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\*The Elephant Gathering at Minneriya National Park takes place during the dry season (July to September)



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# Encounters with reptiles and amphibians

David Alderton describes some sightings of various reptiles and a particularly bold amphibian in Sri Lanka.

I recently had the opportunity to visit this beautiful Indian Ocean island, to make a film about the incredible elephant migration that takes place there during the dry season, and of course, this gave a great opportunity to look for other wildlife as well! When it comes to reptiles, Sri Lanka has a rich diversity of some 176 species, with representatives of all the major taxa to be found there. There are some 93 species of snake, which are the most numerous of the reptiles, ranging down to just two species each, of crocodylians and freshwater turtles, and a single type of tortoise.

### Out and about

Probably the most conspicuous group of reptiles, however, certainly in southern parts of the country where we were staying, was the monitor lizards. There is something rather disconcerting at first when you hear a large creature moving in dry vegetation alongside a path, before a large lizard emerges and ambles across in front of you, with its forked tongue flicking in and out of its mouth, sniffing the air, as its long tail drags behind.

There are two species of monitor lizard resident in Sri Lanka - the so-called land monitor (*Varanus bengalensis*) and the water monitor (*V. salvator*),

which grows even larger, up to 2.5m (8.25ft) overall. They seem to be quite common, especially in localities where they are not persecuted and there is cover available for them. These lizards can prove to be beneficial as well, preying on potentially harmful invertebrates and even rodents. They seemingly adapt well to changes in habitat. One individual sat out in the open on a hotel lawn, enjoying a shower under a sprinkler as we watched.

Another group of lizards that have benefited from human habitation are geckos. As elsewhere in warmer regions throughout the world, these small agile lizards, with their flattened toe pads that allow them to run up vertical surfaces, emerge from their daytime hiding places in buildings as dusk falls. They then sit motionless near a light, waiting for a passing moth or similar insect to be drawn here, before rushing and grabbing it very quickly. These geckos were also quite territorial by nature, chasing each other at times if one ventured too close to another's hunting area.

### A fearless frog

Where we were based, at the beautiful Diyabubula Art & Jungle Hideaway, there was

an attractive frog which emerged every night, and sat on the same place on a wooden balcony. It was quite unafraid of people walking back and forth past it. The pools here, which inter-connect during the monsoon season, were a refuge for various amphibians, although the frogs were not easy to observe in these surroundings, in spite of being quite clearly audible at night.

### Turtles too

Heading down to the coast, and staying at Barbery Resorts, there were turtles nesting on the beaches nearby. These marine reptiles come ashore depending on the tide, laying regularly at their traditional nesting grounds. What was interesting here was that there was very little space between the tidal zone and the top of the beach, increasing the likelihood of nests becoming swamped by the sea on a high tide. Different species nest at various times of the year, and with five of the world's seven species of marine turtle laying their eggs on the island's beaches, it is clearly a significant refuge for members of this group.

\*David flew with SriLankan Airlines ([www.srilankan.com](http://www.srilankan.com)) on their non-stop London-Colombo service and stayed at Diyabubula Art & Jungle Hideaway ([www.diyabubula.com](http://www.diyabubula.com)) and Barbery Resorts ([www.barberyresorts.com](http://www.barberyresorts.com)).



Turtles prefer to come ashore and nest under cover of darkness, when their presence will be less obvious.



The frog was to be seen at night on the same part of the wooden balcony here at Diyabubula.

All Sri Lankan photos courtesy of the author. Map courtesy Harvepino/www.shutterstock.com