time at Yala National Park in the south of the island, another site in Pruthu's Sri Lankan elephant research project.

Now we are ready to leave, I just want to be there, so looking forward to seeing you all. Remember it's 20:00 on 3 September at the Ranweli reception for those who want to come for an informal dinner with official assembly in the same place at 07:00 on 4 September (same procedure for the second slot).

See you there!

2 September

Over the last two days much has been accomplished at base camp. In a frenzy of building, wiring and plumbing and the scaling of a large tree to put up the aerial for the satellite phone (much crashing about and final success).

There is a hill behind base camp, craggy and covered in lush forest. It is a spot favoured by Buddhist monks as a meditation retreat as it is so wild and quiet. Though in reality it is never quiet here. There is always a cacophony of frogs, insects, and birds, sometimes deer and other noises I can't identify yet. We're nearly ready to welcome the first team.

6 September

The first expedition team arrived on 4 September. As we drove to base camp along the main road from Colombo we saw domesticated elephants returning from an elephant festival, probably in Kandy. One was being driven in a flat bed truck, just standing looking very relaxed on the back of the truck with two men sitting on the tailgate.

As we approached base camp on the dirt track, we stopped to try and make a phone call as we got a signal for the phone (rare in these parts). Suddenly a wild elephant turned the corner on the track behind us and started to approach us. Lionel, our driver, bundled us back into the van shouting 'elephant coming, elephant coming!' and raced off, pedal to the metal; his van is his livelihood and I don't think he wanted any personal experience of 'elephant damage' or 'human elephant conflict'.

Base camp is running smoothly now and as I write this the teams are out on their second day's work. We are blessed with overcast skies, so it is not as stiflingly hot as was when we were setting up. Roy (our cook) is making birdcalls in the kitchen, and a bird nearby is answering him. Outside tents are being secured after a gusty night, and I can hear the trundling of the coconut mill as lunch is being prepared ready for the team's return.

This afternoon I shall go out with one of the teams. Matthias and I are down on the schedule as 'Free Radicals' so I just need to choose which of the 10 activities I would most like to work on. I will get back to you later on how it went.

9 September

Matthias left yesterday afternoon and will be flying out to Namibia in a week's time to prepare the forthcoming expedition there.

The expedition teams are getting lots of work done; every day one team spends the day on elephant ID work in the National Park. They are seeing herds and lone males every day, and collecting lots of data, they photograph elephants to ID them later from distinguishing features such as ear shape and tail configuration. They are getting some great photographs of their own as well, whilst they are there working. Over the last couple of days we had herds surrounding the vehicle sniffing it out and apparently quite keen to be added to the first-ever elephant ID catalogue of the National Park!

There is also a night tree hut elephant ID activity that runs every other day. The night observation tree hut is close enough to a Buddhist temple to hear the mantras drifting across on the breezes that blow here at night. So they feel as though they have a little company as they wait for the elephants to arrive. Not much luck so far, but we are hopeful!

The human/elephant conflict interviews are also yielding good results with everyone enjoying the interaction with local people, if not the bike-riding into their villages! In fact the first expedition blood was spilled when one of the team members came off her bike on a gravel track yesterday and sustained some cuts and grazes, which were taken with good humour and a suitably stiff upper lip!

All else is well, though, with camp running smoothly – amazingly smoothly for Sri Lanka really and the “in” tray of datasheets filling up slowly and steadily.

10 September

Yesterday the National Park elephant ID research team were rather closely inspected by a herd of elephants in what was described by team members as a 'Jurassic park moment' where one of the elephants approached the vehicle and looked inside. The rear door was opened and slammed shut again by Harsha in an effort to encourage the elephant to keep a little more distance from the Land Rover. Unfortunately, however, a lunch box full of rice and biscuits fell out of the back door (we still have the lunch box as a memento, bravely retrieved later by Harsha). The curious elephant then turned its attentions to the rice and biscuits within, before booting the box into some grass at the side of the track. We have the pictures to prove it, though unfortunately I can't include them with this email.

My shopping list now includes one new lunchbox.

12 September

Elephants are being sighted during the tree hut elephant ID from the hut hide next to a nearby tank (tanks are actually reservoirs built hundreds or even thousand of years ago to irrigate the lands of the dry zone, many have been restored in recent decades and attract lots of wildlife, especially in the dry season). There are two 3-4 meter crocodiles in the nearest tank where we have our tree hut hide, and whilst waiting for elephants you can see a wide variety of birds, including three types of kingfisher, egrets and painted storks.

Team members seem to be thriving on the electric fence survey (of elephant fences), which regularly involves wading through chest high water and picking your way through areas of 'chena' slash and burn land adjacent to the national park fence. This chena land is hard and dirty going, full of toppled thorn scrub, sharp stumps, holes in the ground and gubby charcoal.

A snake or two have also been seen, one rat snake and one described as a viper by the field scouts seen on the road after the rain, trying to warm itself up. Monitor lizards and tortoises are common here and we encountered a four foot long monitor lizard sauntering down the road holding up traffic. A few blasts on the horn quickened its exit into the undergrowth.

The last two days have been cloudy with some rain as the wet season finally starts here. For the expedition team members this is a relief from the heat, and for the land, farmers and wildlife it is badly needed rain for vegetation growth and water supply. But for the solar power supply system at base camp it means shutdown, so I have arranged the use of a generator for times when the solar powered system grinds to a halt. Data input needs to be done in the afternoon, and the Landcruiser which is the vehicle fitted with an inverter to power equipment such as laptops is out all day everyday in the National Park.

17 September

On Wednesday I joined Karin's team (whose birthday it was) in the National Park for elephant ID in the afternoon. We were approached by a curious elephant who peered short-sighted into the vehicle as I frantically searched the floor for the window winding handle, which drops off when you go over bumpy ground! The window is normally difficult to close, but it went up very fast on that occasion!

Thursday was a hive of activity at base camp, as it was the final day and all data entry and preliminary analyses had to be completed so that the expedition teams could prepare their presentations. So no computer time then for me to send you a diary update. In the early evening the teams presented their findings, and Pruthu gave a talk on the wider context of the research into human/elephant conflict and elephant conservation in Sri Lanka. The field scouts also joined us for our final night BBQ and bonfire

Today several expedition team members old and new are at Ranweli as we are in transition between slot 1 and slot 2. With sole use of the laptop I can catch up on admin and diary updates after a gruelling 3 am start and 8 hour drive to Colombo yesterday.

Thank you to the first team for all your efforts and I look forward to working with team 2.

20 September

We are all settling back into camp life now on the second day back in Wasgamuwa base camp with the second expedition team. The familiar old favourites of fence monitoring (electric anti-elephant fence) and tank monitoring (irrigation reservoirs) including wading duties where there are small bodies of water to be crossed are being introduced to the new team.

Yesterday I joined the tree hut elephant ID team at out at the tank tree hut. This has a long, high 2 section ladder with a dog leg in it near the top. It is lovely up in the tree, and the whole platform creaks and sways slightly like a ship at sea. This hut stands at the forest margin overlooking our nearest reservoir tank, the one with two 3 - 4 meter crocodiles in it. After about an hour we heard lots of loud trumpeting from very close by in the forest, and later on we saw that a herd of eight elephants come out of the forest and having a dust bath across the tank from us with the local people doing laundry and bathing in the waters of the reservoir.

22 September

The weather has turned extremely hot; even the local staff working at base camp are feeling the heat. The night shift in the tree hut saw a herd of elephants pass by the tank, and early in the morning around dawn, a solitary bull elephant walked past the tree hut.

Teams were late back this evening as there was a herd of 23 elephants at the tank, Pruthu and Marlene were in the midst of them at one point as they surrounded the vehicle and then passed on their way.

A journalist from the south of England spent a couple of days with us quizzing us about whether we were actually working on a research project, he mentioned the 'H' word, so we planned to send him on a fence monitoring mission. He may have got the picture as he left early the following morning, neatly circumnavigating his appointment with fence monitoring!

27 September

I have been out on trail transect with Pruthu twice in the last three days, both times on new routes.

On Saturday the trail went up onto a ridge with views across to the Knuckles Range. Neil and Carole were working on the trail transect that day, and Neil was delighted when Mahesh, one of the two field scouts with us, spotted a frogmouth, a nightjar apparently. I don't know a lot about birds, but it caused a lot of excitement.

A little further along Pruthu found a recently deceased purple-faced leaf monkey, and stopped to take tissue samples for DNA analysis later. Grisly but interesting!

At the end of the ridge the trail petered out, and we navigated our way over scrubby terrain, through some woods and 'chena' slash and burn land to get down off the ridge into the valley bottom. By the time we got there we were all coated with red dust and covered in charcoal streaks from the slash and burn lands.

We had to cross another smaller ridge to reach the road and the old Series III Land Rover with Sampath at the helm, and just as we climbed up to the final ridge a tropical storm began, soaking us and blending our charcoal streaks to an overall grubby grey colour.

Probably my most enjoyable day of the expedition though. Neil and Carole also agreed (after initial reservations about the angle of the descent slope off the ridge).

28 September

We have had several snakes in camp over the last couple of weeks, first there was the harmless rat snake, where Marlene found all of Ecoteam (Roy, Jayasakara, Jayala and Prabat) who run the camp, looking under her tent using a long stick; flushing it out.

Next there was a speedy seba's bronzeback also harmless, which shot across camp with people shouting "snake, snake". Pruthu IDed it as harmless so we let it slope off under a bridge.

Then I saw a small dark snake sliding past the shower block, again "snake, snake" and it was ID'ed by Pruthu as a banded racer, also harmless.

Today though as I was working on the accounts and everyone else was out working, there was the shout of "snake, snake" from Ecoteam in the kitchen. I didn't pay too much attention after the other three, but a minute later Roy came out to consult the reptiles book and said it's a pit viper, poisonous!! Prabat the youngest cook in the kitchen had found it in the bag of coconuts, then they moved it out with a stick and put the first bottle they could find in front of it, it slid in, the bottle was capped, the cap pierced to make an air hole and the snake released safely far away from camp.

29 September

The last week has passed so fast, and today is the final day of the expedition. The expedition team are analysing the data, and preparing their presentations for this evening. The field scouts are involved in this too and will stay on for the final night barbecue that Roy and Jayasakara are preparing.

I am busy paying people, making arrangements for transport and packing the expedition equipment, so this will be the last Sri Lanka Diary.

Thank you to everyone for making this happen. We have achieved much. In Pruthu's words: "The findings of the expedition were very interesting. We surveyed about a 100 square km area outside the park and found elephants in all that area with some indication that the densities outside may be even higher than inside. Both single adult males and herds were found outside the park. Both the electric fencing models - containment (on boundary of park) and exclusion (around villages) had issues about maintenance. Dung decay rates may be very rapid... and so on. The information collected also points to the importance of looking at additional factors such as the effect of slash and burn cultivation and its restriction in the area."

All of this will be written up in the report and I am looking forward to reading it in about six months time, as I am sure you are.

All the best, Marian