Project Update: May 2016

Jan 2016 Update – Wilpattu National Park leopard abundance survey.

Heavy rains in 2014 - 15 flooded the park making many sections inaccessible until the late dry season when we could begin our work. For abundance estimation, we set up 36 remote camera stations within the core of the park. Our cameras elicited the attention of various forest denizens including a baby sloth bear who repeatedly visited one of the stations to play with the camera, his mother waiting patiently on the jeep track. Another time an inquisitive, or possibly camera shy elephant pulled a camera from its tree - chain, lock and all - and walked away carrying it with her trunk (thankfully our other camera captured her thieving, and we recovered it later!). Of course the vast majority of animals completely ignored the cameras and we now have thousands of images – from rusty spotted cats to bull elephants and of course the leopard, to process.

March 2016 Update – Leopard density estimates from Wilpattu National Park.

We were thrilled with the data we were able to collect from the remote cameras. After the daunting task of sieving through thousands of images to enable a spatially explicit capture – recapture analysis, we were left with 49 individual leopards detected during the course of the 14-week survey. General patterns of resident home range distribution were also determined from repeat photo captures and clearly showed the classic leopard social structure with larger adult male ranges overlapping and encompassing several smaller female ranges. Prey analysis of photos is on-going due to the quantity of data, but our separate prey abundance surveys have already shed light on the availability of key prey resources such as spotted and barking deer. This new predator and prey data provides another piece of the ecological jigsaw which will allow us to more effectively conserve and manage the endangered Sri Lankan leopard.