

A close-up photograph of a leopard's legs and tail, showing the characteristic rosette pattern. The leopard is positioned on the left side of the frame, with its legs extending towards the center. The tail is visible on the right side. A large, bright pink circular shape is overlaid on the top half of the image, partially obscuring the leopard's body. The background is plain white.

PREDATOR

A
CEYLON PRESS
TINY GUIDE TO SRI LANKA'S
WILD CATS

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In a
Word
or Two

Of the many mighty mammals that once sat, enthroned, like Phidias' Olympian Zeus gazing at the lesser world around him, so too did a dazzling assembly of cats lord it over the island, at the very apex of Sri Lanka's food chain.

Some of the most glamorous members of this ancient feline club have long since vanished, predators who themselves fell prey - less to other predators but to climate change, and the accompanying alternations in vegetation.

Others, thriving, or perhaps now just clinging on to life with grim resilience in other corners of the world, never made it to the island in the first place.

This, today, is not the country where you might glimpse tigers, lions, cougars, lynx, ocelot or jaguars slipping stealthily through scrub forests.

But, as benefits of one the world's most notable biospheres, the island has instead an astonishing variety of surviving predator cats, including one that has moulded its appearance so intimately around a particular environment that scientists have eagerly given it endemic status three times over, with a fourth, identified from a small town near Nuwara Eliya, waiting for taxological promotion like a good, albeit dead man before the Catholic Dicastery for the Causes of Saints.

THE ASIAN PALM CIVET



ASIAN PALM CIVET, IMAGE COURTESY OF BERNARD DUPONT

The Asian Palm Civet (*Paradoxurus Hermaphroditus*), more happily known as the Toddy Cat, lives in generous numbers across Sri Lanka, South and South East Asia.

It is a small beast, little more than five kilos in weight, its stocky body painted with gorgeous markings: grey fur with a white forehead, white dots under its eyes and beside its nostrils – a sort of Panda in the making.

Luckily it displays none of the wearisome fastidiousness of the now almost extinct panda and, although primarily forest dwelling, it has acclimatised to urban life with alacrity, making its home in attics and unused civic spaces – and of course, palm plantations.

And indeed wherever it can best find the fruit it most prefers. Like the golden palm civet, it is also famous in some countries for producing Civet Coffee, made from defecated and partially digested fermented coffee berries.

THE CEYLON LEOPARD



THE SRI LANKAN LEOPARD COURTESY OF GERARD MENDIS

Shrewd, secretive, elusive, the Ceylon Leopard (*Panthera Pardus Lankae*) is without doubt of the greatest endemic jewels in Sri Lanka's mammalian crown. It is the largest of the country's four cat species - the others being the Jungle Cat, the Fishing Cat, and the Rusty-Spotted Cat.

Averaging six feet in length, head to tail, and weighing anything up to two hundred and twenty pounds, they are mostly solitary beasts, largely but not always nocturnal and with a typical life expectancy of fifteen years. |

It is beautifully attuned to hunting, an observer noting that “if the lion is the king of the jungle, then the leopard is the king of stealth,” able to run seventy kilometres an hour and leap as far as six metres.

Despite habitats that stretch right across the island, numbers of the Sri Lankan Leopard are falling fast and are currently estimated to be around just eight hundred.

Contrary to popular belief, they are not just found at the Yala National park but right across the country’s arid, dry, and wet zones, its hills, forests, and plantations.

Conservation methods have failed to have any meaningful impact on the leopard population in general and there is little sense of urgency in government circles about the pressing need to do more to protect the future of this apex predator.

Habitat loss as much a disastrous history of human-animal interaction is largely to blame for this decline but if nothing is done soon about it the Sri Lanka Tourist Board may have to turn to promoting seagulls.

An errant gene in the leopard population provides the rarest of leopards, the Black Leopard, of whom there have been only a few firm sightings.

One in every three hundred leopards born has the propensity to be black and so able to live up to Karl Lagerfeld's gimlet observation: "One is never over- or underdressed with a little black dress."

THE CEYLON RUSTY-SPOTTED CAT



THE SRI LANKAN LEOPARD COURTESY OF GERARD MENDIS

The Rusty-Spotted Cat (*Prionailurus Rubiginosus*) is the world's smallest wild cat, smaller even than most domestic cats and one of the least studied and understood of the wild cat species. Covered in reddish fur, it is found in dry forests and grasslands and is largely nocturnal, feasting off insects, small birds, rodents, frogs, and possibly small lizards as well as domestic fowl.

Territorial, and somewhat abstemious when it comes to sex (once a year, thank you), they produce a litter of rarely more than three kittens after a two month pregnancy.

Found only in Sri Lanka and India, their conservation status is threatened, with unending encroachments on its habitats fragmenting its home range.

Billionaires, or at least those still capable of pausing long enough to consider the probity of jets and yachts with gold taps; or clothes and jewellery enough to fill a space craft set for private voyages, might instead consider donating lavish amounts of money to cash strapped Sri Lankan environmentalists to study this most intriguing and overlooked of all cats - knowledge, being power, and more power being precisely what this imperilled species most needs.

THE INDIAN FISHING CAT



THE CEYLON FISHING CAT, IMAGE COURTESY OF NAMOMAGAZINE

Double the size of a domestic cat, and weighing up to almost forty pounds, the Indian Fishing Cat (*Prionailurus Viverrinus*), though increasingly vulnerable due to habitat loss, is found in Sri Lanka and across South and South East Asia.

It has slightly webbed paws and, given its proclivity for fish, prefers to live around the island's wetlands, rivers, lake and stream banks, swamps, and mangroves. Its striking yellow grey fur displays confident black strips along the head and upper back that fray into dots and stipples further down the body. The fur is specially layered to give it an extra barrier to water. Its lives up to ten years, with pregnancies lasting two months, after which two or three kittens are born.

THE JUNGLE CAT



THE CEYLON JUNGLE CAT, IMAGE COURTESY OF NAMOMAGAZINE

The Jungle Cat (*Felis Chaus*) appears to be thriving right across its distribution range – from Sri Lanka to China, the Middle East, to the Caucasus. Wholly sandy in colour, and roughly twice the size of the house cat, it lives its very solitary life feasting off birds and small animals, the hermit of the cat world. It has a variety of

sub species, including one in Sri Lanka (*Felis Chaus Kelaarti*) but none so distinct as to excite cries for endemic status. It sticks to warmer locations within Sri Lanka, but abounds in grassland and forest - whatever offers the greatest cover and food.

THE PALM CIVET



GOLDEN PALM CIVET COURTESY OF WILDLIFE OF TAMIL EELAM

When life was simple, long ago; and when beige, like black or white, came in just one colour choice, it was thought that the island was home to just one endemic civet. But scientists, zookeepers, and wildlife photographers like Dhammika Malsinghe, Dr. Wolfgang Dittus, Dr Devka Weerakoon, and Channa Rajapaksha have in the past fifteen years worked hard to evaluate this assumption.

By careful observation, the checking of paw prints, the measurement of bodies and assessment of markings (beige or off-beige), they have instead come to the conclusion - now widely accepted in the scientific community - that the country actually plays host to three endemic civets:

1. Wet Zone Golden Palm Civet (*P. Aureus*)
2. Montane Golden Palm Civet (*P. montanus*)
3. Dry-Zone Palm Civet (*P. stenocephalus*)

In fact, the debate about numbers is ardently on-going, with some scientists now claiming that a fourth civet also merits separate recognition: the Sri Lankan Mountain Palm Civet (*Paradoxurus* *supp*), found only in Dickoya, a refinement that makes Darwin's Galápagos finches look almost modest. But although each civet is zone specific and different enough to be so classified, it would take much effort on behalf of armchair naturalists to ever tell them apart. All three are golden beasts - more golden brown on their backs and lighter gold on their stomachs, though the Montane Golden Palm Civet is, the trained eye, a little darker all round. From nose to bottom they measure 40 to 70 centimetres - like large cats; and weigh in from 3 to 10 pounds.

They are mild, secretive, forest loving creatures, living their life on trees and in high hollows, solitary and very nocturnal, munching their way through fruits and small animals.

Occasionally they can be a more sociable: for four long months one lived very comfortably in the space between my bedroom ceiling and the roof, a home from home where it raised its many excitable and noisy offspring.

Most curiously - and unexpectedly - their farts are widely known on the island to be so pleasant as to smell of the flower of the joy perfume tree - the *Magnolia champaca*, a scent immortalized in Jean Patou's famous perfume, 'Joy', an odour that outsold all others, excepting Chanel No. 5. Civet Coffee, which can sell for \$1300 per kilo, has thankfully yet to make any appearance on the island, associated as it has become with cruel farmed civet practices. The custom, in the past, was kinder, with partially digested and fermented coffee berries being collected from civet poo in the jungle and sold onto ridiculously wealthy Coffee Bubbas.

Gone but
(almost)
not quite
Forgotten

The spectral remains of three giants of the cat world live on in the minds of fan of Sri Lanka's wildlife – or at least those wise enough to be ever mindful of history. Indeed, the simple process of discovering these beasts made searching for the proverbial needle in a haystack look like a walk in the park.

Traces – the odd bit of tooth, or chip of bone – emerged during long hard digs by dedicated biologists in parts of the country not renowned for their embarrassment of facilities, hotels, bars or even air conditioned rooms. But the reward in finding these lost clues was immense, throwing open the country's far distant past to a yet more diverse era where Alpha mammals came with stripes or with beards, and not just spots.

THE CEYLON ASIATIC CHEETAH



GOLDEN PALM CIVET COURTESY OF WILDLIFE OF TAMIL EELAM

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, instead living a tragic mock life in cheetah print onesies and thongs.

THE CEYLON LION



LEFT LOWER MOLAR OF PANTHERA LEO SINHALEYUS, IMAGE COURTESY KELUM MANAMENDRA-ARACHCHI

Adorning 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 an Hercule Poirot, 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 became 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 even biscuits and breweries.

THE TIGER



TIGER COURTESY OF ONE GREEN PLANET

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.”



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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