

# Horton Plains - Home to diverse flora and fauna

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Photos by M.S. Abeysinghe

Situated in the central hill country at a height of 2535m, Horton Plains is surrounded by beautiful mountains and grassland.

Traditionally known as Mahaeliya in Sinhala, British Tea planter Thomas Farr rediscovered this plateau in the 19th century and renamed it after Sir Robert Wilmot Horton, the then Governor from 1831-1837.

Spread over 3,159.8 hectares, Horton Plains is home to a rich and unique biodiversity. To the West of Horton Plains lies Kirigalpoththa, Sri Lanka's second highest mountain (2,393m) and to the North is Sri Lanka's third highest mountain, Totupola Kanda (2,359m). Besides these high peaks, Horton Plains cradles the Belihul Oya, Bogawanthalawa Oya and Agra Oya, the source streams from which the country's major rivers Mahaweli, Kelani and Walawe originate.



**Giant Tree Ferns in Horton Plains**

Horton Plains was gazetted as a Nature Reserve in 1969 and has since been named as the first ever eco-friendly National Park in Sri Lanka in 1988 because of its unique watershed and biodiversity value; its windswept, misty grassland comprising tree ferns and scraggy dwarf trees (some endemic to Sri Lanka). Interspersed by icy-cold rivulets make the Plains one of the most awesome and forbidding regions in Sri Lanka.

Among the trees and plants unique to Horton Plains, the most striking are Binara, Dwarf Bamboo, Patana grass and the tree fern Maha Meemana which dot the forest openings.

On a clear morning, to the South of Horton Plains, the Indian Ocean is visible like a fabulous silver crescent. Dawn is the ideal time to see this sight as the mountains are free of mist at that time.

November to February are the coolest months, sometimes with heavy ground frost at nights. These months see bright sunshine too. There is rain during the rest of the year brought both by the Northeast and Southwest monsoons as well as inter-monsoons.

Horton Plains consists of grasslands interspersed with areas of forest and some unusual vegetation that grows only in high altitudes.

There are 52 species of endemic birds and also 11 species of migrants (which visit the Park between November to March every year). Among the endemic birds are Yellow Eared Bulbul (*Pycnonotus penillatus*), Sri Lanka White Eye (*Zosterops Ceylonensis*), Whistling Thrush (*Myiophonus bligi*), Dull Blue Flycatcher (*Eumiyas Sordida*), the Mountain Hawk Eagle (*Spizaetus Nupalensis*). Majestic Sambar is a common sight at dusk and it roams freely in the grassland. The leopard is a rare sight. But the big cat panther (*Panthera Pardus Kotiya*) can be sighted at dawn.

Bear Monkeys (*Trachypithecus Vetulus Monticola*), Giant Squirrels, Barking Deer, Fishing Cats and wild boar can also be spotted at dawn. According to records before the 1930s, even elephants existed in the Plains.



**Baker's Falls**

Horton Plains can be explored by jeep from early morning (no vehicles are allowed to enter the park) as the mist often clears by noon. The return walk passes the scenic Baker's Falls and Galagama Falls.

The walk to World's End is almost 5km along a flat path. Horton Plains is the only National Park in Sri Lanka where visitors are allowed to walk on their own on designated tracks. Please do remember that this is a very delicate ecosystem. Follow the park rules and walk only on designated tracks. Please don't leave any trash or take away plants. While enjoying this unique treasure, we should protect it for our future generations.