



International Student Experiences

The Great Elephant Project

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The Great Elephant Project

Focus: Elephants
Location: Sri Lanka

Arrival & Starting Point: Colombo

Situated on the outskirts of Wasgamuwa National Park, The Great Elephant Project invites volunteers to aid the conservation of one of Sri Lanka's most prized animals. While this gentle giant has long been respected throughout the nation, it has also been the cause of much frustration. Over the course of the past century, human and elephant territories have begun to merge, resulting in conflict between both parties. Tragically, around 90% of Sri Lanka's elephant populations have vanished in the space of 100 years, and their odds of survival are not much greater today.



It is thought that around 200 elephants are killed annually as a result of the human-elephant conflict, with an estimated 80 humans also losing their lives. It is evident that the conflict has surpassed its tipping point, which is why the team behind The Great Elephant Project are so determined to restore harmony between animal and man.

As a volunteer, you will support the project's tireless efforts to soothe these issues, aiding numerous on-site activities and initiatives within the local community. From monitoring wild elephants in their natural habitats to educating the community's youngest members, there are a range of important activities which require your assistance, making your time here both valuable and rewarding.

Sri Lanka is a fantastic destination in which to aid conservation efforts, owing in part to its wealth of fascinating wildlife species. In addition to spotting elephants, you might just catch a glimpse of the country's brilliant bird species, boars, deer, or even the elusive leopard. These sightings, and your time spent alongside the friendly local community, are sure to leave you with memories to last a lifetime – so why not consider getting involved today?

Activities

Elephant Observation & Data Logging



You will spend most of your afternoons located in an area known as the Elephant Corridor, or on the littoral plains of irrigation reservoirs known locally as tanks. Wild elephants pass through this area on a regular basis, so you will spend your time here on the lookout for them! In the incredible moment that you witness a wild elephant, you will take note of their numbers, age, size, sex and any other significant physical features. The purpose of this is to collect data on the spatial and temporal distribution of passing elephants, observing how villagers and elephants interact within the area. While waiting for elephants, keep an eye out for animals such as peacocks, mugger crocodiles, water buffalo, macaque monkeys, leopards, and an array of birds. This information is vital for understanding the health of the incredible Sri Lankan ecosystem.

Wasgamuwa National Park

Perhaps one of the most exciting activities of the trip is the safari you will take through Wasgamuwa National Park. The park is a protected area of forest with ample opportunity to observe an array of magnificent species in their natural habitat. Here, you will encounter an abundance of wild elephants of all ages, from newborn babies, to the matriarch of the herd, right through to a bachelor pack of bulls! Other species present here include wild hares, boars, various species of deer, sloth bears, countless bird species and, if you're lucky, you may even catch a glimpse of a wild leopard!



Sustainable Land Use

Agriculture is one of the main contributing factors in human-elephant conflicts, with millions of pounds worth of crops being damaged each year. This project has established several sustainable projects alongside the local communities in order to create harmony between humans and elephants. One example of this would be 'Project Orange': after having learnt that elephants are averse to citrus, the project and local community took to planting orange trees around the village as to deter the animals from entering the area and causing damage. As well as reducing human-elephant conflict around the village, the orange trees also provided a viable income for the locals, as the oranges themselves were able to be harvested and sold on. You will help to monitor and evaluate similar systems put in place to protect the communities from elephant raids. Student involvement is particularly appreciated here, with your presence motivating locals to continue to work with the project staff in the quest to resolve human-animal conflict.



Activities

Fence Monitoring

Your group will check the state of the solar powered electric fences which have been erected to stop elephants from entering villages. Once checked, their conditions will be relayed to the local fence committees who maintain and operate them. This process also enables you and the project staff to see what can go wrong with the protective measures, so that their design and management can be improved.



Trail Transects & Water Reservoir Monitoring

During these activities, you will spend time looking along a trail and searching around the water reservoirs outside the national park for the presence of elephant dung. While not the most glamorous of tasks, the analysis of elephant dung proves extremely insightful when it comes to determining the eating patterns of an elephant which, in turn, may tell us where they have been before. The size, age and gender of an elephant can also be determined in this way, and the location of dung across the trail may illustrate the extent of risk of conflict in the area.



Camera/Sand Traps & Species Scat Analysis

Camera traps offer a deeper insight into the behaviour of species here, and these traps are designed to pick up movements of all wildlife in the area, such as leopards, boars and elephants. You will help to set up these camera traps, and will also work to establish 'sand traps' in different parts of the forest. This activity involves preparing sand beds on the forest floor to collect various pug marks of diverse species, including a range of carnivores, omnivores and herbivores. As part of the carnivore studies, you will assist with spotting tracks, scats, scratches, burrows, dens and hair samples to gain more knowledge on the species found here.



Bird Diversity & Abundance

You will aid in the long-term study of birds in the area, including both indigenous and migratory species found in the habitats of Wasgamuwa. It is important to monitor the different species of birds, their breeding, and abundance so the team can take the most appropriate action to conserve them. You will also assist the project scientists in collecting data on the density and diversity of birds visiting paddy fields, their spatial and temporal distribution, feeding behaviour, and foraging strategies, as well as assessing the agricultural habitats used by different species and their impacts on agriculture.



Activities

Teaching English

Every morning, 3 learners will be selected to visit one of the local schools to teach English to the children to help them prepare for their exams. You will be working with children across a range of different ages, from early primary school years to high school level. The children may seem shy at first, but when the lesson is over, they certainly enjoy playing games with volunteers! This is also a great opportunity to educate them about elephant conservation in their surrounding environment, and may help to inform the next generation of the community about the importance of environmental protection.



The Ele-Friendly Bus

Another initiative that is in place is the Ele-Friendly Bus, a free service which transports children to school safely through an elephant corridor. Often, young children have to walk a fair distance to school, with their journey leading them through an elephant corridor where the animals frequently visit. Understandably, local parents were extremely concerned for the safety of their children, but with the help of donations from volunteers, the project established the 'elebus' system, and this seems to be proving very successful in avoiding human-elephant conflict. While this is not a set activity in the itinerary, volunteers are welcome to ride along! The drivers leave around 6am to begin the school run, so if you would like to join, just let a member of staff know the night before and make sure you get to the meeting point bright and early!



Free Time

If you are joining the project for two weeks or more, you may have weekends off as free time. Sri Lanka has an array of cultural gems that are just waiting to be discovered, such as the cultural triangle, the gorgeous location of Ella, and pristine white sandy beaches in the north.

The weekends are an opportunity to explore more of this beautiful country in all of its natural glory with many rocks and mountains to be climbed, rivers and waterfalls to explore, and ancient ruins to be discovered.

There is also a small town just a short tuk-tuk ride away, should you wish to do some souvenir shopping.



Itinerary

Below is an example of a 2-week itinerary on the project. [Click here to view the full itinerary.](#)

Day 1

After arriving into Colombo airport, a project representative will greet you and transfer you to the Elephant Project.

This is a 5 hours transfer, so we will stop at local villages, restaurants and places of interest on the way.

Evening – arrive at the Project.

Days 2-15

After breakfast, students head straight out to go in search of wild elephants.

The rest of your time on the project will see the group divided into two teams for various activities, including jungle trekking and community projects all with a focus of elephant conservation at its core.

Weekends are designated for leisure, giving you the freedom to further explore the wonders of Sri Lanka or simply relax at the field house.

Day 16

Today will be your last day, so after saying goodbye to the project staff and your fellow volunteers, you will depart the project site.

Your departure transfer is included - transfer back to Colombo!



Accommodation

Whilst on the project, you will stay in a rustic field house which can accommodate up to 30 people at one time. The field house is basic yet practical, with a high roof and partitioned walls allowing a cool breeze to flow through and offering views of the natural surroundings. Rooms are shared on a same-sex basis, with enough bunk beds to accommodate 8-16 volunteers per room. There are a number of modern bathrooms, which are also split by gender, each featuring western toilets, showers and sinks. There is only cold water for showering and washing; however, the water is usually a comfortable temperature as the pipes are in the sun most of the day. Electric fans, mosquito nets, pillows, and clean bed sheets are provided, but please remember to bring your own towel.



Food & Drink

Three fresh meals per day are prepared for you at the volunteer field house. Food is prepared in the local style, but if you are not too keen on spicy food then there are always plain options available. Most meals will be vegetarian, consisting of dhal, vegetable curry, rice, noodles fresh fruit and vegetables. Breakfast could be toast, bananas and other seasonal fresh fruit, while lunch is typically a light meal. An evening meal may include many of the same dishes served at lunchtime. Western foods and snacks are not available at the field house, but there are many kiosk type shops situated around the region and volunteers are free to stop to get some snacks and refreshments between activities should they wish.

Fresh water is provided by the project.



What's Included

- All meals
- Accommodation
- Arrival airport transfer
- Transfer to the project site
- A trip to Wasgamuwa National Park
- English-speaking project coordinator
- Flights
- Vaccinations
- Visas
- Cultural activities
- Departure transfer on your final day

Learner Reviews

Emily

"Being able to witness and understand the complex and harsh reality of the human-elephant conflict whilst seeing herds of elephants nearly every day was incredible."



Hollis

"My favourite moment was when we visited Wasgamuwa National Park, where we saw 150 wild Asian elephants!"



Mary

"My time on this project has been the most memorable, exciting and worthwhile two months of my life. The staff and my fellow volunteers have been so welcoming and I immediately felt at home."

