The rainforests of present-day Sri Lanka are merely a shadow of what they once were. A few centuries ago, the valleys, streams, and verdant greenery stretched endlessly beneath the blue sky. For generations, we have sought to unlock the mysteries of these rainforests, but alongside our curiosity came exploitation. In just a hundred years, more than half of Sri Lanka's rainforests have been destroyed. Now, we stand at a critical juncture: can these forests survive another generation, or have we pushed them beyond the point of no return? The twenty-first century marks an era in which one species, *Homo sapiens*, has fundamentally altered the natural world. Never before in Earth's history has a single species exerted such an overwhelming influence on all others, particularly within such a short span of time. Our impact intensifies every day, and nowhere is this more evident than in the destruction of biomes such as tropical rainforests, which are among the most complex ecosystems on the planet. At the same time, Earth is experiencing unprecedented climatic shifts, largely driven by our actions. We have entered the Anthropocene, an era in which human activity pervades every ecosystem on the planet.

Every organism, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, plays a unique role in the long chain of life that stretches across time. Plants, animals, and all living things have evolved specific adaptations to survive within the intricate balance of nature. Whether we realize it or not, our survival, and that of countless other species, depends on the health of these ecosystems. Despite advances in our understanding of the complexity and importance of ecosystems such as Sinharaja, we continue to destroy them at an alarming rate. These ecosystems are ancient, intricate systems of life, and once they are gone, they cannot be replaced. We must confront the truth: our actions, or inactions, will have profound and irreversible consequences. The destruction of rainforests is not merely a loss of biodiversity; it poses a direct threat to our future. Every decision we make now affects the biosphere, that thin, fragile layer of life that covers the Earth's surface. It is already crumbling under the weight of our mistakes.

Humanity has always sought answers about the natural world. Thousands of years ago, people viewed the world as a profound mystery, both beautiful and terrifying. Today, we understand far more than our ancestors ever could, yet we still fail to fully comprehend the consequences of our actions on the planet. On the grand scale of the universe, human beings are insignificant, a mere blip. A housefly has a greater effect on Earth's atmosphere than we collectively have on the universe. However, here on this small planet, we have become the most powerful force shaping its future. What we believe about our planet matters. We are impacting the biosphere in ways no other species ever has, and we are accelerating the destruction of ecosystems essential for life. Our failure to care for nature may lead to Earth's sixth mass extinction event and potentially to our own annihilation. It is easy to feel powerless in the face of such global challenges, but the truth is that we have the ability to change course. The very trait that defines us as human; our capacity for reason and self-reflection also grants us the power to make better choices.

The destruction of tropical rainforests like Sinharaja is not inevitable; it is a conscious choice made every day by politicians, business leaders, and consumers. It reflects the decision to prioritize short-term economic gains over the long-term stability of our planet, to value profit above the priceless services these ecosystems provide. We already possess the knowledge, the technology, and the responsibility to protect these invaluable ecosystems for future generations. These forests are not luxuries; they are essential for our survival. They supply clean air, regulate water systems, and provide resources that sustain millions of lives. Just as importantly, they are vast repositories of genetic diversity, holding the keys to medical discoveries and innovations we cannot yet imagine. The real question is not whether we can stop their destruction, but whether we will. We can choose to be the generation that allowed these forests to vanish, or the generation that took a stand. The choice is ours, but time is running out. We must act now, and we must act decisively.

This book is not an exhaustive research document on the flora and fauna of Sinharaja. It is not a comprehensive manual for identifying every plant and animal in the rainforest, nor is it intended to be a field guide for those venturing into the wild. What it does aim to be, however, is a celebration of Sinharaja and the lives that inhabit it. It tells the stories of rainforest creatures, how they survive, reproduce, and navigate the harsh realities of their environment. It sheds light on their endeavors, their predators, and their remarkable instincts for evading danger. It also speaks of their uncertain future in the face of human-driven changes. This book draws the reader's attention to the kinds of settings anyone walking through the rainforest might witness, offering a more intimate look at what makes the Tropical Lowland Evergreen Rainforest ecosystems so unique. While we provide an overview of some key features, we also delve into subjects that we personally find fascinating. These accounts are grounded in observable reality, yet at times, they rely on speculation or patterns that might not be apparent in every situation.

We are well aware that some of what we present is based on delicate evidence, much like the fragile threads of a spider's web. Still, there is value in these threads. The behaviours and interactions we describe are things that do happen in the natural world, maybe not always in the same way or in every place, but often enough to offer a meaningful understanding. To narrate the story of Sinharaja, we have used imagination alongside scientific observation, creating a balance that allows us to give readers an accurate yet engaging experience. Our goal is to make this book accessible to everyone, whether or not they have a scientific background. We have intentionally kept the text free of complicated and excessive technical detail, knowing that for many, too much analysis can detract from the pure wonder of experiencing nature. We want you to feel the excitement of the rainforest and the awe of its intricacies without getting bogged down by academic dryness. We acknowledge that the complexities and details of the rainforest are often deeper than they initially appear.

We do not claim to have all the answers. We make no claim to be experts, but we hope to inspire curiosity and a desire to learn more about the rainforests of Sri Lanka. This book is the result of our exploration of Sinharaja, a journey that began over four decades ago with clumsy first steps into a mysterious realm we knew very little about. At the time, there were few resources to guide us, and as we sought information, we were struck by how much of the knowledge about rainforests was either locked away in scientific journals, inaccessible to the layperson, or sensationalized in popular media. We quickly realised that the available writings fell into two categories: either overly academic, draining the excitement from nature's vibrancy, or exaggerated and full of inaccuracies. Neither seemed suited to our needs. As amateur naturalists, we longed for a middle ground, a way to share the thrill of discovery with others without losing sight of the truth. That lack of accessible, balanced information prompted us to create this book. We want to fill the gap between dense scientific writing and overly simplified, often misleading popular narratives.

Relying on a mixture of books and online resources, we have been careful in how we have interpreted and presented the information in these pages. We are not scientists by profession, but we are passionate about the natural world. Our background is rooted in curiosity, storytelling, and photography. Over the years, we have wandered through many of our rainforests, and while we have learned a great deal, there is still so much we have not seen or fully understood. Yet, that is part of nature, as it always leaves more to discover. This book is designed for a wide audience, especially those who may never set foot in a rainforest yet still want to explore and understand these environments from afar. Whether you are a casual reader with a budding interest in nature or someone more experienced who enjoys making connections across various fields like natural history, evolution, and science. We invite you to journey with us, to lose yourself in the sights and sounds of Sinharaja, and to rediscover the wildness that still exists in this corner of the world.

The first recorded accounts of rainforests date back to 327 BCE, during Alexander the Great's campaign through the Khyber Pass into Punjab. His army's journey to the Indus River led to the earliest written observations of tropical forests, documented by Theophrastus, a student of Plato and Aristotle, in *Enquiry into Plants*. However, these early descriptions were often inaccurate. For nearly a millennium, these misconceptions persisted, shaping the Western understanding of rainforests into a blend of fantasy and myth. With the Age of Exploration came new discoveries that reignited interest in tropical rainforests. European explorers, captivated by the allure of the unknown, ventured deeper into these forests, contributing both insight and myth. In 1493, Christopher Columbus provided one of the first detailed descriptions of a rainforest when he encountered the dense forests of the Caribbean. He wrote of "a thousand kinds of tall trees" that "seem to touch the sky," marveling at their evergreen foliage and describing a scene of endless greenery. His accounts were far more accurate than earlier ones, yet many Europeans continued to view the rainforest as a mysterious and dangerous place.

The era's fascination with the unknown often led to exaggerated stories about the rainforest. A particularly famous account comes from G. E. Rumpf, a German naturalist working for the Dutch East India Company, who in 1750 described a tree in Indonesia with allegedly poisonous sap. According to Rumpf, no plant, shrub, or grass could grow beneath this tree, and any bird that perched on its branches would fall dead. "Even the air around it," he claimed, "was toxic, causing birds to fall from the sky." Such far-fetched tales reflected the common belief that rainforests were filled with dark forces, a place where nature itself could turn deadly. In addition to these exaggerated stories, some people even believed that the biblical Garden of Eden, an ancient symbol of paradise and eternal life, might be hidden within the depths of these unexplored forests. This theory added to the mystique and mythology surrounding tropical rainforests, reinforcing the idea that they were places of both wonder and danger.

The arrival of more scientifically inclined explorers and naturalists, however, began to shift perceptions. British naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace conducted an extensive scientific survey of the Malay Peninsula from 1854 to 1862. In his famous book *The Malay Archipelago,* Wallace described the incredible variety of life he found in the rainforest, noting that while at first glance the forest appeared uniform with its mass of green vegetation; closer inspection revealed a rich diversity. He observed that trees which seemed identical from a distance often turned out to be entirely different species, making it difficult to find two of the same species close together. His observations highlighted the hidden complexity of these ecosystems and challenged earlier views of the rainforest as a monotonous, species-poor environment. Even Carl Linnaeus had initially believed rainforests to lack diversity. His early impressions, recorded in his 1753 work *Species Plantarum*, suggested that rainforests consisted of relatively uniform plant life.

It was not until later explorations that the true biodiversity of rainforests began to be understood. In 1898, German botanist A.F.W. Schimper coined the term "tropical rainforest" in his book *Plant Geography upon an Ecological Basis*. Schimper defined rainforests as dense forests thriving in tropical climates with high levels of rainfall and little to no dry season. He recognised the uniqueness of these ecosystems and their distinctiveness from other types of rainforests. However, despite Schimper's efforts, defining rainforests with strict boundaries proved challenging. Unlike political borders, the biological boundaries of these forests are often fluid, with rainforests gradually blending into other types of vegetation, making clear distinctions difficult. Nevertheless, all tropical rainforests share certain core characteristics: an extraordinary diversity of plant and animal life, an abundance of moisture, and the capacity to flourish in warm, stable climates. As scientific understanding progressed, a clearer picture of rainforests emerged. What was once considered a dangerous and alien environment was now seen as one of the most intricate and vibrant ecosystems on Earth.

George Henry Kendrick Thwaites produced the first extensive catalogue of Sri Lanka's flora in his *Enumeratio Plantarum Zeylaniae* (1864). Though not exclusively focused on Sinharaja, Thwaites's work indirectly highlighted the forest's wealth of endemic plant species. Building on this foundational effort, Henry Trimen expanded the understanding of Sri Lanka's botanical diversity through his seminal *A Handbook to the Flora of Ceylon* (1893). These scientific studies underscored Sinharaja's ecological significance, though they also reflected colonial interests in cataloguing resources for economic exploitation. As the scientific exploration of Sinharaja advanced, a few forward-thinking individuals began to advocate for sustainable forestry practices. Among them was Thomas Farr, whose 1902 publication, *A Descriptive Catalogue of More Useful Trees and Flowering Plants of the Western and Sabaragamuwa Provinces of Ceylon*, called for a balance between utilisation and preservation.

The richness of Sinharaja's biodiversity was not limited to its flora. The forest's avian treasures also captivated British naturalists, particularly during the latter half of the 19th century. Captain Vincent Legge devoted much of his work to studying Sinharaja's birdlife. His monumental *A History of the Birds of Ceylon* (1880) included vivid descriptions of endemic species found within Sinharaja. The allure of Sinharaja extended beyond scientific documentation, inspiring poetic admiration and literary celebration. Thomas Willis, in his 1907 publication, *Ceylon: A Handbook for Resident and Traveller*, celebrated the rainforest as an ethereal masterpiece. Blending scientific observation with lyrical reverence, Willis's work brought the wonders of Sinharaja to a broader audience. Further contributions came from Richard Henry Beddome, a naturalist based in India, whose research on reptiles, amphibians, and flora had significant implications for understanding tropical rainforest ecosystems. Although Beddome's work primarily focused on the Western Ghats in India, his studies offered valuable insights into habitats like Sinharaja, which shared many ecological characteristics.

• Sri Lanka green snail (*Beddomea albizonata*)

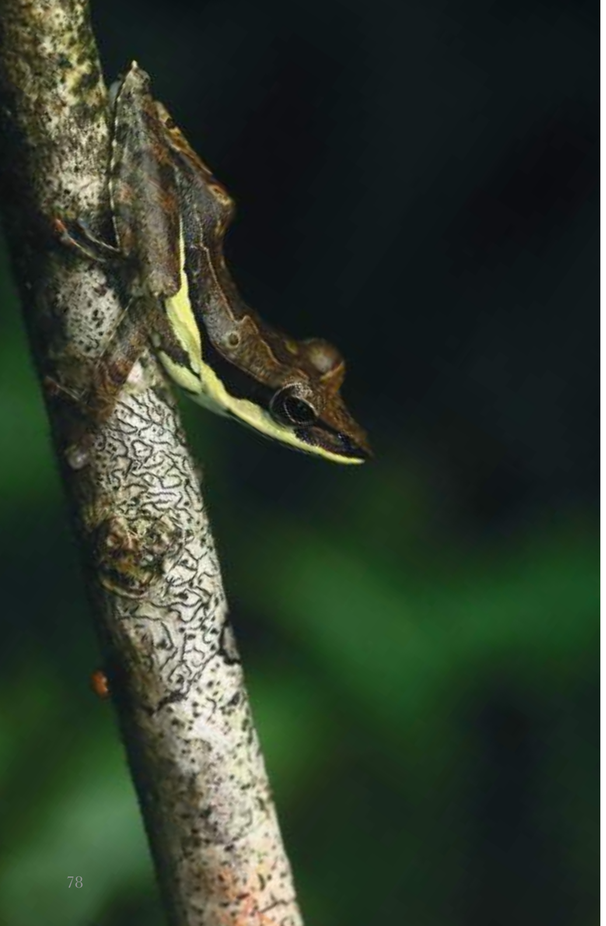
E.F. Kelaart (1819–1860) was one of the first Sri Lankans to gain international recognition for his contributions to natural history. His detailed work on the fauna of Sri Lanka, particularly reptiles and amphibians, laid the groundwork for later studies in rainforest ecology. Kelaart's writings, including *Prodromus Faunae Zeylanicae* (1852), indirectly highlighted the ecological significance of habitats like Sinharaja. His research underscored the vital importance of conserving the island's forests, warning of the dangers posed by unchecked exploitation. Yet, like Frederick Lewis's ecological insights, Kelaart's pleas for stewardship were largely ignored by colonial authorities, who prioritised economic gain over environmental preservation. Even so, his work remains foundational to the evolving narrative of Sinharaja, offering an early recognition of its fragile ecological balance. Hugh Neville (1847–1897) played an important role in documenting the flora and fauna of Sri Lanka. His extensive collections of manuscripts and notes on Sri Lankan natural history included observations on the biodiversity of Sinharaja.

Amid these scientific warnings, a chorus of voices emerged, blending ecological appreciation with poetic admiration. J.C. Willis's *A Manual and Dictionary of the Flowering Plants and Ferns of Ceylon* (1901) meticulously catalogued Sinharaja's astonishing botanical diversity. His efforts provided a crucial understanding of the forest's unique flora. A.B. Lushington eloquently captured the forest's enchantment and ecological richness in his writings. Meanwhile, V.E. Charawanamuttu's *The New School Geography of Ceylon* (1930) introduced the forest to a wider audience, emphasising its geographical importance and the pressing challenges of human encroachment. Samuel Walker and his wife Eleanor deepened this narrative through their rigorous fieldwork. Eleanor's pioneering studies of birdlife illuminated the intricate web of species within Sinharaja's ecosystem, while Samuel documented its insects and plant life. Their work not only advanced scientific knowledge but also brought Sinharaja's wonders into public consciousness.

Kelaart's dwarf toad (*Adenomus kelaartii*) •

• Freshwater crab *(Perbrinckia sp.)*

Ceylonese combtail (*Belontia signata*) •



You don't need to be a scientist to appreciate the wonders of Sinharaja. All you need is a sense of curiosity and the willingness to slow down. At first, it may feel like a chaotic tangle of green: towering trees, twisting vines, and dense undergrowth. But if you take a moment to pause and look, the forest will reveal its hidden complexity. The sheer greenness of Sinharaja may overwhelm you initially, but every tree, leaf, and rustle in the undergrowth has a story to tell. Tall trees rise like pillars, their branches stretching towards the sun, while epiphytes cling high in the canopy, living off the moisture in the air. These plants, thriving without ever touching the ground, are marvels anyone can appreciate, with no scientific expertise required. As you walk through the forest, you'll hear its life all around you. Birds sing to mark territory or attract mates, insects hum as they go about their work, and leaves rustle as unseen creatures move through the undergrowth. These sounds form a natural symphony that draws you into the forest's rhythms, with no need for specialised knowledge. Even the smallest sounds - the buzzing of a bee or the rustle of a lizard - become part of the experience.

In time, you'll notice patterns. Certain trees grow together, forming relationships with plants, fungi, and animals that have evolved over millions of years. This intricate web of life, known as symbiosis, is one of the rainforest's great wonders. You might not know the exact science behind it, but it's enough to observe how a bright flower attracts its perfect pollinator, whether it be a bird, bat, or insect. The rainforest's balance of colours, scents, and shapes can captivate anyone, whether or not they understand the biological intricacies behind it. The forest floor, thick with fallen leaves and branches, might seem like debris, but it plays a vital role in the life of the forest. As these materials decompose, they return essential nutrients to the soil, creating a foundation for new growth. You don't need to know about the microbes and fungi that break down this organic matter to appreciate how life in the rainforest constantly renews itself. The scent of damp earth and the warm humidity clinging to your skin remind you that life in Sinharaja never pauses.

• Rakwana whipping frog (*Taruga fastigo*)

Here, every element is connected in an intricate web of survival. The towering trees, diverse animals, vibrant plants, and even the very air rely on one another in ways both obvious and hidden. When a majestic tree falls, it creates a rare opening in the dense canopy, allowing sunlight to flood the forest floor, where dormant seeds awaken and new plants spring to life with renewed energy. Meanwhile, the fallen giant becomes a vital shelter and food source for fungi, insects, and small mammals, facilitating a rich circle of life. You don't need to be a botanist to marvel at how a vine spirals its way up a tree, seeking out the light in an eternal, determined climb. Nor do you need to be an ornithologist to be fascinated by a bird darting through the branches, energetically gathering food for its hungry brood. Even the simplest observation, like the flutter of a leaf or the buzz of an insect, draws you deeper into the forest's rhythms and mysteries. At first, the rainforest may seem like chaos, but with time, an underlying order begins to emerge, revealing the complexity of this thriving ecosystem.

You'll start to see when certain trees bloom, when birds are most active, or how insects diligently play their role in pollination and decomposition. You might not fully grasp all the intricacies, but you will witness how the forest breathes with the seasons - how it flourishes in the rains and endures through periods of drought. These beautiful patterns are open to anyone with the patience to watch and observe. Sinharaja is more than a scientific marvel; it's a living wonderland for anyone who steps beneath its lush canopy. You don't need to be a scientist to be moved by its breathtaking beauty, its remarkable resilience, or its delicate fragility. Each walkthrough of Sinharaja offers the chance for discovery and introspection. With curiosity and quiet observation, you'll uncover the invisible threads that hold this intricate ecosystem together. The more you look, the more you understand, and with understanding comes a deeper reverence for this ancient rainforest and its wonders. It's a place where anyone, regardless of expertise, can find inspiration and a profound connection to the natural world - no scientific degree required.

Sri Lanka scimitar babbler (*Pomatorhinus melanurus*) •

Life at the edge of ravines exists on the brink of survival. The peripheries of waterways serve as lifelines, sustaining the diverse flora and fauna that inhabit this rainforest. Some species are so finely adapted that they exist only in these specific microclimates. Yet, survival in this environment is fraught with challenges. Heavy rains can swiftly transform tranquil streams into torrents, threatening to sweep away everything in their path. Despite these forces, life flourishes in these seemingly inhospitable places. To endure the fluctuations, both plants and animals have evolved impressive survival strategies. Most plants cling tenaciously to rocky surfaces, with roots that seek out cracks and crevices for stability. Some plants possess flexible stems that bend rather than break under the force of rushing water, while others develop deep roots that anchor them securely against flooding. These resilient pioneers help prevent erosion, creating pockets of stability in an otherwise precarious environment. The walls of the ravines are draped in vibrant ferns, mosses, and lichens. Towering tree ferns, liverworts, and horsetails anchor themselves along the banks of streams that meander through this intricate ecosystem. Orchids burst into bloom in shaded corners, reliant on the air's humidity.

Animal life reveals equally remarkable adaptations. Life at the edge is exemplified by the three-toed kingfisher, a bird perfectly suited to these valleys. It hunts along the streams with precision, guided by its intimate knowledge of the forest's rhythms. The kingfisher nests in the soft riverbanks, using instinct passed down over generations to build its home just high enough to avoid flooding during the rainy season. Another fascinating inhabitant is the Sri Lankan tree crab (*Perbrinckia scansor*), a creature uniquely adapted to life in the hollows of tree trunks. Geckos, with specialised toe pads, cling effortlessly to vertical rock faces, deftly navigating the damp surfaces, while snakes scale sheer walls, their scales gripping rough rock as they hunt for prey. Each organism embodies the tenacity and resilience essential for survival at the edge, revealing a profound interconnectedness in this vibrant ecosystem.

• Black-backed dwarf kingfisher (*Ceyx erithaca*)

Stemless Balsam (*Impatiens acaulis*) •

Morningside, a secluded region within the Sinharaja, offers an experience that feels as though you've stepped into another world. Nestled at a higher elevation and perpetually cloaked in mist, this part of the forest creates a cool, damp microclimate, nurturing some of Sri Lanka's rarest and most captivating wildlife. From the moment you enter Morningside, you are enveloped by a serene sense of mystery. The crisp air is thick with moisture, and the fog weaves through the trees, creating an otherworldly atmosphere that beckons you deeper into its embrace. This lower montane forest shares characteristics with the famous Horton Plains in the central highlands. The flora of Morningside mirrors that of montane ecosystems, with certain trees and plant species having uniquely adapted to this cooler environment. The birdlife here reflects the region's uniqueness as well. As you wander, the haunting call of the elusive Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush, the melodic song of the Yellow-eared Bulbul, or a fleeting glimpse of the Dusky Blue Flycatcher may punctuate your journey. These birds, like the mist itself, appear and disappear without warning, enhancing the sense that the forest is alive with hidden wonders.

The mist is not merely an atmospheric feature - it is the lifeblood of Morningside. This ever-present fog clings to the trees, nourishing a thick, spongy carpet of moss, lichens, and epiphytes that covers the forest. The ground beneath your feet feels soft and springy, made up of layers of decomposing leaves and twigs, perpetually damp from the moisture that sustains the forest. Even during dry seasons, the mist ensures that life in Morningside continues to flourish. The dynamic fog creates a constantly shifting landscape, where visibility changes from one moment to the next, adding an element of surprise to every step. Walking through the forest, you are immersed in profound silence, occasionally interrupted by the soft drip of water falling from leaves or the distant call of a bird. The mist intensifies this sense of isolation, making you feel as though you've stumbled into a hidden sanctuary. Orchids, ferns, and various mosses drape the trunks and branches of trees, soaking up the moisture that hangs in the air.

Sri Lanka whistling thrush (*Myophonus blighi*) •

Spiders often get a bad reputation, don't they? With their many legs and sometimes hairy bodies, they can evoke unease in many people. I vividly remember the first time I spotted a large spider lurking in a shadowy corner of our home; my heart raced, and a shiver ran down my spine. Yet, as I explored the Sinharaja rainforest, my perceptions shifted dramatically. I soon realised just how many spiders inhabit this ecosystem, often hidden in plain sight, blending seamlessly into the vibrant tapestry of life. Growing up, I noticed how adults recoiled at the sight of spiders, passing down that instinct to be wary. However, spending time in nature taught me that these creatures are often misunderstood. Yes, they are predators, but their hunting methods reveal a surprisingly humane side. Instead of tearing their prey apart while it is still alive, they deliver a quick, anaesthetic bite, making their methods almost gentle compared to those of other hunters.

During our journeys through the rainforests, we became captivated by the incredible diversity of spider species and their myriad hunting techniques. Some weave intricate webs, while others leap, chase, and employ clever tricks. Wherever we looked, a spider seemed nearby–whether spinning a delicate web high in the branches or patiently waiting among damp leaves. Among the most enchanting are the jumping spiders, a group that never fails to capture our attention with their agile movements and unique behaviours. Unlike many others, they do not rely on webs; instead, they leap great distances, stalking their prey with the precision of a jungle cat. One of our favourites is the jewel jumping spider, dazzling with iridescent hues that shimmer in dappled sunlight. Watching the males perform their elaborate courtship dances is pure joy; their intricate movements are mesmerising. The way they flaunt their vibrant colours and engage in energetic displays speaks to the artistry of nature. Another captivating example is the ant-mimicking jumping spider, a master of disguise. Its ability to imitate the appearance and movements of ants not only helps it evade predators, but also allows it to approach its prey without raising suspicion.

• *Hyllus* species

Eriovixia species •

In the dappled sunlight of a forest clearing, where predators lurk with patient eyes, survival demands more than speed or strength – it requires a performance. And few creatures deliver this act with the finesse of the Blue Oak-Leaf Butterfly. A master illusionist, it walks a fine line between dazzling beauty and complete invisibility, a dance where one misstep could mean the end. When the butterfly spreads its wings in the sunlight, it is a spectacle to behold. The upper wings shimmer with iridescent blues, flashes of metallic light that catch and hold the gaze. This brilliance serves one purpose: to signal its presence to potential mates. To those who understand its secret, this fleeting flash is a promise, a call across the still air that says, *Here I am*. But beauty, in the wrong eyes, can be dangerous. A passing bird or lizard might see the same flash and interpret it not as a promise but as an opportunity – a meal. And here lies the Blue Oak-Leaf's dilemma: it must be seen to survive, yet unseen to live. In this precarious existence, every moment holds weight, every movement is calculated, a balance between visibility and concealment.

So, when the moment calls for it, the butterfly transforms. With a graceful swoop, it descends into the shadows, and the show ends. Its wings fold together, hiding the brilliant hues of blue behind an illusion so perfect, it might make you doubt your own eyes. The underside of its wings becomes a tattered, timeworn leaf – veins sprawling like cracks on ancient parchment, irregular spots mimicking decay and fungus. Even the edges fray into uneven, nibbled lines, as though time itself had taken a bite. It lands on a tree trunk, unmoving, a humble leaf clinging to bark. Look closely – no, closer still – and you will see nothing but what you expect: a dead leaf, brown and brittle, forgotten among thousands. The predator's eyes scan and move on, fooled completely. And in that moment of stillness, the Blue Oak-Leaf survives. It is both artist and trickster, a creature that straddles the realms of light and shadow, presence and absence. The forest may seem indifferent to its plight, yet it rewards ingenuity with life. The Blue Oak-Leaf whispers back: *You cannot catch what you cannot see.*

• Sri Lanka blue oakleaf (*Kallima philarchus*) •

Snakes: creatures of intrigue, beauty, and fear. Few animals spark such polarised emotions. They glide silently, their movements fluid and hypnotic, their iridescent scales shimmering like captured light. Their unblinking eyes and flickering tongues evoke an ancient mystique, a primal connection to something deep within us. Remember Kaa from *The Jungle Book*? Across cultures and histories, they have slithered their way into our myths, religions, and even our fears, becoming symbols of both wisdom and peril. They are at once guardians of forbidden knowledge and harbingers of doom, existing in the delicate space between reverence and revulsion. Much of this fascination stems from their contradictions: symbols of danger yet renewal, creatures feared yet revered. Their ability to shed their skin – emerging new and unscathed – has long been seen as a metaphor for transformation, immortality, and the cyclical nature of life. Yet this same power to captivate has, for millennia, cast them as villains lurking in shadows.

In Sinharaja, this uneasy relationship between humans and snakes takes on an almost theatrical intensity. Here, ask any visitor – or even the local villagers – what they fear most, and they will tell you: snakes. For many, they are a living nightmare. The mere mention of the word is often enough to provoke a shudder. Yet the danger, though very real in some cases, is largely overblown. Yes, there are venomous species in Sinharaja – the deadly Ceylon Krait, the elusive Russell's Viper, and the iconic Cobra, whose hooded silhouette is synonymous with lethal elegance. But these dangerous few are outnumbered by countless others that are harmless or only mildly venomous. The villagers, however, are not easily convinced. Even those who know better often fall back on the same refrain: "It's better to be safe than sorry." And so, many snakes are killed indiscriminately, victims of a fear they neither deserve nor earn. This fear, rooted in misunderstanding, deprives these creatures of their rightful place in the ecosystem and perpetuates a cycle of ignorance. It is a loss that ripples through the delicate web of life, a needless tragedy born of misinformation.

• Barnes' cat snake (*Boiga barnesii*)

Sri Lanka krait (*Bungarus ceylonicus*) •

Supplies ran low, and hunger loomed. Medical emergencies became life-threatening. One family told us of a child who had died from a simple infection because they couldn't reach a clinic in time. One evening, as the rain hammered against the thatched roof, the man shared a story that stayed with us. He spoke of a time when the forest was less guarded, when the villagers could gather its bounties freely and live off the land without fear of fines or arrests. Encounters with forest rangers were now a constant threat, as conservation laws often criminalised the villagers' traditional practices. His voice, though steady, carried a note of longing - a quiet grief for a way of life that had slipped away. The absence of electricity meant that evenings were lit only by the dim glow of kerosene lamps. Family gathered close, sharing simple meals and quiet moments. It was during these evenings that we heard their stories - of children walking for hours to reach schools that offered a faint promise of escape, and of dreams that were too fragile to nurture. Parents ensured their children ate dinner first, often going without themselves. After the meal, the woman cleaned up while the man sat in exhausted contemplation, his face etched with both age and the weight of unrelenting labour.

As we lay on mats spread across the floor, we couldn't help but reflect on the resilience of these people. Their lives were an unending series of battles against nature, poverty, and the indifference of a world that barely knew they existed. And yet, they endured. We saw it in the way the woman laughed softly as she prepared their meals, and in the man's pride as he showed us the tools of their trade. As we left the house, retracing our steps along the narrow, slippery trails, we felt the weight of their reality pressing against our hearts. Their lives were hard, yes, but they were also profoundly human, marked by moments of connection and hope. The houses we had once seen from afar, perched on mountaintops and hidden by the forest, were no longer distant mysteries. They were homes filled with love, struggle, and hope. We were finally able to piece together a mosaic of their lives - a story of survival, resilience, and quiet despair.

This is the final page of our journey, yet it feels more like an invitation to yours. Every word and image is the culmination of days spent exploring the most unforgiving corners of this magical place. This is not a story born of convenience; it is one forged in bruises, cuts, and moments that tested our resolve but never our purpose. We did not confine ourselves to the well-trodden paths. These paths, though beautiful, are only the veneer of Sinharaja. Instead, we ventured deep into the inaccessible parts of this rainforest, trekking the rugged slopes of Gongala Mountain, the ethereal mists of Morningside, and distant places few dare to tread. The trails were merciless, marked by steep inclines, slick mud, and dense undergrowth. These places were not easy to reach. In fact, many would consider them impossible. But that was precisely where we needed to go to capture the soul of this remarkable rainforest.

The underwater world brought its own challenges. We spent days diving into freezing waters, enduring the numbing cold to photograph the hidden underwater life that few will ever witness. The waters were icy, and the visibility fleeting. Yet it was worth every shiver to reveal a world of vibrant aquatic life that thrives in the shadows. These were not postcard-perfect moments but raw and unfiltered encounters with a living, breathing ecosystem. Yet, in these places, far from human interference, Sinharaja revealed its true nature: vibrant, fragile, and profoundly alive. The days were gruelling, but the nights held their own kind of magic and their own set of challenges. The forest transformed at night, its secrets unfolding in a symphony of unfamiliar sounds: the chirping of frogs, the rustling of leaves, and the distant calls of nocturnal creatures. It was exhilarating and humbling, but far from easy. Wonder came at a cost. The darkness was absolute, the terrain treacherous. Exposed roots and vines were like death traps, leeches clung to our skin, and every shadow seemed to carry the weight of the unknown. Yet, there was something about those nights that made the forest feel even more alive, and we knew we were capturing moments that few have ever experienced.

Our loyal but battered SUV became stuck countless times, stranded in the rain and mud with no quick way out. We pushed, pulled, and muttered exhausted prayers as the tyres spun uselessly. Every obstacle begged the question, "Why are we doing this?" Why? Because Sinharaja deserves more than admiration - it deserves protection. It is not just a rainforest; it is a sanctuary of life, a fragile masterpiece, and a silent witness to humanity's choices. To leave without telling its story would have been a betrayal-not just of this place but of everything it represents. It was not just about capturing the beauty of the rainforest; it was about showing the world the fragility of this place, and the cost of ignoring its plight. Every photograph and every word in this book came from those moments-both the breathtaking and the brutal. We did not choose the easy path because Sinharaja is not an easy story to tell.

This book is not just ours - it belongs to Sinharaja. It is more than a celebration; it is a call to action. If we can show you even a fraction of the beauty and fragility we witnessed, perhaps you will understand why this place and others like it need saving. We did not write this for accolades or recognition. We wrote it for all rainforests, for the towering trees that have stood for centuries, for the creatures that call them home, and for the underwater lives flourishing unseen. Most of all, we wrote it for future generations who may never experience their wonders if we fail. We believe in the power of storytelling to ignite passion, awaken hearts, and inspire action. Rainforests deserve every effort, every hardship, every ounce of love we can give. Our journey ends here, but Sinharaja's story does not have to. Let these pages remind you of what is at stake and inspire you to act. Whether by raising awareness, supporting conservation, or simply sharing this wonder, every action matters. The future of Sri Lanka's rainforests are uncertain, but together, we can shape it. Thank you for joining us. This is our contribution, born out of muddy boots, sleepless nights, freezing waters, and unwavering hope. We hope it inspires you to care, to act, and to ensure this rainforest survives for generations to come.

Thilak Jayaratne

Thilak, a voracious reader, lifelong scuba diver and amateur naturalist, is a passionate explorer of the natural world and the written word. His love for nature and conservation has led him to co-author several acclaimed books, including *Wild Cats of Sri Lanka, Mannar Unbound, and Sri Lankan Freshwater Fishes*. Through his journeys and writings, Thilak shares not only knowledge but the wonder and reverence he holds for Sri Lanka's extraordinary biodiversity. He does more than record facts – he awakens a love and curiosity for Sri Lanka's landscape and the enduring spirit of the wild. His hope is to leave a lasting legacy for future generations to cherish and protect.

Vimukthi Weeratunga

Vimukthi is a passionate wildlife biologist, deep-sea diver , and nature photographer. He holds a BSc in Wildlife and Fisheries Biology from Oregon State University, USA. He later studied environmental leadership at the University of California, Berkeley. Over the years, he has taken on key conservation roles. These include Head of Biodiversity at IUCN Sri Lanka and Operations Director at the Environmental Foundation Ltd. He is an accomplished writer and communicator. Vimukthi co-authored *Living Free* and compiled a book on *Wilpattu National Park*. He has published numerous impactful scientific articles. Today, he serves as the Manager of Cinnamon Nature Trails, where he leads innovative eco-tourism initiatives.

Nadika Hapuarachchi

After earning an MSc in Information Technology from Charles Sturt University, Australia, Nadika pursued his passion for nature and conservation by completing a Master of Wildlife Management at the University of Otago, New Zealand. A dedicated wildlife and underwater photographer, he has co-authored several acclaimed books, including *Wild Cats of Sri Lanka, Mannar Unbound, Sri Lankan Freshwater Fishes, Sri Lankan Primates,* and the evocative nature-themed book *Life*. His expertise and insights have earned him the honour of serving as a scientific adviser to National Geographic and the BBC, where he has contributed to several ground-breaking wildlife documentaries.

Janaka Gallangoda

Janaka, was a doctor of medicine with a postgraduate degree in Palliative Care from Flinders University, Australia. He seamlessly blended his professional expertise with a profound passion for the natural world. An accomplished wildlife and landscape photographer, and an avid golfer, Janaka found immense joy in capturing the untamed beauty of nature through his lens. His photographs reflected an unyielding passion for the wilderness, blending artistry with a deep respect for the natural world. His legacy lives on through his co-authored works, including the celebrated titles *Wild Cats of Sri Lanka, Mannar Unbound*, and the inspiring nature-focused book *Life*.