

HANG OUT

A detailed illustration of a bat hanging upside down from a horizontal branch. The bat's body is covered in thick, brown fur, and its wings are dark and spread out to the sides. The background is a light, textured wash, suggesting a natural setting.

A
CEYLON PRESS
TINY GUIDE TO SRI LANKA'S
BATS

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In a
Word
or Two

Sri Lanka is bat country, its incredible range of environments supporting 30 of the world's 1400 bat species.

Despite the best efforts of Batman and his friends, bats have a troubled reputation with their Halloween and Vampire blood-sucking associations, though only three are known to sip the liquid; and with them the long shadow of vampire bat movies, once the last word in classic Hollywood horror, is slowly abating.

Bats range in size from ones tiny enough to sit comfortably upon a thumb nail to those with a wing span of 1 ½ metres and a weight of 1.6 kilos.

They are the only mammals able to truly fly, angels excepted, and are famous for roosting upside down from their feet, viewing the world like happy drunks, a propensity made worse by their extremely poor vision.

Using ultrasonic sound and the full capacity of their renowned hearing, they navigate the world, dining off insects, pollen, fruit small beasts and even one another.

They are worth observing from a distance for they are enthusiastic harbingers of diseases, especially those best able to leap from animal to human.

Most live in large colonies and are much given to hibernation, a habit that accounts for their exceptionally long lifespan – with one bat recorded to have lived 41 years.

THE FALSE VAMPIRE BAT



IMAGE OF THE CEYLON FALSE VAMPIRE BAT, COURTESY OF PAUL DUNN.

The reassuringly named False Vampire or Megadermatidae Family has just two bats in its little grouping (with 3 others elsewhere in the world), the family name coming from an incorrect folk belief that they enjoyed feasting on blood. Both are tiny - around 100 cm in length, but whilst the Ceylon False Vampire

Bat (*Megaderma Spasma Ceylonense*) prefers to dine on insects (and very occasionally other bats), the Indian False Vampire Bat (*Megaderma Lyra Lyra*) is much more of a big meat eater devouring birds, and fish.

They also differ in colour with the Ceylon variant having fur that is noticeably browner than the grey-blue fur of its Indian cousin.

THE FREE-TAILED BAT



IMAGE: PUBLIC DOMAIN.

The happily named Free-Tailed or Molossidae Family has but two cadets on the island, a tiny number given the 110 it totals globally, one of the largest of all the bat families. They are well named for they have an uncommon ability to fly fast - and well above the

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THE FRUIT BAT



IMAGE OF THE COMMON FLYING FOX BAT, COURTESY OF WWW.DRISHTIIAS.COM.

The Fruit or Pteropidae Family has four bats in its little grouping, though 60 across the rest of the world. They are famously gregarious and groups of between 15,000-100,000 cluster together like small airborne townships. The Ceylon Fruit Bat (*Rousettus Seminudus*) is brown to grey brown, and almost 14 cm head to tail.

Similarly coloured, though smaller is the Indian Short-Nosed Fruit Bat (*Cynopterus Sphinx Sphinx*) who is almost impossible to tell apart from the Ceylon Short-Nosed Fruit Bat (*Cynopterus Sphinx Ceylonensis*). But the unquestioned head of the family is the Common Flying Fox Bat (*Pteropus Giganteus Giganteus*).

These are the megabats of the bat world. With a wing span of 1 ½ metres and a weight of some 1.6 kilos, they effortlessly live up to their name.

Nocturnal, fruit eating and curiously infecund (producing perhaps just one offspring per year), they are an unmistakable part of any skyline – especially around city parks where they gather at dusk to hang off trees in infamous colonies.

Although unlikely to turn suddenly into airborne artillery, they are best kept at a distance, harbouring as they do such a wealth of diseases as to make biological warfare warriors tremble with dread.

THE HORSE-SHOE BAT



IMAGE OF THE RUFOUS HORSESHOE BAT, COURTESY OF ADITYA JOSHI.

The Horse-Shoe or Rhinolophidae Family has two bats in its little grouping on the island – but 90 others elsewhere in the world. They are far from popular, being linked to both the 2002–2004 SARS outbreak and the global COVID-19 outbreak, with genetic analyses showing that the virus found in China was

highly similar to viruses found in horseshoe bats.

The Rufous Horse-Shoe Bat (*Rhinolophus Rouxi Rouxi*) is the more glamorous of the pair, with a bright orange body, its cousin the Ceylon Great Horse-Shoe Bat (*Rhinolophus Luctus Sobrinus*) being darker in colour.

Both are tiny beasts, happiest in moist evergreen forests.

THE LEAF-NOSED BAT



IMAGE OF SCHNEIDER LEAF-NOSED BAT, PUBLIC DOMAIN.

The Leaf-Nosed-Shoe or Hipposiderosidae Family has been much poured over by scientists eager to classify and reclassify its many members. Of the seventy species in the family found across the world, only four of them call Sri Lanka home - and all have a marked preference for dining on beetles. All tend to be small,

reddish brown, with a fussy intolerance of habits above 1000 metres, though the Ceylon Bi-Coloured Leaf-Nosed Bat (*Hipposideros Bicolor Ater*), first described in 1834, is willing to move a little higher up the hills.

Barely ten years later, in 1846, as the East Indian took over Kashmir in northern India and Queen Victoria pocketed the Koh-I-Noor diamond, its closest island relative was also first described, the Dekhan Leaf-Nosed Bat (*Hipposideros Galeritus Brachyotus*).

Both came lower down in the pecking order from Schneider Leaf-Nosed Bat (*Hipposideros Speoris Speoris*), first identified way back in 1800, but ahead of the last of the island's four leaf-nosed bats, the Great Ceylon Leaf-Nosed Bat (*Hipposideros Lankadiva Lankadiva*) which was first described in 1850.

THE LONG-WINGED BAT



IMAGE OF THE LONG-WINGED BAT, MINIOPTERUS SCHREIBERST FULIGINOSUS, COURTESY OF BHARAGAVI SRINIVUSULU.

The unfortunately named Long-Winged or Miniopterinae Family is one of the two smallest bat families here, with but one lone representative, the Long-Winged Bat, *Miniopterus Schreiberst Fuliginosus*. Twelve cousins live more companionably in other countries as far afield as Austria to Korean. A small creature with reddish grey fur, it is happiest grouping together with relatives in caves, caverns, and rock holes.

THE PAINTED BAT



IMAGE: PUBLIC DOMAIN.

The glamorous Painted or Kerivoulinae Family has but two cadets on the island and is a relatively rare creature to encounter. One variety, the Painted Bat (*Kerivoula Picta Picta*) is a solitary beast despite its very glamorous colouring – bright orange or scarlet, with black wings; and tiny, barely 100 mm from tail to

nose. Its cousin, the Malpas Bat (*Kerivoula Hardwickei* Malpasi) is just half the size, and far more ordinary in its light greyish-brown furry costume.

It was named after the East India Company soldier, Major-General Thomas Hardwicke, a man as much noted for his love of natural history as for his determination to defeat Tipu Sultan in battles across India.

Like many East India, Hardwicke he had a complicated domestic life, leaving behind five illegitimate children and two other daughters born to his Indian mistress.

THE SHEATH-TAILED BAT



IMAGE OF TAPHOZOUS MELANOPOGON, COURTESY OF P KUMARASAMY.

The Sheath-Tailed or Emballonuridae Family has three in this its grouping, the happy hounds of the bat world with faces that best resemble a dog, and fur that is reddish grey - though the Pouch-Bearing Sheath-Tailed Bat (Taphozous Saccolaimus Crassus), a rare countryside.

and retiring creature, tends to be blacker in its markings.

It is larger and less gregarious than the Black-Bearded Sheath-Tailed Bat (*Taphozous Melanopogon*) which can sometimes be found in colonies of many hundreds. The Long-Armed Sheath-Tailed Bat (*Taphozous Longimanus*) is the most familiar of the three, as happy in cities as in the forest.

THE SRI LANKAN WOOLLY BAT



IMAGE COURTESY OF MAMMALWATCHING.COM.

The Sri Lankan Woolly Bat (*Kerivoula Malpasi*) is the country's only endemic bat. This tiny creature, barely 50 mm from head to body, was first described by a tea planter, W.W.A. Phillips in 1932. It is said to enjoy sleeping in curled up banana fronds on hills between 500 to 1000 metres, though its sightings are so rare that it has not been properly assessed for a score on the IUCN list of endangered animals.

THE TUBE-NOSED BAT



IMAGE OF THE CEYLON TUBE-NOSED BAT (*MURINA CYCLOTIS EILEENAE*), COURTESY OF VINCENT LUK.

The Tube-Nosed or Murininae Family is one of the two smallest bat families here, with but one lone and very tiny representative, its two closest cousins living elsewhere in South & SE Asia. Averaging little more than 89 cm in length and weighing less than 12 grams, the Ceylon Tube-Nosed Bat (*Murina cyclotis Eileenae*) gets its somewhat anatomical name from its tubular nostrils and sports a darkish brown covering of fur.

THE TYPICAL INSECTIVOROUS BAT



IMAGE OF KELAART'S PIPISTREL BAT (PIPISTRELLUS CEYLONICUS CEYLONICUS), COURTESY OF SRINIVASULLU, B.; SRINIVASULLU.

The Insectivorous or Vespertilionidae Family is the largest of the bat families the occur in Sri Lanka.

There are eight bats in this little grouping, which worldwide numbers north of sixty. Four of the species found on the island bear the name "Pipistrel" in the laborious naming gifted to them by science: "bird of

the evening.” The Grizzled Pipistrel Bat (*Pipistrellus Mordax*), unkindly known as “pungent” is rarely seen.

Its tiny (5 grams) reddish brown cousin, Kelaart's Pipistrel Bat (*Pipistrellus Ceylonicus Ceylonicus*) is a little more common but a sad member of the List of Endangered Species, just like its equally tiny cousin, the Indian Pipistrel Bat (*Pipistrellus Coromandra Coromandra*).

The Indian Pigmy Pipistrel Bat – whose touching Latin name is *Pipistrellus Mimus Mimus* – is even smaller, just 3 grams in weight.

Of the remaining four, two – the Greater Yellow Bat (*Scotophilus Heathi Heathi*) and the Lesser Yellow Bat (*Scotophilus Temmincki Wroughtoni*) – gain their name for their yellowish bronze brown fur, and can weigh in at up to 50 grams.

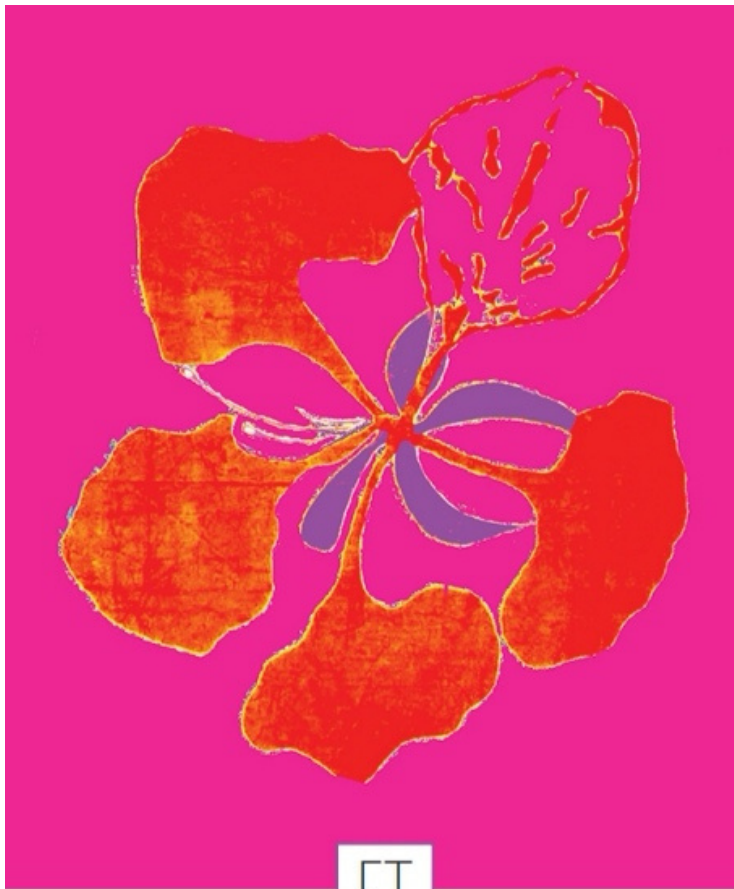
The other two, also well proportioned, are Van Hasselt's Bat (*Myotis Hasselti*), discovered in 1840; and Tickell's Bat (*Hesperoptenus Tickelli*), discovered in 1851.



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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