

TIME OUT



A
CEYLON PRESS
TINY GUIDE TO SRI LANKA'S
EXTINCT MAMMALS

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In a
Word
or Two

Ever more scientists are putting forward the prospect of the earth facing its sixth greatest extinction event, a party to which no-one desires an invitation.

The first of these events, the Late Devonian extinction (383-359 million years ago) killed off about 75 percent of all living species .

One hundred million years later came the plant's worst extinction – the Permian-Triassic extinction, or Great Dying. This despatched 96% of all marine animals and 3 out of every 4 land animals that had managed to evolve and flourishing since the previous extinction.

After fifty-one million years of later exhaustive recovery, the Triassic-Jurassic extinction swept down, exterminating 80% of all living species.

The last, and most famous mass extinction, the Cretaceous-Paleogene extinction, 66 million years ago, was the one that claimed the life of the dinosaurs – and with them 76% of all earth's species.

The next one, argue many, will be the first due to human activities. Already one million species of plants and animals are classified as being in danger of extinction, a process that has, of course, already started right, not least in Sri Lanka, where records, including rare fossil records, seem to illustrate the ghostly presence of some a number of mammals that once roamed the island.

Much of what little we know about these super natural beasts dates back to the remarkable work carried out between the 1930s and 1963 by P. E. P.

Deraniyagala, Director of National Museums. Uncommonly hands-on for so senior a civil servant, his life work was

spent examining the alluvial strata better known for concealing gems around Rathnapura. Within its sandy layers he uncovered fossils, fragments, teeth, and bones dating right back to the Pleistocene, when Sri Lanka was still – just about – joined physically to the Indian landmass and when the melting ice sheets caused the creation of these alluvial beds.

These most prominent discoveries he made are included in this *Tiny Guide*; but more prescient is the chilling prospect that many of the island's most important endemic mammals may eventually follow suit. Human – elephant conflict is decimating the numbers of wild elephants across the land. Their numbers, falling fast, are little arrested by any of the modest attempts by the state to secure their future.

The future is no less glowing for other beats such as the rare endemic civets – the Montane Golden Palm Civet and the Dry-Zone Palm Civet; or the Red Slender Loris. Mice, shrews, deer, monkeys all face an existential threat as their habitat shrinks and the food chain suffers the slow and deadly consequences of reckless tourism, pollution, and climate change.

THE CEYLON ASIATIC CHEETAH

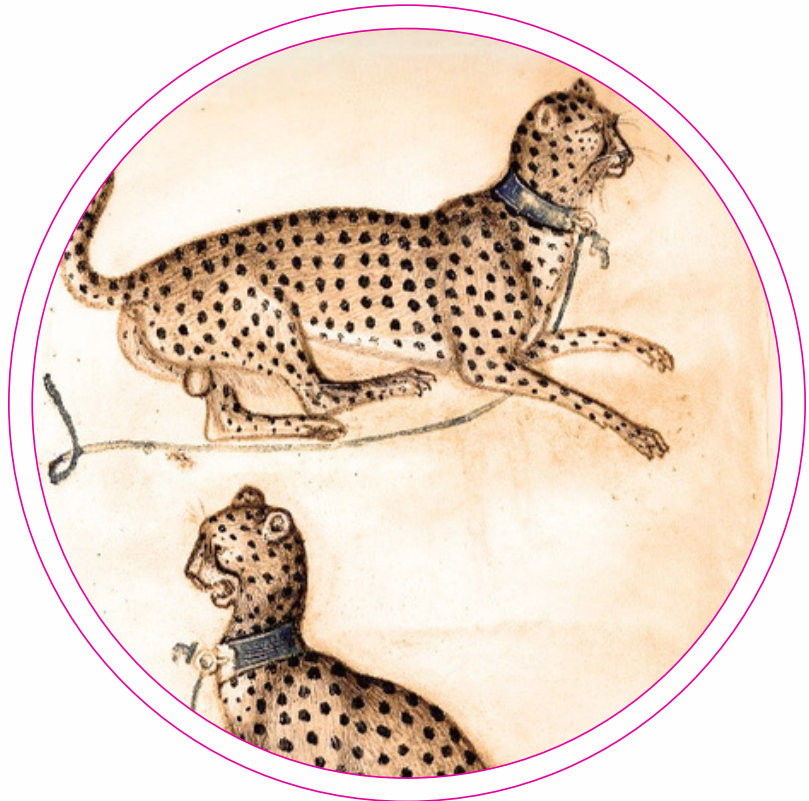


IMAGE PUBLIC DOMAIN.

The extinction in Sri Lanka of the Ceylon Asiatic Cheetah (*Acionyx Jubatus Venaticus*) offers a clear warning to the existence of the island's other great cat, the Leopard, whose numbers are plummeting. A distinctly different version of the Africa Cheetah, the Asiatic Cheetah once roamed the world from Arabia

and the Caspian to South Asia - and Sri Lanka, until around ten thousand years ago. Today their numbers are so few that all but the most myopically optimistic enthusiasts, anticipate that it will soon cease to live in the wild at all.

THE CEYLON LION



IMAGE COURTESY OF ADRIFT COUPLE.

Adoring the national flag, the Sri Lankan lion is thought to have become extinct in 37,000 BCE – about the same time as the famous Stone Age Balangoda Man walked his last steps. *Panthera Leo Sinhaleyus*, as the sub species is known, only came to light in 1936 when the archaeologist, P.E.P.

Deraniyagala, uncovered two fossilized teeth in Kuruwita, near Ratnapura. With the passion of a forensic detection, the archaeologist studied his modest clutch of teeth.

One was so damaged as to be of little use in identifying the animal, but the other, a left molar, presented so distinctive a structure as to not just twin it with lions, but set it apart from all known species too. From this single tooth, a lost sub species was uncovered, its size indicating that the beast was a lion much larger than the present Indian lion.

Back in 37,000 BCE, Sri Lanka was a very different place to what it would become, an island of open grasslands – a habitat perfect for lions. But over time, as the monsoon rainforest fuelled the proliferation of trees, its habitat become ever more restricted and at some point the creature just died out. The National Flag aside, the lion lives on still in many a temple and ancient fortress, in statues and new.

THE ELEPHANT

ELEPHAS MAXIMUS SINHALEYUS, HYPSELEPHUS
HYSUNDRICUS SINHALEYUS & PALAEOLOXODON
NAMADICUS SINHALEYUS



IMAGE COURTESY OF DERANIYAGALA.

The current and endangered Sri Lankan Elephant is considered to be a subspecies of *Elephas Maximus Sinhaleyus*, an elephant now extinct in Sri Lanka, Its treasured fossils, unearthed in Kuruwita, indicates that it last lived 100,000 years ago. Its similarity to the present-day elephant is likely to have made it all but

impossible to tell them apart, the difference lying in such things as smaller molars and a wider spout.

A scant dusting of other fossils reveal the existence of two further elephant sub species that may have called Sri Lanka home before becoming extinct: *Hypselephus Hysundricus Sinhaleyus* and *Palaeoloxodon Namadicus Sinhaleyus*.

THE GAUR BIBOS SINHALEYUS DERANIYAGALA



IMAGE PUBLIC DOMAIN.

Once common throughout South and South East Asia, the Gaur, or Indian bison, is moving inexorably towards extinction, with a just 21,000 mature specimens still living. Related to yaks and water buffalo, they are the largest of all wild cattle and out ranked in size by other land mammals only by elephants, rhinoceros, and

hippopotamus. The Ceylon Gaur (*Bibos Sinhaleyus Deraniyagala*) is a distinct sub species that used to be found in Sri Lanka but was last spotted by British adventurers in 1681 in the menagerie of King Rajasinghe II of Kandy.

Proving its ability to juggle many varied priorities (political reform, economic stability, improved educational standards etc etc.), the Sri Lankan government recently proposed to its Indian counterpart that they send half a dozen gaur to the island as part of a reintroduction programme.

HIPPOPOTAMUS, HEXAPROTODON SINHALEYUS



IMAGE COURTESY OF KEMONOFRIENDS.

Dating back between 800,00 to 100,000 years ago, the fossilised remains of a hippopotamus's jawbone, showing the presence of a couple more teeth than exist in the current living hippopotamus (*Hippopotamus amphibius*), are all that is left to prove the once lively

presence on Sri Lanka's rivers of this great land mammal, the largest after the elephant. Hexaprotodon Sinhaleyus, a distinct sub species, probably fell afoul of early climate change when rainfall become significantly less heavy, so putting pressure on their preferred habitat.

THE PORCUPINE HYSTRIX SIVALENSIS INHALEYUS



IMAGE PUBLIC DOMAIN

Happily widespread, and at home in most habitats, the Indian Crested Porcupine (*Hystrix Indica*) is found right across Sri Lanka and India. 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.

But 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 Sinhaleyus*.

THE RAT TATERA SINHALEYA



IMAGE COURTESY OF BANKSY.

Rats abound in Sri Lanka but only two can be called endemic – the rare Ohiya Rat and its equally endangered cousin, the Nillu Rat. Even so, they are joined by an embarrassment of other rat species, many common throughout the world, others restricted to South and South East Asia, and all much more

successful in establishing an enduring if unattractive dominance.

These include the massive Greater Bandicoot Rat and its slightly smaller cousin the Lesser Bandicoot Rat; the Black Rat or *Rattus Rattus* which comes in five quite distinct sub species; the ubiquitous European Brown Rat; and three others who tend to restrict themselves more to South Asisa - Blanford's Rat, the Indian Bush Rat, and the Indian Soft-Furred Rat. A final rat, *Tatera Sinhaleya*, known only from fossil records bade farewell to the island many thousands of years ago.

THE RHINOCERUS SINHALEYUS & KAGAVENA



IMAGE PUBLIC DOMAIN

The Indian Rhinoceros, or Greater One-Horned Rhinoceros, (*Rhinoceros Unicornis*) once roamed Asia from Pakistan to China. But now they can be counted in every lower numbers, confined to a few protected locations in Assam, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, and

Nepal. The range that their relatives once encompassed extended to Sri Lanka.

Fossilized remains dating back eighty thousand years found near Ratnapura by Dr. P.E.P. Deraniyagala indicate the now ghostly existence of two distinct sub species: *Rhinocerus Sinhaleyus*, and *Rhinocerus Kagavena*, their marginally different teeth all that remains to tell them apart.

THE SAMBUR MUVA SINHALEYA



IMAGE COURTESY OF CHARLES J. SHARP.

Across Sri Lanka and India, the Sambar Deer (*Cervus Unicolor Unicolor*) claims gold as the largest and most impressive of the several deer species with which shares its genes. Within Sri Lanka, the species has evolved still further and teeters on the edge of being

declared endemic – as the Sri Lankan Sambar (*Rusa unicolor unicolor*).

Yet fossil records from tens of thousands of years earlier, show the existence of a now extinct ancestor, the Muva Sinhaleya, a species of Sambar smaller in size than the one alive today.

THE TIGER



IMAGE COURTESY OF ISTDIBS.COM.

The scant but intriguing fossil records of Sri Lanka reveal the existence not just of the lion – but also that of the Tiger too (*Panthera Tigris*). These telling fossils amount to a left lower tooth found near Ratnapura in 1962 and a sub-fossil of a paw bone dated back 16,500 years, found near Kuruwita. Tigers appear to

have arrived in India some 12,000 years ago and spread from there to Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan.

But it seems that it was not this Tiger sub species that wandered across the then existing land bridge from India to Sri Lanka – but another one altogether, one that was native to central Asia, eastern and northern China, Japan, northern Siberia, Sumatra, and Java.

Little else is known of this now long departed mammal whose spectral remains sadly disproves the old German proverb “There is no off switch on a tiger.”

THE WILD BOAR SUS SINHALEYUS



IMAGE COURTESY OF BERNARD DUPONT.

The Indian Boar or Pig (*Sus Scrofa Cristatus*) is widespread across Sri Lanka and the Indian sub-continent. It is most magnificently differentiated from its European cousin by a crested mane that runs from head to back, sharp features, and a gratifyingly athletic build. . They are beautiful looking creatures,

and social too, travelling in bands, often at night and much given to wrestling one another. Living in forest and scrubby grasslands, habitat loss has brought them ever closer into contact with humans, to the benefit of neither party.

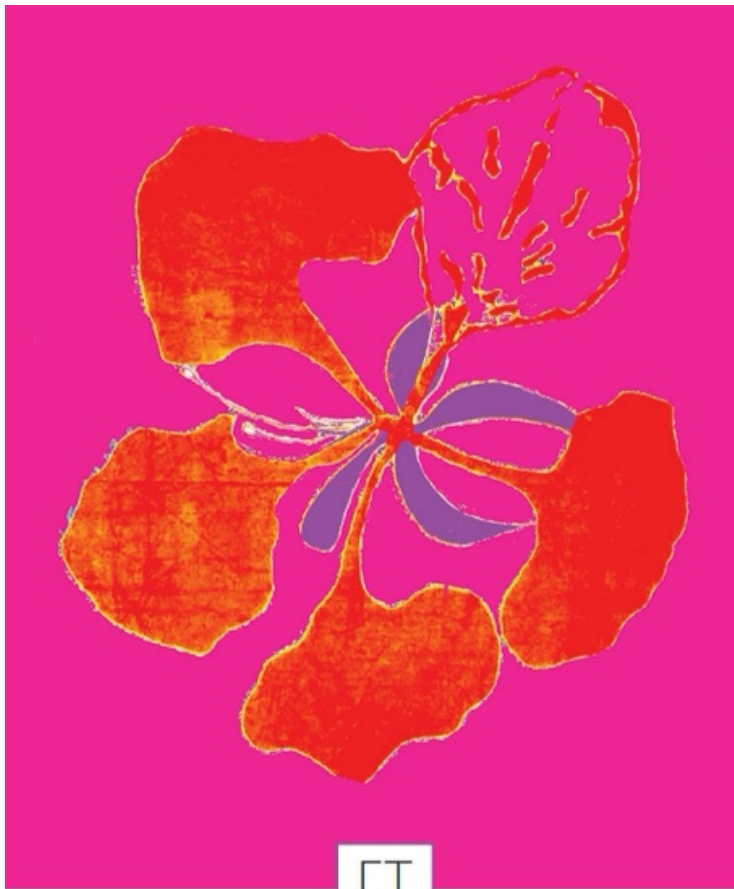
Fossil records from thousands of years ago show that they were preceded on the island by an endemic species some third smaller than the one that lives today - *Sus Sinhaleyus*.



DISCOVER MORE

A small island surrounded by large oceans, Sri Lanka is a mystery to many: remote, hard to place; a well-kept secret. The Ceylon Press aims to make its complicated story more accessible.

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