

Tour Report

Sri Lanka – Blue Whales, Dolphins & Leopards

10 - 23 March 2023

Long-snouted spinner dolphin



Sri Lankan leopard



Blue whale



Long-snouted spinner dolphin



Compiled by Susantha Weerappuli

Day 1: Travel from home (Northern Ireland/UK)**Friday 10 March 2023****Day 2: Colombo/Kalpitiya****Saturday 11 March 2023**

The group arrived at Colombo Airport early in the afternoon. As soon we left the airplane, we were hit with the warm temperatures of tropical Sri Lanka. For most of the group, it was quite a contrast from their colder home climate.

The drive to the Blue Whale Resort at Kalpitiya was an eventful and enjoyable one. The first half of the journey took us through small towns full of bustling traffic, then we headed out into the beautiful countryside. We encountered a wide variety of birds, with particular highlights being blue-tailed bee-eater, Indian roller, cattle egret, whiskered tern, Caspian terns with massive red bills, and common redshank – which are overwintering at this time of the year in Sri Lanka. A small troop of Toque Macaques, an endemic species to Sri Lanka, were also seen by the side of the road, eating berries from a fruiting tree.

We stopped at a local shop to taste our first cup of Ceylon tea and enjoy a much-needed leg stretch before continuing our journey and arriving at the hotel just before dark. We got checked in and agreed to reconvene for dinner that evening. Supper was an enjoyable experience with lots of laughter and plenty of animated discussions about the possibility of seeing dolphins the next day.

Day 3: Kalpitiya**Sunday 12 March 2023**

Starting the day early with a cup of coffee, we eagerly headed to the beach to catch our boat. We set to sea full of hope, but as there had not been any dolphin sightings for a few days I was also a little apprehensive.

The first hour was pretty quiet, but then we hit rush hour. Boats that had been cruising around in search of dolphins all started heading in one direction. Soon the fiesta began and several pods of dolphins appeared in the vicinity – we estimated there were 200-300 individuals. An incredible sighting!

We identified them as long-snouted spinner dolphins – a very acrobatic species. The group watched in awe as the dolphins threw themselves into the air, twisting around several times. It was such a beautiful encounter. On the way back to the shore, we also had two separate encounters with green turtles.

After a joyful morning, we tucked into a late breakfast. We had all thoroughly enjoyed the very first day of the tour.

Day 4: Kalpitiya**Monday 13 March 2023**

On our second day, we saw plenty of terns, especially little terns, which were feeding voraciously on shoals of fish on the water's surface. Initially, we didn't have much luck with dolphin sightings, but just as we were resigning ourselves to a dolphin-less day, the skipper revved the engine and steered our boat into deeper water.

There they were. For a second consecutive day, we were treated to excellent sightings of long-snouted spinner dolphins. This time the encounters were much closer and lasted longer.

On our way home, we saw a mating pair of green turtles.

Day 5: Kalpitiya/Udawalawe**Tuesday 14 March 2023**

We left Kalpitiya right after breakfast and began the long journey to Udawalawe. Our route took us through the countryside again and into different climatic zones.

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On the way, we stopped to do some birdwatching, sighting Asian woolly-necked stork, Asian openbill stork, black-headed Ibis, and some egrets that were feeding in a recently harvested rice field. Next, we encountered a pair of crested serpent eagles sitting on an electric post just by the roadside, which seemed to pose for us while we took pictures. A short while later, we saw a grizzled giant squirrel with a big bushy tail running along a wire parallel to the main road.

It was quite astonishing for the group to see such a vast number of man-made tanks (reservoirs) scattered around the country. Since ancient times, these have been constructed to preserve monsoon rainwater for agricultural use, simultaneously enriching the habitats for biodiversity.

We also stopped at the city of Ratnapura - the jewel of Sri Lanka - to visit the gem mines. The miners in Sri Lanka still use a traditional method called 'pit-head mining' and tunnelling using basic hand tools, rather than big machines. These traditional methods are less harmful to the environment.

We reached Udawalawe in the late afternoon and went to bed early.

Day 6: Udawalawe National Park/Tissamaharama

Wednesday 15 March 2023

We left the hotel early, laden with picnic breakfasts, and headed to Udawalawe National Park.

On arrival, two big bull elephants were blocking the entrance for the safari vehicles, so we had to wait for them to move away. The larger bull was in musth and was letting off a strong smell. Udawalawe National Park is known for all-male herds or bull pairs.

Once inside the park, we had a wide variety of incredible wildlife encounters. Our highlights included: changeable hawk-eagle, Malabar-pied hornbill, orange-breasted green pigeon, painted stork, blue-faced malkoha, yellow-wattled lapwing, grey-bellied cuckoo and white-bellied sea-eagle. We also sighted female elephants with their calves. After the park visit, we started our journey to Tissamaharama.

In the afternoon, we went birdwatching at the nearby wetlands. It was a very productive session which yielded a roosting colony of Indian flying foxes, spot-billed pelican, Sri Lanka green pigeon, baya weaver, grey-headed swamphen, mugger crocodile, and several other bird species.

Day 7: Tissamaharama/Lunugamyehera National Park

Thursday 16 March 2023

We visited Lunugamyehera National Park, taking a picnic breakfast and lunch with us. This park is the fifth block of Yala National Park, which was recently developed for visitors. At the time of writing it was not as well known, so we enjoyed a peaceful day.

Our species highlights were: brown fish owl, jungle owlet, grey-headed fish eagle, grey langur, spotted deer, Asian elephant and Indian pitta.

Day 8: Tissamaharama/Vala National Park/Koggala

Friday 17 March 2023

We visited Vala National Park early in the morning and enjoyed another picnic breakfast.

At the very first waterhole, we saw a huge tusker feeding grass in the water, along with a big mugger crocodile which was basking on the shore. A short while later, we saw a sloth bear moving slowly through the bushes.

We didn't have to drive for long before we met a congregation of safari vehicles eagerly trying to see something up in a nearby tree. To our surprise, it was the rotting carcass of a spotted deer. This must have been the work of Yala's apex predator: the Sri Lankan leopard. We scanned around for the culprit. He was fast asleep, well hidden on a thick branch in a nearby tree.

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The rest of the morning safari was full of wildlife sightings. We encountered wild buffalo, wild boar, spotted deer, grey langur, land monitor, and many species of birds.

After lunch at a nearby restaurant, we started our journey to Koggala. On the way, we visited the famous Veherahena Buddhist Temple, which is well-known for its colossal Buddha statue and beautiful paintings depicting the life stories of the Buddha.

We checked into our hotel late in the afternoon.

Day 9: Koggala/Mirissa

Saturday 18 March 2023

We set off early from Mirissa Harbour for our whale watching excursion.

The first hour or so was quiet, but then a pod of long-snouted spinner dolphins started to show off their acrobatics. As soon as their show was over, a Bryde's whale started blowing in the vicinity. It was a beautiful sighting. The whale moved slowly, appearing for short intervals to feed close to the surface.

On the way back to the shore, we witnessed a small pod of bottlenose dolphins and a green turtle. We also saw great crested, lesser crested, gull-billed and white-winged terns.

Day 10: Koggala/Mirissa

Sunday 19 March 2023

On our second day of whale watching we had further sightings of long-snouted spinner dolphin, Bryde whale, green turtle and various terns.

Day 11: Koggala/Mirissa

Monday 20 March 2023

On the third day of the whale watching, the sea was not very helpful! It was stormy and choppy. We still witnessed two Bryde whales, but the big waves breaking in front of the boat meant it wasn't very easy to see them.

In the afternoon, we visited a Tea Factory and its small estate, within a short distance of the hotel. We enjoyed a nice cuppa and bought some Ceylon Tea.

Day 12: Koggala/Mirissa

Tuesday 21 March 2023

This was our fourth day and last day of whale watching excursions in Koggala. We were all hoping for a blue whale to round off the trip.

The sea was extremely flat and calm. Not far from the shore, we saw the spinner dolphins again. As the sea was flat and the day was bright, we could see the dolphins even a couple of metres below the surface as they swam with or across the boat. Such a delight.

Then the Bryde whale appeared. Again, it was a very close encounter.

Finally, our main goal was achieved! A blue whale made its presence known. We could see the spout - a very tall, vertical column of water in the distance. Wow! The sighting was a delight for everyone in the boat.

The blue whale, the largest animal ever to have lived on earth, was right in front of us, showing beautifully on the flat and calm sea. What a nice way to accomplish all our targets and end a successful tour.

In the afternoon, we visited the UNESCO World Heritage Site Galle Fort, which was built when the Dutch ruled Sri Lanka.

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Day 13: Koggala/Niwala River/Katunayake**Wednesday 22 March 2023**

After breakfast, we took a boat ride on the Nilwala River, which is known for its population of estuarine crocodiles. We caught sight of a few individuals, including some young crocodiles, as well as a variety of birds and a day roost of Indian flying foxes.

After the boat ride, we made our way back to the hotel for our last night in Sri Lanka.

Day 14: Departure**Thursday 23 March 2023**

We flew home after breakfast.

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Checklist for Blue Whales, Dolphins & Leopards



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9	Day 10	Day 11	Day 12
	BIRDS													
1	Cotton pygmy goose	<i>Nettapus coromandelianus</i>					✓	✓	✓					
2	Sri Lanka junglefowl	<i>Gallus lafayettii</i>					✓	✓	✓					
3	Indian peafowl	<i>Pavo cristatus</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓
4	Painted stork	<i>Mycteria leucocephala</i>	✓				✓	✓	✓					
5	Asian openbill	<i>Anastomus oscitans</i>				✓		✓	✓					
6	Woolly-necked stork	<i>Ciconia episcopus</i>				✓								
7	Lesser adjutant	<i>Leptoptilos javanicus</i>						✓						
8	Black-headed ibis	<i>Threskiornis melanocephalus</i>	✓			✓		✓	✓					
9	Eurasian spoonbill	<i>Plata/ea leucorodia</i>					✓							
10	Striated heron	<i>Butorides striata</i>		✓	✓									
11	Indian pond heron	<i>Ardeola grayii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓
12	Eastern cattle egret	<i>Bubulcus coromandus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓
13	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓				✓	✓	✓					✓
14	Purple heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>	✓				✓	✓	✓					✓
15	Great egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓					
16	Intermediate egret	<i>Egretta intermedia</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓					✓
17	Little egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓				✓	
18	Spot-billed pelican	<i>Pelecanus philippensis</i>					✓	✓	✓					✓
19	Little cormorant	<i>Microcarbo niger</i>					✓	✓	✓					✓
20	Indian cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax fuscicollis</i>	✓				✓	✓						
21	Oriental darter	<i>Anhinga melanogaster</i>					✓	✓	✓					
22	Crested serpent eagle	<i>Spilornis cheela</i>				✓		✓	✓					✓
23	Changeable hawk-eagle	<i>Nisaetus cirrhatus</i>						✓	✓		✓			✓
24	Booted eagle	<i>Hieraetus pennatus</i>					✓							
25	Shikra	<i>Accipiter badius</i>			✓	✓		✓						✓
26	Brahminy kite	<i>Haliastur indus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓

27	White-bellied sea eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucogaster</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓				✓	✓
28	Grey-headed fish eagle	<i>Haliaeetus ichthyaetus</i>						✓	✓					
29	White-breasted waterhen	<i>Amaurornis phoenicurus</i>						✓	✓					✓
30	Western swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>					✓							
31	Common moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>					✓							
32	Black-winged stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	✓			✓	✓		✓					
33	Yellow-wattled lapwing	<i>Vanellus malobaricus</i>					✓							
34	Red-wattled lapwing	<i>Vanellus indicus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	
35	Little ringed plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>							✓					
36	Greater painted-snipe	<i>Rostratula benghalensis</i>					✓							
37	Pheasant-tailed jacana	<i>Hydrophasianus chirurgus</i>								✓				
38	Eurasian curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		✓	✓									
39	Common redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓										
40	Marsh sandpiper	<i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>	✓											
41	Wood sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>					✓							
42	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		✓	✓		✓							
43	Little stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>	✓											
44	Curlew sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>	✓											
45	Brown-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus brunnicephalus</i>	✓											
46	Gull-billed tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
47	Caspian tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>	✓			✓								
48	Lesser crested tern	<i>Thalasseus bengalensis</i>		✓	✓	✓				✓	✓			
49	Sandwich tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>											✓	✓
50	Little tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>		✓	✓					✓	✓			✓
51	Saunders's tern	<i>Sternula saundersi</i>			✓						✓			
52	Bridled tern	<i>Onychoprion anaethetus</i>									✓		✓	
53	Common tern	<i>Sterno hirundo</i>									✓			
54	Whiskered tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
55	White-winged tern	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
56	Rock dove	<i>Columbo livia</i>				✓	✓	✓						✓
57	Spotted dove	<i>Spilopelia chinensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓

58	Orange-breasted green pigeon	<i>Treron bicinctus</i>					✓	✓	✓					
59	Sri Lanka green pigeon	<i>Treron pompadora</i>					✓	✓	✓					
60	Green imperial pigeon	<i>Ducula aenea</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓					✓
61	Greater coucal	<i>Centropus sinensis</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓				✓	
62	Blue-faced malkoha	<i>Phaenicophaeus viridirostris</i>					✓							
63	Asian keel	<i>Eudynamis scolopaceus</i>		✓	✓								✓	
64	Banded bay cuckoo	<i>Cacomantis sonneratii</i>												
65	Grey-bellied cuckoo	<i>Cacomantis passerinus</i>					✓							
66	Brown fish owl	<i>Ketupa zeylonensis</i>							✓					
67	Jungle owlet	<i>Glaucidium radiatum</i>							✓					
68	Crested treeswift	<i>Hemiprocne coronata</i>							✓	✓				
69	Indian swiftlet	<i>Aerodramus unicolor</i>							✓				✓	✓
70	Asian palm swift	<i>Cypsiurus balasiensis</i>		✓	✓								✓	✓
71	Little swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>							✓					
72	Indian roller	<i>Coracias benghalensis</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓						
73	Stork-billed kingfisher	<i>Pelargopsis capensis</i>							✓					
74	White-throated kingfisher	<i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓
75	Common kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		✓	✓				✓	✓				✓
76	Pied kingfisher	<i>Cery/e rudis</i>							✓					
77	Green bee-eater	<i>Merops orientalis</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓					
78	Blue-tailed bee-eater	<i>Merops philippinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓
79	Chestnut-headed bee-eater	<i>Merops leschenaulti</i>							✓	✓			✓	
80	Eurasian hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓					
81	Malabar pied hornbill	<i>Anthracoceros coronatus</i>					✓	✓	✓					✓
82	Sri Lanka grey hornbill	<i>Ocyrceros gingalensis</i>	✓						✓	✓				
83	Brown-headed barbet	<i>Psilopogon zeylanicus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓
84	Coppersmith barbet	<i>Psilopogon haemacephalus</i>					✓	✓						
85	Brown-capped pygmy woodpecker	<i>Yungipicus nanus</i>							✓					
86	Yellow-crowned woodpecker	<i>Leiopicus mahrattensis</i>							✓					

87	Black-rumped flameback	<i>Dinopium benghalense</i>			✓			✓						
88	Plum-headed parakeet	<i>Psittacula cyanocephala</i>					✓	✓						
89	Alexandrine parakeet	<i>Psittacula eupatria</i>						✓	✓					
90	Rose-ringed parakeet	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓
91	Indian pitta	<i>Pitta brachyura</i>						✓						
92	Common iora	<i>Aegithina tiphia</i>						✓	✓					
93	Marshall's iora	<i>Aegithina nigrolutea</i>					✓	✓						
94	Black-headed cuckooshrike	<i>Coracina melanoptera</i>												✓
95	Brown shrike	<i>Lanius cristatus</i>					✓	✓	✓					
96	Black-hooded oriole	<i>Oriolus xanthonus</i>			✓	✓		✓	✓					✓
97	White-bellied drongo	<i>Dicrurus caerulescens</i>									✓		✓	✓
98	White-brewed fantail	<i>Rhipidura aureo/a</i>						✓						
99	Indian paradise flycatcher	<i>Terpsiphone paradisi</i>					✓	✓	✓					
100	House crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓	✓
101	Indian jungle crow	<i>Corvus culminatus</i>					✓	✓	✓					
102	Jerdon's bush lark	<i>Mirafra affinis</i>					✓	✓	✓					
103	Red-vented bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓
104	White-brewed bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus luteolus</i>					✓	✓	✓					
105	Barn swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					
106	Sri Lanka swallow	<i>Cecropis hyperythra</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓					✓
107	Blyth's reed warbler	<i>Acrocephalus dumetorum</i>					✓							
108	Zitting cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>					✓							
109	Grey-breasted prinia	<i>Prinia hodgsonii</i>					✓							
110	Jungle prinia	<i>Prinia sylvatica</i>					✓							
111	Ashy prinia	<i>Prinia socio/is</i>						✓						
112	Plain prinia	<i>Prinia inornata</i>						✓	✓					✓
113	Common tailorbird	<i>Orthotomus sutorius</i>		✓	✓		✓		✓					✓
114	Yellow-billed babbler	<i>Turdoides affinis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓
115	Southern hill myna	<i>Gracula indica</i>									✓			
116	Common myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	
117	Rosy starling	<i>Pastor roseus</i>					✓							
118	Indian robin	<i>Copsychus fulicatus</i>					✓	✓	✓					

119	Oriental magpie-robin	<i>Copsychus saularis</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓			✓		
120	White-rumped shama	<i>Copsychus malabaricus</i>						✓						
121	Purple-rumped sunbird	<i>Leptocoma zeylonica</i>			✓			✓						
123	Purple sunbird	<i>Cinnyris asiaticus</i>			✓			✓						
124	Loten's sunbird	<i>Cinnyris lotenius</i>					✓	✓					✓	
125	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>											✓	
126	Streaked weaver	<i>Ploceus manyar</i>							✓					
127	Baya weaver	<i>Ploceus phifippinus</i>					✓							
128	White-rumped munia	<i>Lonchura striata</i>					✓							
129	Scaly-breasted munia	<i>Lonchura punctulata</i>			✓			✓	✓					
130	Tricolored munia	<i>Lonchura malacca</i>						✓						
131	Forest wagtail	<i>Dendronanthus indicus</i>						✓	✓					
132	Grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			✓									
133	Paddyfield pipit	<i>Anthus rufulus</i>			✓		✓							
	MAMMALS													
1	Toque macaque	<i>Macaca sinica</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓						
2	Grey langur	<i>Semnopithecus (Presbytis) entellus</i>					✓	✓	✓					
3	Purple-faced leaf monkey	<i>Trachypithecus (Presbytis) vetulus</i>										✓		
4	Golden jackal	<i>Canis aureus</i>						✓						
5	Sloth bear	<i>Melursus ursinus</i>							✓					
6	Grey mongoose	<i>Herpestes edwardsii</i>				✓								
7	Ruddy mongoose	<i>Herpestes smithii</i>					✓	✓	✓					
8	Stripe-necked mongoose	<i>Herpestes vitticollis</i>						✓						
9	Brown mongoose	<i>Herpestes fuseus</i>											✓	
10	Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus kotiya</i>							✓					
11	Asian elephant	<i>Elephas maximus</i>					✓	✓	✓					
12	Wild boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>						✓	✓					
13	Muntjac	<i>Muntiacus muntjac</i>						✓						
14	Spotted deer	<i>Cervus axis</i>						✓	✓					
15	Water buffalo	<i>Bubalus Bubalus</i>					✓	✓	✓					

16	Indian palm squirrel	<i>Funambulus palmarum</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓
17	Grizzled giant squirrel	<i>Ratufa macroura</i>				✓		✓						
18	Indian hare-black-naped hare	<i>Lepus nigricollis</i>						✓						
19	Indian flying fox	<i>Pteropus gigantea</i>					✓		✓		✓			✓
20	Blue whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>											✓	
21	Bryde's whale	<i>Balaenoptera edeni</i>								✓	✓	✓	✓	
22	Bottlenose dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>								✓				
23	Spinner dolphin	<i>Stenella muelleri</i>		✓	✓					✓	✓	✓	✓	
	REPTILES AND OTHER													
1	Hump-nosed viper	<i>Hypnale hypnale</i>					✓							
2	Bengal (Land) monitor	<i>Varanus bengalensis</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	
3	Asian water monitor	<i>Varanus salvator</i>				✓								
4	Oriental (Common) garden lizard	<i>Calotes versicolor</i>		✓										
5	Estuarine crocodile	<i>Crocodylus porosus</i>												✓
6	Mugger crocodile	<i>Crocodylus palustris</i>					✓		✓					
7	Hard shelled terrapin	<i>Melanochelys trijuga parkeri</i>					✓							
8	Green turtle	<i>Chelonia mydas</i>		✓	✓					✓	✓			
9	Common house gecko	<i>Hemidactylus frenatus</i>	✓				✓							
	BUTTERFLIES													
1	Crimson rose	<i>Pachliopta hector</i>		✓			✓							
2	Lemon emigrant	<i>Catopsilia pomona</i>					✓	✓	✓					
3	Blue glassy tiger	<i>Ideopsis similis</i>						✓						
4	Plain tiger	<i>Danaus chrysippus</i>		✓	✓			✓						
5	Common tiger	<i>Danaus genutia</i>						✓						
6	Common crow	<i>Euploea core</i>		✓				✓						