

Horton Plains National Park

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Horton Plains, a beautiful gift of nature, is situated at the eastern boundary of the main range of the anchor shaped central hills of Sri Lanka, between latitudes 6°.47 N. and 6°.50 N. longitudes 80°.46 and 80°.51 east. At 2100–2300 metres above sea level, it is Sri Lanka's most elevated plain. Kirigal Potta (2395 metres) and Totupala Kanda (2359 metres) are two mountain peaks located in this Natural Park.

History does not record any information about the Horton Plains other than that it served as a hunting-ground. It is believed that Sir Robert Horton named the plains after him in 1836 during the British occupation. In January that year he had made arrangements to tour Nuwara-Eliya and meet his friend the Rate Mahattaya of Sabaragamuwa. They decided to meet each other in some place between Nuwara-Eliya and Ratnapura. This place was Mahaweli or Mahatenne (Great Plain). River Mahaweli originates in the Horton National Park. Therefore it is possible to presume that the river took its name from the place 'Mahaweli'.

In 1969 Horton Plains National Park was declared a natural reserve for the first time. This plain 3160 hectares in extent is bounded on the east by the Samanala Kanda Peak Wilderness Sanctuary. When the necessity to protect this area arose was raised to the status of a National Park in 1988.

Records of weather or climatic conditions of the plains has not been kept for any considerable length of time. Although there is a regular incidence of rainfall throughout the year, January and February are generally dry months. During this season midday temperature is about C 27°, and the night temperature C 5° less. In 1971 Muller Dombis and Perera have recorded an average February temperature of C 12°. In February and March dew forms on the grass in early mornings. In the rainy season there is mist throughout the day. The strong winds and the ceaseless drizzle which fall during the South-West Monsoons is a climatic condition not experienced in most other parts of the country.

In 1961 seed potato was cultivated in parts of the Horton Plains. But due to the efforts of environmentalists it was possible to put a stop to this. However the environmental destruction caused during the 9 years have created many problems within the National Park.

There are two main kinds of vegetation in this Park now. They are:

1. Montane Grassland,
2. Evergreen Cloud Forest.

The lower parts of the grassland is marshy. Small streams and springs flow slowly over this portion. In the marshes and forests are present several species of grass of varying stages of growth. In February and March particularly, fires occur due to human interference. This happened on a large scale in 1980, 1980. These fires affect more seriously the large trees at the edge of the grassland. When the rains set in during April the grasslands revive quickly.

In the slow moving revulets many kinds of Kekatiya (*Aponogetova jacobseuii*), Diya Pasi, Beraliya Pasi (*Ntricularia* sp) grow. On the banks of the revulets and brooks thick bushes of bamboo (*chimanobambusa devisifolia*) grow. Near the marshes grow different kinds of grass. The more prominent are *Gavnolia mutica*, *Denmistaedtia seabva*, *Ericanlon* sp., *Exacume maeravithum* grasses.

The chief varieties of grasses that grow in the main grasslands are *Arundinella villosa*, and *Chrysopogon Zeylanicus*. Fire resistant Maha Ratmal trees (*Rhododendron araboreum*) grow interspersed on the grasslands. Hence these grasslands resemble the Savannas. Various kinds of shrubs grow on the road clearings. Among them are kinds of *Bovitiya* (*Osbeckia* sp.)

Among the large trees of the rain forests can be identified 57 different species of trees. Of these 29 are peculiar to Sri Lanka. Hence in the Horton Plains National Park's evergreen upland forests about 50.87% of these varieties can be seen. Only in Sri Lanka is this possible. And nowhere else. The chief plants in this forest are Kurundu (*Cinnamomum ovalitolum*), Karan Damba (*Syzygium revolutum*), Keena (*Culophyllum walkervii*), Maharatmal (*Rhododendron arboreum*) etc.

The beauty of this forest is enhanced by a kind of lichens (*Usenea barbata*) that hangs from their branches like beards of old men. Numerous varieties of orchids grow on these trees. A special feature of the environment here is the total absence of palms.

Large mammals except the elephant inhabit the Horton Plains. Nowhere in Sri Lanka could one see so many elks roaming about as on the Horton Plains National Park. There are herds comprising 50 animals at times. The spotted deer is absent here, but the Welimuwa (a kind of deer) and Meeminna are a common sight.

A large number of characteristically Sri Lankan animals could easily be seen here. Of the 21 characteristic Sri Lankan bird varieties 17 could be found on the Horton Plains.

The special identity of its environment is exhibited by the presence of Ang Katussa (*Ceratophora stoddarti*), Maha Wandura (Highland Bear Monkey). Several species of insects and animals have been discovered in this National Park. Its zoological phenomena may be treated under a different heading.

Today the Horton Plains National Park is a reserve which protects our wildlife and plants. Large water resources like the Mahaweli and the fate of our hydro electric power plants depend on the catchment area of the Park.

The catchment of rivers Mahaweli, Walawe, Kelani, Belihul Oya, Uma Oya and Bagawantalawa Oya which joins the Castlereigh reservoir is based in this National Park. Hence it should be protected not only as a wildlife and plant zone but also as a catchment.

At present there are two environment problems in the National Park. On some parts there is a forest die back and the great increase of the number of elks. After systematic research a speedy solution should be found for the problems.

The scarcity of pure drinking water is a major worldwide environment problem now. One of Sri Lanka's foremost problems is the protection of this National Park.



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