

THE RAT RUN



A
CEYLON PRESS
TINY GUIDE TO SRI LANKA'S
RATS

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In a
Word
or Two

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.

Their collective poor reputation and cordial hosting of many especially nasty diseases marks them out as a mammal best enjoyed from a distance - though the observation of E.B White, the American writer of children's books, is a little savage: "the rat had no morals, no conscience, no scruples, no consideration, no decency, no milk of rodent kindness, no compunctions, no higher feeling, no friendliness, no anything."

BLANFORD'S RAT



IMAGE COURTESY OF MAYURESH KULKARNI.

Blanford's Rat (*Madromys Blanfordi*), known also as White-Tailed Wood Rat, is found in impressive numbers throughout India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. Measuring thirty five centimetres in length nose to tail, it has the classic grey fur of the kind of rat that scares most people.

THE CEYLON GERBIL OR ANTILOPE-RAT



IMAGE PUBLIC DOMAIN

Happily widespread, the Ceylon Gerbil (*Tatera Indica Ceylonica*) is a distinct variant of the Indian Gerbil.

Well distributed across the island, it lives in small colonies inside nests lined with dry grasses at the end of deep labyrinthine burrows. It is notably

unneighbourly, aggressive and territorial with gerbils from other colonies.

Like most gerbils it is exhaustively fertile, with pregnancies lasting under a month that produce up to nine young - who will themselves reach sexual maturity within four months. It is tiny - little more than 4 centimetres head to tail and clothed in brownish grey fur, all the better to pass unnoticed.

THE EUROPEAN BROWN RAT



IMAGE COURTESY OF AIKEN PEST CONTROL.

The Brown Rat (*Rattus Norvegicus*) has almost as many alternative names as the Devil himself (Lucifer, Satan, Abaddon, Beelzebub, etc) for it is also known – rather unkindly – as the common, street, sewer, or wharf rat; and, rather unexpectedly as the Hanover or

Norway rat. Immortalized by Charles Dickens, it has been studied and domesticated more than most other mammals and inhabits almost every continent of the world – not least the island of Sri Lanka. It is a large creature – over fifty centimetres in length nose to tail.

It is happy to consume almost anything, is highly social, produces up to five litters a year and – according to the more informed scientists, is capable of positive emotional feelings.

THE GREATER BANDICOOT RAT



IMAGE PUBLIC DOMAIN.

Measuring almost sixty centimetres in length nose to tail, the Greater Bandicoot Rat (*Bandicota Indica*) lives right across South and South East Asia and for obvious reasons is known in Sri Lanka as the Pig Rat. Aggressive, highly fertile, widespread, happy to eat practically anything and an enthusiastic carrier of many diseases, it is not the sort of creature to closely befriend.

THE INDIAN BUSH RAT



IMAGE COURTESY OF ARANYAPARVA.

The Indian Bush Rat (*Golunda Ellioti*) is found widely across Sri Lanka and all through India. It even boasts a tiny pocket sized colony in Iran.

At twenty five centimetres in length nose to tail, it is smaller than many other rats and has rather beautiful

fur that is speckled yellow, black, and reddish as if it had wandered out of a hair salon having been unable to make up its mind about what exact hair dye ask for, opting instead for a splash of everything.

THE INDIAN SOFT-FURRED RAT

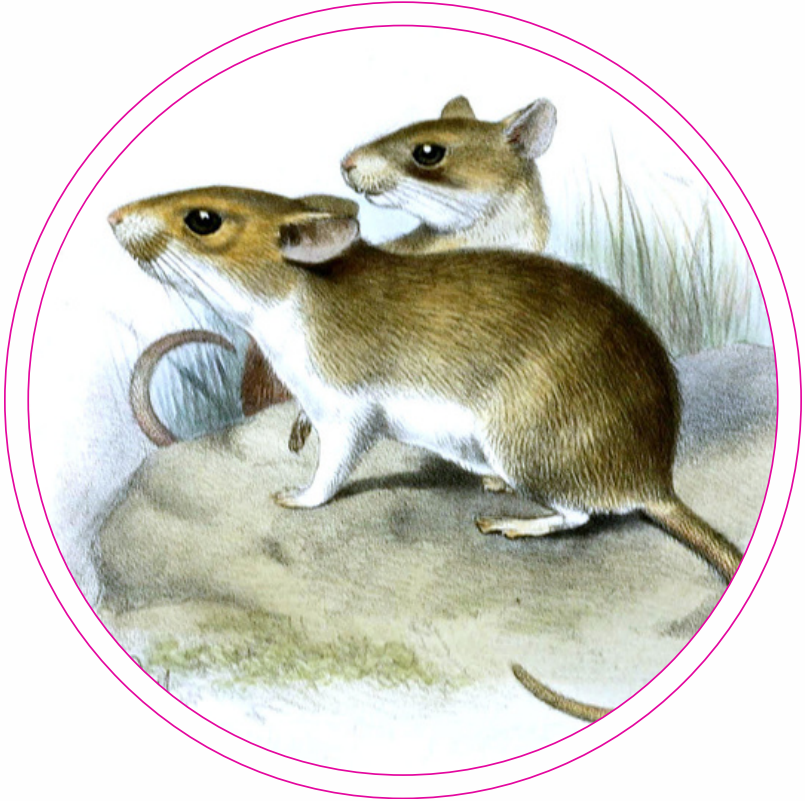


IMAGE PUBLIC DOMAIN

The ultimate C List celebrity, the Indian Soft Furred Rat is more than happy to make its home at any altitude and almost any place from India, Nepal, and Pakistan to Sri Lanka. So ubiquitous and successful is it, that it lists as being of no concern whatsoever on the registers of environmentalists troubled by species decline. Barely 30 centimetres nose to tail,. It has brown to yellow fur on its back and white across its tummy.

THE LESSER BANDICOOT RAT



IMAGE PUBLIC DOMAIN.

The Lesser Bandicoot Rat (*Bandidota Bengalensis*) is one of the giants of the rat world coming in at 40 centimetres length nose to tail. It is found in significant numbers throughout India and Sri Lanka

and its fondness for burrowing in the farmlands and gardens it prefers to live within, has earned it a reputation for destruction. It can be aggressive and is a reliable host to a range of nasty diseases including plague, typhus, leptospirosis, and salmonellosis.

THE NILLU RAT



IMAGE COURTESY OF NATURE NIBBLE

Like its only other endemic cousin, the Ohiya Rat, the Nillu Rat (*Rattus Montanus*) is an increasingly endangered species and is found in restricted highland locations such as the Knuckles, Horton Plains, Nuwara Eliya, and Ohiya. Little more than thirty nine

centimetres length nose to tail, its fur tends to be slightly redder than the typical grey of many of its relatives. Its name – Nillu, which means cease/settle/stay/stand/stop – gives something of a clue about its willingness to get out and about.

THE OHIYA RAT



IMAGE COURTESY OF DEVIKA ANTHARJANAM.

Thirty centimetres in length, nose to tail, with steel grey fur and white undersides, the Ohiya Rat (*Srilankamys Ohiensis*) is one of just two rat species that are endemic to Sri Lanka. Quite why it is named after a small village of barely 700 souls near Badulla is a mystery. It lives quietly in forests and has gradually become ever scarer in counts done by depressed biologists.

RATTUS RATTUS



IMAGE COURTESY OF FANTASTIC PEST CONTROL AUS

The Black Rat, or *Rattus Rattus* lives in all parts of Sri Lanka and comes in at least five distinct sub species - the Common House-Rat Rat (*Rattus Rattus Rattus*) , the Egyptian House Rat (*Rattus Rattus Alexandricus*), the Indian House Rat (*Rattus Rattus Rufescens*), the Common

Ceylon House Rat (*Rattus Rattus Kandianus*) and the Ceylon Highland Rat (*Rattus Rattus Kelaarti*). None are much longer than thirty three centimetres nose to tail and despite their reputation for being black, also sport the occasional lighter brown fur. It is phenomenally successful, calling almost every country in the world its home, including Sri Lanka. It is also a disconcertingly resilient transmitter for many diseases, its blood giving a home to a large quantity of infectious bacteria - including the bubonic plague.



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