Horton Plains and its ecology

by Manjula Fernando

The morning hills were developed into a chilly mist and the sunlight was streaming down on the land plains, overpowering the chill, curving a spectacular view before our eyes. These are the first impressions one experiences in the Horton Plains, one of our exotic natural heritage sites.

The hazardous route to the Horton Plains on twisting roads, surrounded by steep mountain slopes was not a match for the breath taking scenery around the area and we were captivated by the beauty of the place. Horton Plains, named after Sir Robert Willis, Horton who was the governor of Ceylon during the period 1835 to 1837 is on a plateau on the Central Highlands of Sri Lanka. It occupies approximately 1646 hectares and the elevation of the plateau ranges from 2100 to 2300 feet. Travelling over the magnificent Horton Plains is via Kithulgala in the south-east and Thuparamakanda in the north-east. Kithulgala at an elevation of 7300 feet is the second highest vegetation in Sri Lanka while Thuparamakanda a more mapped and larger mountain is at an elevation of 7741 feet and is the third highest mountain in Sri Lanka.

Species like Kandana, Karandana, Karama, Kadu Dewala and Bambu typical to monsoon forests create the forest canopy of the Horton Plains. While species like Ahlan, standing forest sub canopy. Hanging in clusters from the tops of the trees are the peacocks or more known as male's beak, a striking feature of the mountain forest. The forest vegetation surrounding the plains acts as a water reservoir for streams that flow into the Anthurva and other irrigation channels in the area. Tributaries of three major rivers, the Mahaweli, Uma and Walawu origins from within the region and Bhelela Goya, a small stream funding the Walawu, turns over a cliff creating a large and spectacular waterfall. This area therefore plays a major role in irrigation and hydropower generation.

Authorities concerned, who understood the ecological importance of this region, declared this area a National Reserve in 1989 and it was elevated to the status of a National Park in 1998, the only one of its kind in the highlands of Sri Lanka. But sadly, Horton Plains, a mecca of immense forest and war parasas, gentle is under the threat of deforestation due to its diverse and rich ecosystem.

The introduction of ornamental plants during colonial times and the organised paddy cultivation has only contributed to the devastation of the native vegetation in Horton Plains. With European ornamental plant introduced by the British during the last century has been a big threat to the endemic species of the Horton Plains. This shows which has the yellow and white flowered species to the edges of its branches that are full of thorny leaves is breeding the grassland. It has a high resilience which makes it difficult to destroy them. The park wardens of the Horton Plains, Bishek Tissana explained in frustration.

Visitors to the Horton Plains can now witness the extent of damage caused to the grasslands by this plant. A considerable stretch of rolling grasslands has been replaced by this introduced species and Sambur and other anti.

The Horton Plains

Hanging in clusters, the monsoon known as old man’s beard