



MIDDLING ALONG

A
CEYLON PRESS
TINY GUIDE TO SRI LANKA'S
MID SIZED MAMMALS

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In a
Word
or Two

From creatures the size of Miniature Schnauzers or wild Labradors to others large as men tempted by Intermittent Fasting, eleven of Sri Lanka's mammals defy any easily appreciable definition, saving that they are mid-sized.

But though mid-size they are, they are not mid anything else.

Some of the island's most iconic wildlife hides beneath this modest badge: the snake defying mongooses; hares and ottars; the tank-like pangolin; porcupine that stay up all night munching on carefully planted shrubs; the skilled jackal and a sloth bear that is anything but lazy. And unlike so many of the county's other mammals, most of these are relatively easy to spot.

THE BROWN MONGOOSE



IMAGE COURTESY OF NRI&GLAFAN2004.

Thankfully widespread across Sri Lanka and the Indian sub-continent, the Brown Mongoose comes in a several iterations, each so marginally different as to be as impossible to tell apart as Herge's Thomson and Thompson. The Highland Ceylon Brown Mongoose (*Herpestes Fuscus Flavidents*), the Western Ceylon

Brown Mongoose (*Herpestes Fuscus Rubidior*) and the Ceylon Brown Mongoose (*Herpestes Fuscus Maccarthiae*) are, to all but the most scrutinizing scientific eye, practically alike. Collectively, and commonly, they are called the Indian Brown Mongoose.

Over eighty centimetres nose to tail with dark brown fur and black legs, and a long black enviably tufted tail, it is a sight of simple, breathtaking beauty.

But seeing all this is something a challenge for it is an introverted beast, with a marked preference for deeper cover, dark forests; and, like Greta Garbo, a preference for being left alone.

THE COMMON CEYLON GREY MONGOOSE



IMAGE COURTESY OF J.M.GARG.

“Rikki-tikki,” wrote Rudyard Kipling in 1894, “had a right to be proud of himself. But he did not grow too proud, and he kept that garden as a mongoose should keep it, with tooth and jump and spring and bite, till never a cobra dared show its head inside the walls.” Kipling’s immortal mongoose was in fact the Indian Grey

Mongoose, sometimes called the Common Ceylon Grey Mongoose (*Herpestes Edwardsi*). It is the smallest of the four main species found in Sri Lanka.

Shy around people it is fearless with snakes, its kill strategy focused on tiring the snake by tempting it to make bites it easily avoids. Its thick grizzled iron-grey fur and neuro transmitting receptors leave it immune to snake venom; and for anyone living up-country, it is a fine companion to have around.

Around thirty inches nose to tail, it lives right across the country, often in pairs, eating fruit, roots, and small animals. It lives for around seven years, breeding twice yearly and producing up to four cubs.

THE CEYLON RUDDY MONGOOSE



IMAGE PUBLIC DOMAIN.

Measuring thirty-two inches nose to tail the Ceylon Ruddy Mongoose (*Herpestes Smithi Zeylanicus*) is found widely across Sri Lanka and India. A retiring forest dweller, it has grizzled ruddy brown hair, a sleek body and a tail that ends in a flourish of black tufts. Although it rarely lives more than seven or eight years,

a Mr W. W. Phillips from Namunukula in Sri Lanka wrote to inform the Bombay Natural History Society (in those halcyon, fallible days when science was a passion shared equally with amateurs) that “the mongoose in question died on the September 8, 1955, aged approximately 17 years and 10 months. It ate quite well right up to the last day and died peacefully during the night, apparently of old age and /or heart failure.”

For although the Ruddy Mongoose is among the more aggressive of the species, it seems that with the right kind of parenting it the beast can be a beloved and longish term part of an inter-species family.

THE STRIPED-NECKED MONGOOSE



IMAGE COURTESY OF SHREERAM M.V.

The Versace of the mongoose world, the Striped-Necked Mongoose (*Herpestes vitticollis*) has been given an outfit by its Maker that marks it out as one of the island's most striking and fetching mammals. A dark grey head morphs to reddish brown and grey on its neck- before blooming into a heady grizzled

covering of bouffant fur that gets redder and longer the further down the body it goes.

A pink nose, black legs and a reddish tail that ends in a curved tuft of black hair make up the rest of this most alluring of beasts.

Widespread across Sri Lanka and southern India, it has sturdy frame and – measuring at often over eighty-five centimetres nose to tail – is the largest mongoose on the island. Its proclivity for calling forests its home can make sighting it a challenge, but it is a sight well worth the effort.

THE CEYLON OTTER



IMAGE COURTESY OF ROAR.MEDIA.

“What is this life, if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare,” wrote Henry Williamson, the man who put otters firmly on the literary map with “Tarka the Otter.” But care is what otters now so badly need. Right around the world they face the very real threat of extinction; their potential demise a possible

calamity still only being faced up to with modest corrective steps. The Ceylon Otter (*Lutra [Ceylonica] Nair*) faces just the same, if not greater levels, of existential threat, though this does not appear to erode their abiding alacrity for play.

Famously family-orientated (so much so that there is even a recorded case of an otter puppy being given by its mother to another mother who had given birth to a still born pup), they live in family groups and play and play – when not eating or sleeping.

They are also scrupulously hygienic, with specific areas designed as otter loos – this despite the fact that their poo is said to give off a scent not unlike that of jasmine tea.

A distinctive sub species of the Eurasian Otter, the Ceylon Otter is shy to the point of near invisibility. Covered in dark brown fur and about a metre long, weighing in at eight kilos, it lives off fish but is more than partial to any other smaller creature incautious enough to stray close to it in the rivers it inhabits.

THE INDIAN PANGOLIN OR SCALY ANTEATER



IMAGE COURTESY OF EDGEOFEXISTENCE.ORG.

Clothed in dexterous overlapping and generously rounded scales, the Indian Pangolin or Scaly Anteater (*Manis Crassicaudata*) is a unique cross between an architectural marvel, a desert tank, and a Viking warrior clad in chain mail. Measuring some six feet nose to tail, it makes its home in rainforest and

grassland and even colonizes modest hill country – right across the Indian sub-continent and all across Sri Lanka. It lives in burrows, some designed for sleeping, others for eating, its diet consisting of ants and termites, or, at a push beetles. Its long sticky tongue is specially evolved to dig deeply and productively into insect nests.

Pregnancies last around two months and the cub (for there is usually only one) gets carried on its mother's tail until it is able to move around confidently.

Yet the Pangolin is teetering on the very edge of being critically endangered, not helped by increasing deforestation, but more especially because it is poached for its meat and its scales which are internationally traded as aphrodisiacs, rings, charm or crafted in grisly leather goods, like boots and shoes that surely shame their wearers more than they might be if caught dancing naked down Galle Face Green on the top of big red bus.

THE INDIAN PORCUPINE



IMAGE COURTESY OF WWW.HELLABRUNN.DE.

Happily widespread, and at home in most habitats, the Indian Crested Porcupine (*Hystrix Indica*) is found right across Sri Lanka and India. Nikita Khrushchev, the bombastic Russian leader, was unexpectedly wise to the beast, stating to his enemies that “if you start throwing hedgehogs at me, I shall throw a couple of

porcupines under you."Up to three feet long and sixteen kilos in weight, they are, like Khrushchev, highly territorial. When their feel threatened or their territory unacceptably encroached upon, their sharp quills will spring up, their teeth will clack loudly and, emitting a most unpleasant smell, they will go on the attack.

Nocturnal, and usually hidden in the burrows that are their homes, they are eager consumers of bark, fruit, berries, vegetables and almost most plants in gardens and plantations.

Gratifyingly monogamous, their pregnancies last eight months and the two to four cubs that are born live on with the parents until they are two or three years old. Fossilised records from thousands of years ago show that the present porcupine once had an ancestor similar though smaller to its form today, the *Hystrix Sivalensis* Sinhalayus.

THE CEYLON BLACK- NAPED HARE



IMAGE COURTESY OF DAVID HOSKING.

Curiously Sri Lanka lacks rabbits – though it does have a hare. Just the one. And an endemic one too, a distinct variant of the Indian Hare. The Ceylon Black-naped Hare (*Lepus nigricollis singhala*) is a mere fifty centimetres head to body, and distinguished by

having a black patch on the back on its neck. It is notable also for its dozy daytime habit – being more of a night creature, leaving the day for alone sleeping in the grassland that is its preferred habitat.

Blessed with excellent sight, hearing, and smell, it can usually outrun any would-be enemy; and remains happily widespread across the island.

THE CEYLON JACKAL



IMAGE COURTESY OF CHANDIKA JAYARATNE.

“It is far better,” wrote Tipu Sultan, shortly before being killed by the future Duke of Wellington in Srirangapatna in 1799, “to live like a lion for a day then to live like a jackal for hundred years”. The Sultan, who of course, saw himself as the lion, was merely channelling the unrelentingly poor press that jackals

have endured since recorded time –in Arabic holy writ, the Bible; even in Buddhist Pali literature which depicts them as inferior, greedy, cunning creatures. Small wonder then that their numbers face increasing pressure.

The future of the Sri Lankan Jackel (*Canis Aureus Lanka*) generates little of the media alarm that surrounds other, more politically correct species. Much threatened by habitat loss and infected by dog borne rabies, the Sri Lankan Jackel is second only to the Leopard in the pecking order of island predators.

A skilled hunter, slightly smaller than a wolf, it is, like them, a pack animal and scavenger, and will eat anything from rodents, birds, and mice to young gazelles, reptiles, and even fruit.

Commendably patriotic, they have evolved to be a little larger than Indian jackals, with a darker richer colouring and a subtlety different tooth arrangement whose close study is best avoided.

THE SRI LANKAN SLOTH BEAR



IMAGE COURTESY OF TOURISM SRI LANKA.

The Sri Lankan Sloth Bear is a unique endemic sub species of the very same Sloth bear that inhabits the Indian sub-continent in ever declining numbers from India to Bhutan, Nepal, and, until recently Bangladesh. It is a little smaller in size than its Indian cousin, with shorter fur and, sadly, sometimes without the cuddly-looking white tummy fur of its northern relative.

Even so, it is no midget, typically measuring six feet in length and weighing in at up to 300 pounds for a male or 200 for a female. Once found in plentiful numbers across the dry zone forests of the island, they are now in serious and significant retreat, with an estimated 500-1000 bears in the wild today.

The destruction of their habitats has been instrumental in their decline, but the fear they engender amongst village populations has also played its part. They are often hunted and killed, with a reputation for damaging property and killing or maiming domestic animals humans running like a wave of terror before them.

The "sloth" part of their name is rather misleading for the bears are quite capable of reaching speeds of thirty miles an hour - faster than the fastest human yet recorded. Although willing to eat almost anything, their preferred diet are termites for which their highly mobile snouts are especially well designed.

With nostrils closed, the snouts become vacuums, sucking out the termites from their nest. Long curved claws enable them to dig the nest ever deeper till the last juicy termite has been consumed. The claws are also handy for rapidly scaling up trees to suck out honey from bee nests.

Evolution has cast the sloth bear towards the Grumpy Old Man side of the mammalian spectrum. Its poor sight and hearing leaves it very dependent on its sense of smell, so it can all too often be surprised by what seems like the abrupt appearance of something threatening – like a human – which it will attack with warrior like ferocity before asking any questions.

It is very solitary, living alone in the forest except for those rare moments when it seeks a mate.

Reproduction is not its strongest skill, and most females produce a single cub that stays with them for two to three years, the first months of which are endearing spent living or travelling on its mothers back. D.J.G Hennessy, a policeman who had a couple of bears on his land in Horowapotana in 1939, noted the emotive articulateness of their paw suckling: “The significance of the notes on which the bear sucks his paw is interesting; a high whine and rapid sucking denotes impatience and anger, a deep note like the humming of a hive full of bees on a summer’s day indicates that he is contented and pleased with life, a barely audible note shows great happiness while a silent suck in which he usually indulges in just before going to sleep on a full stomach denotes the acme of bliss”.



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