Magical Mannar

Most birders travelling to Sri Lanka head off to the wet zone in the south west of the island, seeking endemics in the rain and cloud forests of Sinharaja and Horton Plains.

However, with 3 days to spare at the end of a short working trip to Sri Lanka during February, I visited the less well-known Island of Mannar, which lies to the far north west of the country. This is in the dry zone, and until recently it was inaccessible to tourists because of the civil war, now ended. It is a day's drive north of the capital, Colombo. Positioned at the convergence of the Central Asian Flyway, migratory species of waders, gulls, terns and ducks concentrate there in significant numbers during the winter months. In 2010 more than one million migrant shorebirds were seen at Vidattaltivu lagoon.

Mannar shares some similarities with Holy Island, being a birding hotspot connected to the mainland by a long causeway. It is remote and scarcely populated. It does not share the same bracing climate however; mean temperatures during February are 32degrees C.

The guest house where we stayed takes its birding seriously. All guests have access to its resident ornithologist, who is studying for a PhD in bird migration under a grant from the hotel. She went out with us, for no additional charge, early the next morning as we tracked down a flock of flamingos which headed north the following day.

Greater Flamingos

She then joined us for an evening drive identifying birds, pointing out places of interest and explaining more of the ecology of the island .

Eurasian Spoonbill

Whilst checking to the guest house we saw 6 different species of raptor alone from the reception area.

Combat!

White-bellied Sea Eagle

Brahminy Kite

There were few other tourists or bird watchers around, making for a relaxing and unhurried stay.

Crested Hawk-Eagle

Brown Fish-Owl

We stayed on Mannar island for a couple of nights, then on the third day travelled back south to Colombo. In order to break the journey we spent a few hours at Wilpattu National Park adding to our tally including Hornbills and yet more raptors.

Malabar Pied Hornbills

Grey-headed Fish Eagle

Blue-tailed Bee-Eater

The number of species seen over 3 days of birding (including travel) totaled 101. For birders after something different Mannar offers a magical experience away from the crowds.

David Richens

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