

# THE NUT THIEVES



A  
CEYLON PRESS  
TINY GUIDE TO SRI LANKA'S  
SQUIRRELS

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In a  
Word  
or Two

Sri Lanka is home to seven squirrel species, only two of which are endemic, the Dusky-Striped Squirrel and Layard's Palm Squirrel. The other five are globe trotters by comparison: the Grizzled Giant Squirrel; the Black Giant Squirrel; the Nilgiri Striped Squirrel; the Indian Palm Squirrel or Three-Striped Palm Squirrel; and the Indian Giant Flying Squirrel.

They feat off almost any plants including nuts, seeds, fruits, fungi, and green vegetation, and have been known to enrich their diet with bird eggs and insects too,

Their constant nibbling of course wears down their teeth, and so, in a little bit of evolution that mankind might have benefited from as well, their teeth just keep on growing, to make up the loss.

Collectively, they are what rats might be - if rats had any sense of fashion, PR or merely a dude-cool attitude. Nimble, beautiful, curious, and cute, they are rodents merely by genus.

Even so, there remains something edgy about them. It is a squirrel after all who provokes the discovery of a massive diamond in F Scott Fitzgerald's story "A Diamond as Big as the Ritz," a tale of excess and debauchery. Nor does Beatrix Potter's Squirrel Nutkin do much better, being chronically naughty. "Proud, wayward squirrel," noted Yeats of a beast so easily and effortlessly seen across Sri Lanka.

# THE BLACK GIANT SQUIRREL



IMAGE COURTESY OF ECOLOGY ASIA

The Black Giant Squirrel (*Ratufa bicolor*) is dark all over but for a small expanse of orange on its chin and chest. It is very rarely seen, preferring the deeper most inaccessible parts of evergreen forests.

# THE DUSTY STRIPED SQUIRREL



IMAGE COURTESY OF CHLIDONIAS.

The Dusky-Striped Squirrel (*Funambulus sublineatus obscurus*) is one of two Sri Lankan squirrels considered unimpeachable members of the island's endemic mammal club. It is also the smallest of its squirrels. It was first documented in 1935 by the tea planter by W.W.A. Phillips in his celebrated book, *The*

Manual of the Mammals of Ceylon – and has since gone through the taxological wringer in terms of classification and reclassification before being stamped and approved as a distinct sub species in its own right. It takes its comforts cold and lives most happily in such high elevations as Horton Palins and Nuwara Eliya where even frosts can occur. It is also something of a lyrical chatter box, with a strange bird like sound that modulates depending on its message.



# THE GRIZZLED GIANT SQUIRREL



IMAGE OF RATUFA MACROURA, COURTESY OF STEVE GARVIE.

The Grizzled Giant Squirrel (*Ratufa macroura*) is the king of the pack, with a nose to tail length of one and a half metres and death-defying skills enabling it to make the most impossible leaps from tree to tree. In Sri Lanka it hugs the central highlands and comes in

three sub variants that are all but impossible to tell apart: *Ratufa macroura macroura*, *Ratufa macroura*

*Dandolena* and *Ratufa macroura Melanochra*.

Grizzled brown, with white legs, stomach, and frosted face, they have excellent vision but poor hearing – which is something of a blessing for them as their cry – a shrill staccato cackle – is the sort of sound that can easily curdle milk.

# THE INDIAN GIANT FLYING SQUIRREL



IMAGE COURTESY OF PATATASFRITTAS

The most elegantly avian of the squirrels found on the island is the Indian Giant Flying Squirrel (*Petaurista philippensis*), which has evolved a remarkable wing membrane between its limbs to enable it to glide like the 1891 Lilienthal Glider that marked man's first recorded flight, near Potsdam.

# THE INDIAN PALM OR THREE-STRIPED PALM SQUIRREL



IMAGE COURTESY OF YATHIN S KRISHNAPPA

The Indian Palm Squirrel or Three-Striped Palm Squirrel (*Funambulus palmarum*) is another island visitor that is easily confused with the endemic Layard's Palm Squirrel (*Funambulus layardi*).

# LAYARD'S PALM SQUIRREL



A LITHOGRAPH BY JAN BRANDES OF THE PALM SQUIRREL. PUBLIC DOMAIN.

Layard's Palm Squirrel (*Funambulus layardi*) is named for Edgar Leopold Layard, one of those legendary Victorian all-rounders, who took on a diplomatic career, the better to document the natural world, a passion he put down to lacking any siblings when growing up. He spent ten years on the island, leaving behind a variety of animals named

after him, including a parrot and this, the popular and endemic island squirrel, sometimes also known as the Flame-Striped Jungle Squirrel for the beautiful markings that run along its back. It is about thirty centimetres nose to tail, with black fur that fades to reddish brown on its stomach and can be seen all around the central highlands. By day they forage for fruit and nuts; by night they chatter from tree to tree, living, like swans, in pairs that bond for life. With their natural forest habitat eroded steadily, they are categorised as Vulnerable.

# THE NILGIRI STRIPED SQUIRREL



IMAGE COURTESY OF INATURALIST UK

The tiny dark brown Nilgiri Striped Squirrel (*Funambulus sublineatus*) is the mystery of the pack for almost nothing is known about it except for the fact that it is different to the Dusky-Striped Squirrel (*Funambulus sublineatus obscurus*), with which it was once confused.

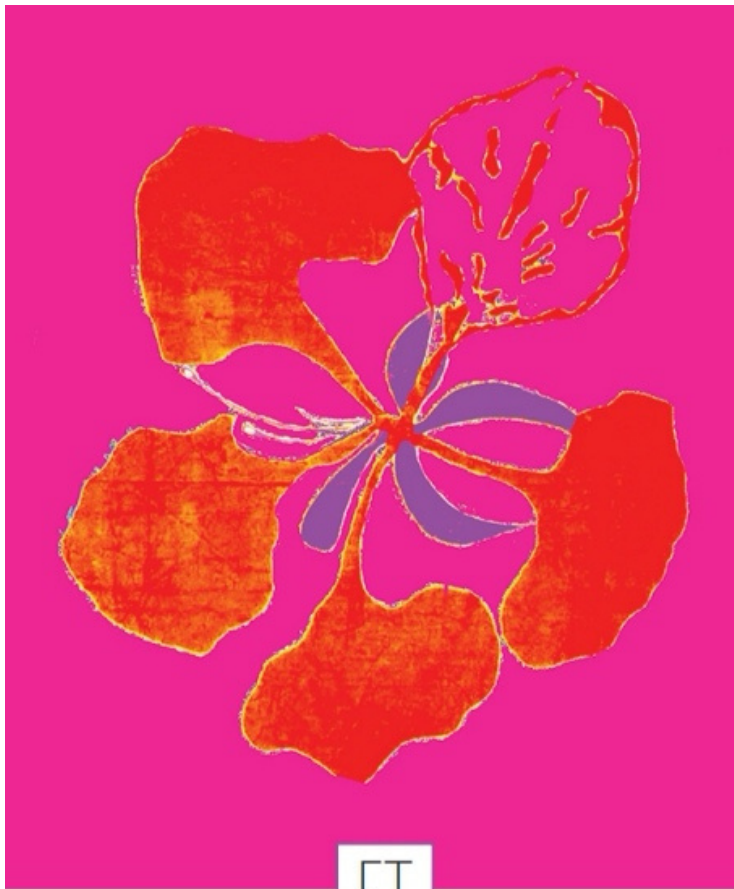


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