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When the Forest Stares Back

A nocturnal trail in Sri Lanka's Sigiriya shows how humans can coexist with wildlife

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Deep in Sri Lanka's Sigiriya forest, a small group treads cautiously over rustling leaves, with their head lamps casting narrow red beams in the darkness. Suddenly, the group freezes. The anticipation is palpable. Two bright eyes flash in the glow. It's not a predator, but a pint-sized creature staring back with quiet curiosity. The grey slender loris, a shy, nocturnal, wet-nosed primate endemic to the tropical forests of Sri Lanka and southern India, reveals itself. Declared 'Near Threatened' by the International Union for Conservation of Nature in 2004, the rare primate has lost a quarter of its population to deforestation, illegal trade and hunting for superstitious rituals.

The nightly walking experience within the forest grounds of Jetwing Vil Uyana, began in 2010, when the flashlight of a resident naturalist unexpectedly fell upon a grey slender loris. The discovery prompted Jetwing's team to protect the vulnerable species and the surrounding ecosystem. Lights were dimmed to suit the nocturnal life, and a three-acre patch was set aside as the Loris Conservation Site—the first protected site dedicated to this overlooked primate.

More than 150 bird species now frequent the grounds, joined by all three small wild cats found in the country—fishing cats, jungle cats, and rusty-spotted cats. Guests stay in thatched villas within this living mosaic, with no demarcation between them and the wilderness. Amidst



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these restored environs, lorises began to flourish. Since the first spotting, naturalists have counted at least 30 births, including a rare twin birth in 2013. But what does it take to make a regenerated forest conducive for wildlife? Patience and observation, says resident naturalist Yesitha Rodrigo. "The more you understand a species, the better you can shape an environment where it can thrive".

It's not just a walk in the forest to spot wildlife, a close understanding of the loris' behaviour shapes the trail experience. Guides urge visitors to listen carefully to the jungle's sounds. Lorises avoid areas patrolled by predators such as owls and eagles, so a bird call often signals where not to search. With their slender fingers clasping branches and their oversized,

(From above) a grey slender loris; Sigiriya forest

close-set eyes perfectly tuned for night vision, the loris may well be watching you first. Participants have to crane their heads upwards, scanning the canopy for sudden glints of reflected light. "The red beam is deliberate. It spares nocturnal animals from disturbance, allowing their natural behaviour to unfold," Yesitha explains.

While glimpses of the lorises might be fleeting, they surely leave an enduring first-hand impression. Participants invariably step out of the densely wooded path smiling into the darkness, with a reminder that the fragile ecosystem must be shared and preserved.

