

IN THE VALLEY OF THE VEDDAS

By

Ranil Bibile

Punchi kiriamma galge, Hitibemini galge, Bendiya galge, Maladeniya galge, Uhapita galge, Pattiwela galge.....

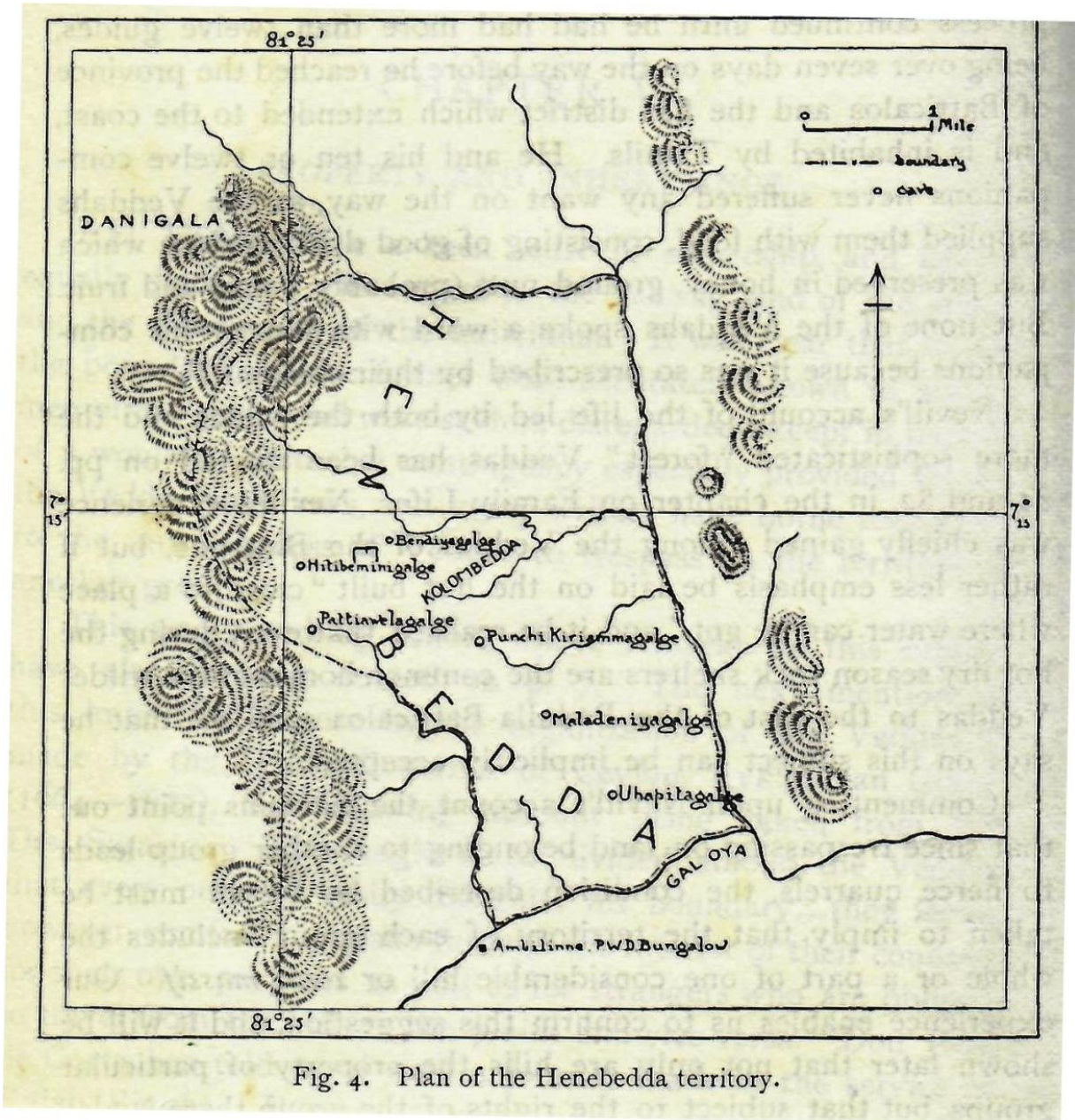


Fig. 4. Plan of the Henebedda territory.

Above map from "The Veddas" by the Seligmans

The cave dwellings of the Veddas of Henebedde Valley lay all around us, empty, yet redolent of a forgotten age and a people that have become practically extinct. Today, only bear and bats and the occasional leopard inhabit these desolate caves.

There is also Ambilinna, once another dwelling place in the valley, but from a different era, the Colonial era, when there had been a circuit bungalow there. But like the Vedda dwellings, it too has succumbed to the impermanence of things. Only fish visit Ambilinna today, a hundred feet below the surface of the Senanayaka Samudra.

We were camped out on a spot about three kilometres south of Kebellabokka Oya and just north of the Giritala Oya. Ahead lay the Balabedde Oya arm of the Samudra. Far to the south, beyond a vast expanse of water we could see Maragalakanda (3650 feet) – the mountain peak of Monaragala with its fascinating 'dry zone' rain forests. Nearer at hand, 'Westminster Abbey' (1870 ft) with its inaccessible ruins from the reign of Magha (1215-1236 A.D.) brooded over the lake. It was called Govindahela by the Veddas. But the British sailors out at sea, and their counterparts on land wandering in a sea of scrub jungle, had their own names for the fantastic rock formations of the east, their navigational landmarks; *Westminster Abbey*, *Chimney Hill*, *Friar's Hood*, *Baron's Cap*, *Gunner's Quoin*, and *St. Paul's*.

The path we had come along, the last 300 metres of which lay through the lake shore, was now blocked by a herd of 27 elephants, ranging from a majestic bull to a tiny baby, and one juvenile with tushes. They had emerged from the fringing forest a few minutes after we had arrived and now fed peacefully on the open plain on the other side of our cove, about a hundred metres away. We took care not to make any noise, and were lucky with the wind direction. Thus the elephants were to remain at our cove for the next eight hours, feeding on the grassland and frolicking in the water by turn, all the while communicating with deep stomach rumbles. They seemed totally content and at peace, with plenty of food and water. During these long hours we set up camp, floated quietly on the lake on inner tubes, had our beer and lunch, enjoyed a little siesta in the hammocks under the shade of a venerable Nuga tree, drank a cup of afternoon tea, went close to the elephants on foot to photograph and film them, drifted in our inflatable boat towards Kunuhela, had our evening swim watching the sunset with one eye and the elephants with the other, lit our hurricane lanterns and a bonfire as the stars came out,

and sat down to our glass of iced sundowner whilst the elephants trumpeted into the night.



Henebedde Valley lies between the Danigala Range (2500 ft) and the Kunuhela-Vanarekanda Range (1600 ft). In this Valley, the Balabedde Oya flows south to join up with the Gal Oya as the latter, descending through a series of rapids, emerges from the canyons of Makare. It is a stunningly beautiful and uncrowded land.

It is also a historical land. Eighty six years ago, in 1908, the noted London University ethnologist, Professor Seligmann, and his wife Brenda were in this Valley researching the sociology of the Veddas for the Ceylon Government. They spent months in arduous circumstances studying the Veddas of Henebedde and Sitala Wanniya and published their monumental work "*The Veddas*" in 1911. Even at the time that the Seligmanns were was doing their field work there was controversy over whether truly wild Veddas existed. At a

Special General Meeting of the Royal Asiatic Society held at the Colombo Museum on May the 25th, 1908, presided over by the Governor Sir Henry McCallum, Prof. Seligmann presented his *"Notes on Recent Work Among the Veddas"*. A lively discussion followed with contributions by the likes of P. Arunachalam and Henry Parker. His Excellency the Governor then wound up by stating to Seligmann, *"It may interest him to know that recently I had a conversation with Mr. Bibile who attended him on the expedition. Mr. Bibile is the Ratemahatmaya of the Uva District, and he assured me that according to his belief, pure Veddas or Rock Veddas no longer exist that they are wholly extinct in fact."* The Hon. Secretary of the RAS added, *"The Ratemahatmaya, if anybody, should know; and his view is shared by H. Parker, no mean authority 'as well as other Europeans long resident in Ceylon'!"*



Mr. W.R.Bibile was the Ratemahatmaya of the area from 1889 to 1918 and was attached to the expedition. Seligmann states of him, *"It was clear that his relationship to the Veddas was the reason for the prestige he undoubtedly enjoyed among the Danigala and Henebedde Veddas. For the same reason one of his relatives was allowed to pasture his cattle on Henebedde territory... about a hundred years ago...and may have been connected with the troubles of the revolution which led to an influx of Sinhalese into the wilds of the Vedita country."*

The 'revolution' was the Uva Rebellion of 1818 which 'led to an influx of Sinhalese into the wilds of the Vedda country'. The marginalisation of the Veddas had begun.



Treron phoenicoptera phillipsi

We had had a long journey, leaving Colombo the previous morning and halting at the remote village of Bulupitiya east of Bibile to pick up my trusted tracker Podiappuhamy who had safely guided me through these wild lands during many years of wandering and camping in the Maha Vedirata of yore. On the rutted track from Bibile to Bulupitiya we were on the watch out for the rare Ceylon Yellow Legged Green Pigeon (*Treron phoenicoptera phillipsi*) that makes its home in this area, and were rewarded by seeing a handful of them. Having picked up Podiappuhamy from his humble home where I had spent many a night in the past, we left the established track and plunged southwards into the grasslands of the beautiful Nilgala Talawa. There are no visible tracks in the talawa where the animal trails are submerged in the tall grass. But Podiappuhamy navigates by the trees. Where all the trees look identical to us, he can distinguish individual trees and knows at which tree we need to swing right, and at which tree we need to swing left. By late afternoon we reached fabled Nilgala where we planned to stay the night. After a refreshing bath in the Gal Oya which at this place breaks up into several rivulets flowing past huge slabs of flat rock – the villagers call it Lokgal Oya - we saw elephants nearby and crawled fairly close to them to film them. Whilst crawling through the tall grass we heard and recorded the call of the elusive Ceylon Painted Partridge (*Francolinus pictus watsoni*) which the villagers here call the 'Manawatawa' and which bird I had last seen here nearly twenty five years ago. There were two of them now, calling to each other across a distance of about 50 metres. As I approached one, getting closer and closer to the call, the bird suddenly took off from a small rock and whirred past us, all in a blur, dropping quickly into the tall grass and disappearing. It was a fortuitous viewing, and it had made our day yesterday.

That night, the sky and stars at Nilgala were the clearest I had ever seen anywhere, with the centre of the Milky Way a brilliant band of white. With no manmade light-pollution or manmade noise-pollution within miles of us, we sat in an open space under the vast dome of the starlit sky while Podiappuhamy reminisced about the old times and the strict way the area was governed during the colonial era. He recalled how, when a '*wasangathaya*' (disease epidemic) hit the area and signs were nailed to the trees prohibiting entry, no one dared to ignore the signs. Compliance was total and the disease quickly controlled. I learned later, from old family papers, that the epidemic had been cholera. It had been controlled by the Ratemahatmaya W.R.Bibile for which he was highly commended by the colonial authorities, and later sent to other cholera-hit areas in Uva, earning him the sobriquet 'a splendid cholera Ratemahatmaya' as "*his energy contributed largely to control the disease in Welassa*". That epidemic had been in 1907, before Podiappuhamy was born. Hence, that night in Nilgala in 1994, Podiappuhamy was reciting, very accurately, the oral history of the area.

I was fortunately able to capture on tape this and other stories he divulged, along with capturing the surrounding night sounds of the jungle, including those of elephants and deer, and once a bear and once a leopard.



Francolinus pictus watsoni

In the morning, we had resumed our journey from Nilgala and travelled another hour east on the dirt track towards Inginiyagala. At the Mullegama guard-post we had picked up the pre-arranged armed guard from the Wildlife

Department and then taken another jungle track southwards, heading to the shores of the Senanayake Samudra. It had taken us nearly two hours to travel the last 16 kilometres of jungle track to the campsite, crossing several streams on the way. It was hard going, mostly on low-range first gear, with innumerable tree roots running across the track, giving a torrid time to the suspension of the fully laden vehicle. At places, whole trees had fallen across the track and had to be cleared. No vehicle seems to have come this way for a very long time.

Now, as darkness fell upon the campsite, I heard the call of a Ceylon Frogmouth (*Batrachostomus moniliger*) very near us. Fortunately I was able to record the next and last call on tape. G.M. Henry calls them "*weird, nocturnal birds which in some ways resemble owls...is rare...an inhabitant of the densest forests, strictly nocturnal...very seldom seen...habits are largely matters of conjecture.*" We did not see the well camouflaged bird in the dark, though a little later I thought I heard it again, more into the forest. But by now there were indications that more elephants were around our camp so that there was no question of trying to follow up the call on foot in the darkness.



Batrachostomus moniliger

There were other unidentifiable animal calls that night in 1994, but ours were the only human voices. It was not so however on the night of February 7th, 1908, when the Veddas of the Bendiya galge caves, on the other side of the Giritala Oya from where we were camped, had carried out the Avana ceremony, "*on the occasion of the death of a fine buck*", as Seligmann, who was present, states. "*The stag, which had been shot a short distance from the Bendiya galge caves, was carried to a convenient slab of rock between our camp and the caves and there cut up, an arrow being most skillfully used to skin and disjoint the animal...cutting out twelve pieces of meat, these constituting the offering called Avana...for the Radawara Yaku, who were said to be the spirits of Veddas...*".

Seated by our roaring log fire in 1994, not far from Bendiya galge, I could picture that event which took place on another night like this in this very valley; so long ago in time and yet so near in space. I wondered whether my great grandfather, W.R. Bibile too had been present that night. He had told Seligmann *"that he had heard of it (the Avana ceremony) having been performed in his father's time by Sinhalese in the neighbourhood of Bibile"*.



Surrounded by jungle noises but snug inside the roof tent of my vehicle, I slept soundly, tired from all the travel and excitement of the day.

In the pre-dawn there was a mournful hoot of an unidentified animal, probably a bird. It was difficult to place but it seemed to wail the passing of the night. With the dawn came a flood of bird calls Jungle Owlet, Stork Billed Kingfisher, White Bellied Sea Eagle, Black Headed Oriole, Common Drongo, Jungle Fowl, Spurfowl, Common Grackle, Orange Breasted Blue Flycatcher, Brown Capped Babbler, White Browed Prinia. It was a veritable orchestra. Spotted Deer called from the Giritala Oya.

As the sun rose and I headed out to the water for a wash, four elephants emerged from the fringing forest onto a little grassy hollow behind me, nearly cutting me off from the camp. I watched a little nervously as they dug up piles of mud and ate the lumps. I wondered why they did that. Later on I learnt that that is the way in which they obtain their mineral requirements, and that there are two or three such special spots frequently used by them in the Yala group of reserves too.

After breakfast we walked down to the Giritala Oya. There, in a quiet cove we spent the morning trying to get close to the resident White Bellied Sea Eagle on its favourite perch. The cover was minimal and the bird extremely shy on the perch. But when it took to the air and dived for fish with its talons at the ready, it was a spectacle worth the journey. Then, as if in emulation, a jungle crow came and hovered over the water, dived, siezed a fish in its beak, and alighted on a perch to feed. I had never before seen this hunting behaviour by a crow: They are normally scavengers. The whole episode caught me unawares and I was not able to film it. There was a Brahminy Kite with two juveniles, a Tank Eagle, Egrets, Eastern Grey Herons, Cormorants, Pelicans, Teal, White Necked Storks, Lapwings, Indian Darters, Kingfishers, Bronze Wing Pigeons, Red Backed and Crimson Backed Woodpeckers, and the bizarre-beaked Malabar Pied Hornbills, fanciful reports of which bird caused a stir in Europe around 1330 A.D. when a traveller, a Franciscan Friar by the name of Odoric, wrote after a visit to Ceylan (Sillan) that, "*I saw in this Island certain birds as big as geese, which have two Heads*".

There were crocodiles too at Giritala Oya and we could only hope that there weren't too many hungry ones near our camp as we were spending a lot of time swimming and bathing in the lake. It was too hot not to. We were assured that there have been no man eaters recently, meaning that there have been no reported cases; but then, in this particular neck of the woods, for months on end there are no men to be eaten either. So 'no reported cases' did not really mean much. We just hoped for the best. A more immediate nuisance however were the ticks. We were all nursing several nasty bites by then.

After lunch I had a siesta, to be rudely awoken by a commotion from the cook and the driver. They had been watching a lone bull elephant feeding on the other side of the cove for some time. The animal had then entered the water and begun to swim. It swam and it swam, and after about fifteen minutes it dawned on the two humans that the animal was swimming directly to our campsite. That is when they raised the alarm. We rushed down to the shore and there he was, paddling along slowly but steadily, occasionally spouting water like a whale at sea. At times the animal completely disappeared under the water, at times only the trunk was visible like a periscope, and at times the forehead broke the surface with a splash like a conning tower. I had never seen an elephant swimming such a distance. As he had now been swimming parallel to the shore for quite a while he must have been swimming for the fun of it. But now he was heading ashore, drawing nearer and nearer to us. We

had to retreat from the shore and hide behind some bushes and film him. A week or so later, while chatting in a comfortable Colombo sitting room, someone asked me why we did not launch the rubber dinghy and paddle up to the animal and film it in the water. I must say that at the time the thought never occurred to me. We only wanted to get out of his way, not get in the way of a flailing trunk whilst being precariously afloat in a leaky rubber dinghy in deep crocodile infested water. I think we were right to stay on shore. Anyway, the animal did come ashore finally, near where we were hiding, splashed itself with a trunkful of water, and lumbered up the slope, making us crawl back hurriedly towards the vehicles at the edge of the forest. As we moved it sensed us, and threateningly raised its trunk and tail. To our relief however, it then turned aside and hurried off into the forest.

In the afternoon a thunderstorm threatened us. Gathering a fair amount of violence over the water, it approached from the east, and then veered off towards Kossapola Oya in the southern regions of the lake where we could see it releasing huge black showers. It began to drizzle in our area and we hurriedly put up the additional tents. Yesterday too it had threatened rain. This was a cause for some worry as one or two heavy showers could well maroon us here as the streams we had to ford to get out of the valley could rise fast. In heavy rain the plains become a boggy morass making the track unusable for vehicles. It takes a couple of months after the monsoon for the tracks to get dry again. I did not fancy having to abandon my vehicle here in the forest till about March or April 1995. It seemed as though we had left it nearly too late in the year to come to this part of the country.

By evening the threat of rain had receded and, adequately prepared for elephants, we walked about two miles up the Balabedde Oya arm along beautiful stretches of lake shore with plenty of bird life and extensive views of Wadinagala, Westminster Abbey, Maragalakanda, Namunukula, and the Danigala Ranges. It was nearly dark when we returned to camp. At the water's edge a nightjar flew into the beam of the torch and kept circling round the beam like a moth. It was gobbling up the insects that were attracted to the torchlight. Elephants trumpeted in the mid-distance but it was too dark to see them.

Another night with jungle sounds. As there were elephants in all directions around the camp we decided to have two log fires burning on two sides of the camp as well as a petromax lantern and three 12-volt tube lights kept on through the night.

In the pre dawn, the mournful hoot again, repeated every few minutes and echoing across the valley. What was it? Other calls were later identified; Rose Ringed Parakeet, Crimson Breasted Barbet, Red Wattled Lapwing, and White Breasted Kingfisher. The clouds had completely cleared and soon it was hot and sunny. It was a leisurely morning with no signs of elephants. We boated up to the mouth of the Giritala Oya observing the now familiar bird life. On some of the half submerged tree trunks, now dead for over forty years, there were scraggly epiphytes struggling to grow on the dead tree trunks, I wondered; did they depend entirely on bird droppings for nutrition?

After a very peaceful morning and afternoon, too peaceful perhaps for a jungle setting, we decided to walk towards Balabedde Oya in the evening. There we encountered a small herd of elephants, eight in number, with a very young animal, feeding on the open plain of the lake shore. As we filed past them the direction of wind changed and they got our scent. The reaction was immediate and frightening as the adults all raised their trunks and tails in attack mode and one trumpeted fiercely and got ready to charge. We were caught in the open and clearly located. There was no point in trying to stay still. The wind was directly from us to them. There was nothing to do but run for it. The one animal began to charge, but luckily changed its mind after a few yards and joined the others who had immediately herded the young one into the forest. It was a somewhat tense walk back to camp in the gathering dusk.

Later, whilst bathing in the lake I heard the Frogmouth again, at the edge of the forest. It was to be our last night at the camp. For Seligmann, those eighty six long years ago, the Veddas of this valley had performed the *Avana* ceremony, the Arrow dance, the *Kirikoraha* ceremony, and the *Nae Yaku* ceremony. For us the performance of the elephants would have to suffice, for the Veddas were long gone.

That night too we kept all our lights on. At about 2 a.m. the cook and driver and the Wildlife Department guard all got up to the sound of elephants, how many they did not know, passing by the camp, moving north between us and the water. I slept soundly through it all, on my vehicle's roof platform as usual. In the morning the elephants' footprints showed that they had come directly

towards my vehicle which made up one perimeter of the camp but had abruptly turned aside when about thirty feet away, probably upon seeing the vehicle's tube lights.

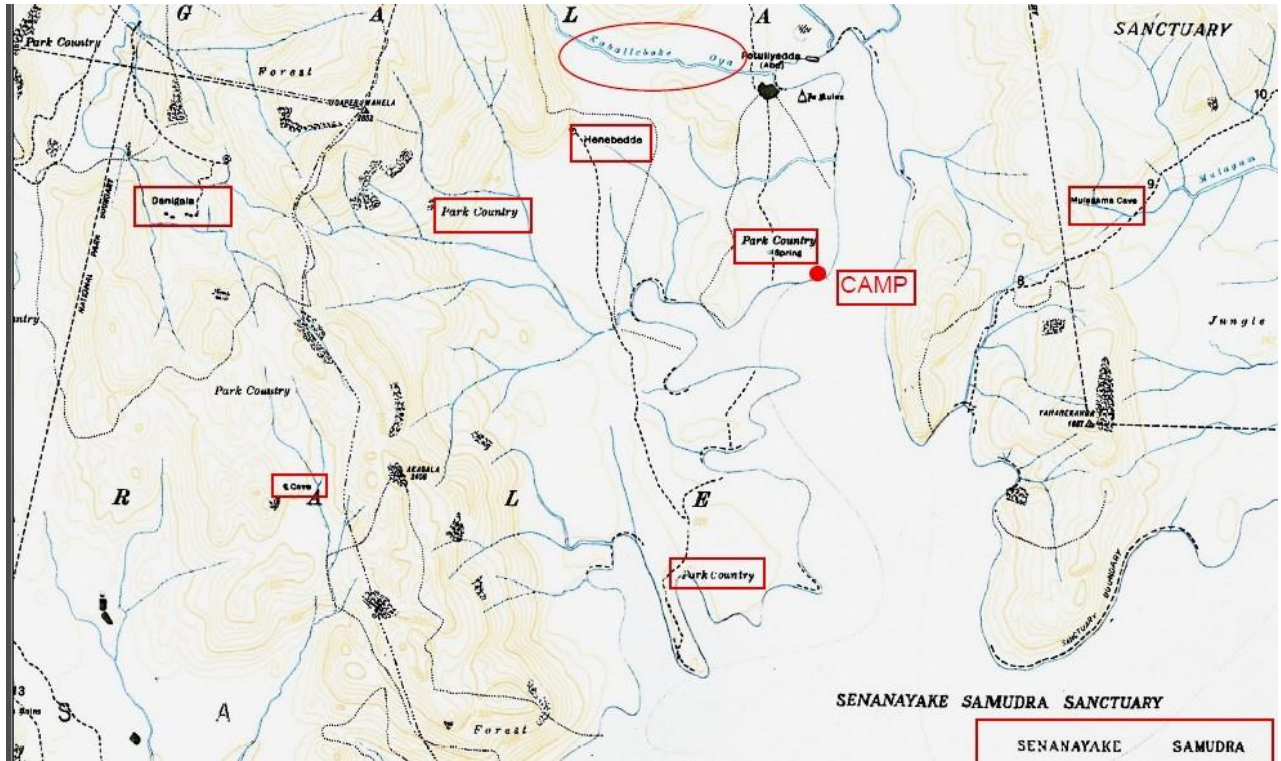
Next morning, still hearing that mournful hoot, and still wandering what it was, we broke camp and headed north out of the once-upon-a-time Valley of the Veddas, now the Valley of the Elephants.



Colombo, Sri Lanka

September 1994





BULUPITIYA - NILGALA - KEBELLABOKKA OYA

(SENANAYAKA SAMUDRA) CAMP, SEPTEMBER 1994

BIRD CALLS ON TAPE

Nilgala, evening

Painted Partridge,
Sunbird ?

Nilgala morning

Orange Breasted Blue Flycatcher
Junglefowl
Brown Capped Babbler
Jungle Owlet
Spurfowl
Common Grackle
White Browed Prinia

Kebellabokka Camp

Black headed Oriole
Common Drongo

Night + early dawn

Frogmouth
Jungle Owlet
Stork Billed Kingfisher
White Bellied Sea Eagle

BIRDS ON VIDEO FILM + OTHERS SEEN

Crested Serpent Eagle
White Browed Prinia
Rose Ringed Parakeet
Common Mynah
Tickell's Flowerpecker
Jungle Crow
White Breasted Kingfisher
Brahminy Kite
Red Wattled Lapwing
Cormorant
Crimson Breasted Barbet
Tank Eagle
Malabar Pied Hornbill
Grey Heron
Racquet Tailed Drongo
Bronze Wing Pigeon
Orange Breasted Green Pigeon
Crimson Backed Woodpecker
Layard's Parakeet
Red backed Woodpecker
Bush Lark
Ashy Prinia
Median Egret
Parson's Stork
Teal
Indian Darter
Pelican
Nightjar
Common Iora
Ash Dove
Orange Minivet
Little Minivet