



## A CALAMITY IN THE YALA NATIONAL PARK

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Yala National Park is the most visited Wildlife Park in the country with a multitude of visitors from all over the world enjoying its beauty and unparalleled wildlife viewing experiences. Although not widely known, Yala also holds the only known white elephant in Sri Lanka, and provides a unique opportunity of observing such an individual in the wild. Yala used to be well known for its elephants but misfortune has been their lot over the last decade.

Prior to 2004, the Yala elephants were not restricted to the Park. They used to move freely between Block I of the Park and the adjacent areas outside, consisting of Forest Department land and the Nimalawa Sanctuary. They used the outside areas intensively during the dry season, but also used to come into the Park on and off. It was common to see herds of 50 - 100 elephants around the tanks in the Forest Department areas at the height of the dry season. In September, when villagers started preparing for *Chena* or slash-and-burn cultivation, most of the herds moved into the park, where they remained till about April. Once the farmers left the *Chenas* after the harvest, many herds moved back out of the Park. Regeneration in the harvested and fallow *chenas* provided elephants with good-quality fodder in the dry season, whereas the mature vegetation in the park gave little sustenance. In this manner, Block I of Yala, the adjacent Forest Department lands and the Nimalawa Sanctuary together supported about 400 - 450 elephants.

In 2000 - 2001, due to public and political pressure to resolve the human-elephant conflict in the area, the Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWC) constructed an electric fence between the Yala Block I and the adjacent Forest Department area. The electric fence was located about 1km outside the Yala park boundary, within the Forest Department area and also excluded the Nimalawa Sanctuary.

Elephants from the Forest Department area and Nimalawa were driven into the park and the fence closed. Waterways that crossed the fence were

guarded with wires dangling down to the water. Soon after, a young male was found dead in a dry waterway that crossed the fence close to Bembawa, with a tush entangled in a wire dangling down from the electric fence. As a result the wires dangling over the waterway were removed. Elephants including herds began to use the waterways to move between the Park and the chena areas, re-establishing their traditional movement and habitat-use patterns. Then, in 2004, the death of two farmers by elephants led to an attack on the DWC by villagers, which resulted in a villager being shot dead. Emotions ran high and to defuse the situation, it was decided to drive the elephants into the Park once again and close the fence. Electrified wires were re-strung across the waterway, firmly shutting what had become a thoroughfare for elephants.

Ever since, the body condition of elephants in Yala Block I has declined drastically in the dry season and calves die. The Yala population has now dropped to about 250 from almost double that number in its heyday. The decline in health and survival is not limited



**Map of area.** Red line – existing electric fence. Blue line - Forest Department boundary. Green line – Nimalawa boundary.



to the herds that were driven-in but has impacted even the herds that range entirely inside the park. For example, practically every female in the Gemunu herd, whose home-range has always been limited to the park, has lost 1 - 3 babies over this period. Already, elephant sightings in Yala have greatly decreased. If this situation continues, within another decade or so it will be hard to see an elephant in Yala.

Although the elephant drive and fencing of elephants eliminated most of the herds from the Forest Department area and the Nimalawa Sanctuary, as with all such drives, the problem-causing adult males were not removed. Consequently, elephant depredation of cultivations and damage to dwellings and home gardens in the surrounding villages has continued. Over the last decade, a number of males were captured from the Forest Department area and translocated, which too failed to resolve the issue. Of the males currently causing problems, some are ones not removed by the drive or translocations and others

are males that break the fence regularly and go in and out of the park at will.

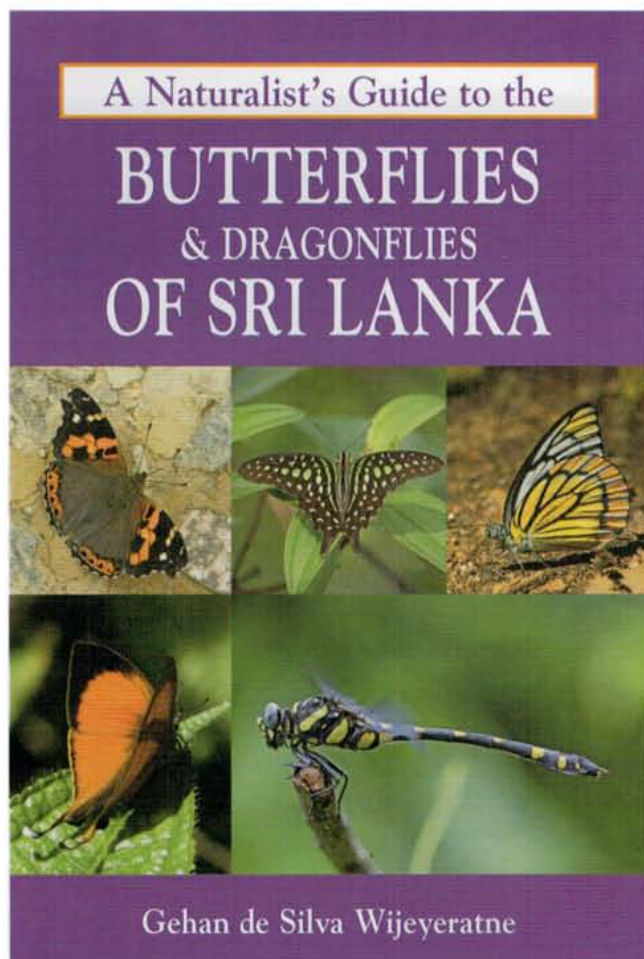
Driving of elephants from the Forest Department area and construction of the fence encouraged encroachment and setting up of permanent cultivations and settlements in the Forest Department land outside the fence. Such encroachments have been conducted by individuals as well as corporations. In one instance, legal action was taken by environmental NGOs against a corporate entity. Encroachment and alienation of the Forest Department lands continue.

The Yala elephants cannot survive without access to the Forest Department area. Yala, as the most-visited National Park in the country, is very important in terms of Wildlife tourism. Continued decline of the Yala elephants is not at all desirable and does not behove the premier status of the Park. It is hoped that the authorities will address this issue and take urgent steps to restore the elephant population.

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## A Naturalist's Guide to the Butterflies and Dragonflies of Sri Lanka.

de Silva Wijeyeratne, G. (2015). **Naturalist's Guides: Butterflies and Dragonflies of Sri Lanka.** John Beaufoy Publishing Ltd. 176 pages, Paperback, 13 x 1.5 x 18.1 cm.



Increasingly the segmentation between birders, butterfly watchers, dragonfly watchers and photographers is reducing as interests overlap and there is a demand for books that cover the three popular groups of birds, butterflies and dragonflies. Having written and photographed the guide to the birds of Sri Lanka in the series, Gehan de Silva Wijeyeratne has produced a single, compact and portable photographic guide to the butterflies and dragonflies of the country. The emphasis in the 226 species featured (148 butterflies and 78 dragonflies) is on the commoner species, covering around 90 per cent of the species that a visitor is likely to see. It is also an excellent book for residents to learn about the commoner butterflies and dragonflies before progressing to more advanced technical books.

The guide is focussed on field use to help beginners as well as more experienced users identify species and provides information on their distribution and habitats. As identification of butterflies and dragonflies require a different approach, the two sections are done as two mini photographic field guides with common introductory sections to wildlife watching in Sri Lanka. The book includes information on the key wildlife sites, general introductions to the biology of dragonflies and butterflies, up-to-date checklists with local status and useful references for people who wish to progress further with their study of these charismatic and photogenic animals.



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