

# PACHYDERMS

A detailed illustration of an elephant's trunk and tusk. The trunk is thick and wrinkled, curving downwards and then back up. The tusk is also thick and textured, curving downwards. The background is a light, hazy landscape with palm trees and a body of water.

A

CEYLON PRESS

TINY GUIDE TO SRI LANKA'S

ELEPHANTS, HIPPOPOTAMUS,

RHINOCEROS, WATER BUFFALO & PIGS

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In a  
Word  
or Two

Elephants are the ultimate Pachyderms – those mammals with skins thicker than that of any a populist politician.

Elephants, Hippopotamus, Rhinoceros, Water Buffalo, and Wild Pigs – all not only qualify, but all have at some point at least, been glad to call Sri Lanka Home.

# THE CEYLON ELEPHANT



IMAGE PUBLIC DOMAIN

Once elephants were widespread across the island; today they are mostly to be found in the dry parts of the north, east and south east – especially in such wildlife parks as Udawalawe, Yala, Lunugamvehera, Wilpattu and Minneriya but they also live outside protected areas.

Although Sri Lanka has the highest density of elephants in Asia, as roads, villages, farms, plantations, and towns grow, they come into ever closer contact with humans – always to their extreme disadvantage.

Unsurprisingly, the numbers of the Sri Lankan elephant, which goes by the beautiful Latin name of *Elephas maximus maximus*, are falling fast.

The WWF put their total at between two and a half to four thousand, and although killing one carries the death penalty, habitat erosion and human–elephant conflict has pushed this largest of beasts into ever smaller areas. The threat they face is increasing existential. In 2023, 470 elephants were killed, a figure almost three times as high as the number of humans killed by elephants in the same year.

Smart, sociable, gregarious, and emotionally intelligent, it is unconscionable how widespread is the cruelty they face – heavily chained and marshalled to be more accessible for visitors. Unwilling parade dolls of the tourist trade, they are also victims of religious devotion. Owning an elephant brings with it immense prestige and the more ambitious temples are as eager as tourist sites to host their own animal.

One such unfortunate beast – Raja – even has his own museum dedicated to him, next to Kandy's temple of the Tooth. For decades he has the responsibility for carrying the sacred casket at the Kandy Perehera, until his death in 1988, a day which promoted the then government to declare National Mourning, and have the luckless beast stuffed and displayed for all time.

More recently, one of the leading elephant of the renowned Kandy Perehera was found to be suffering from such severe malnourishment, that it later died.

Veterinarians International, a global charity, has built the country's first bespoke elephant hospital and, like others, is doing much to reverse the institutionalized abuse they suffer.

Even so, the scales are tipped heavily away from a happy outcome. Laws – and more importantly – the enforcement of laws protecting elephants remains frontier territory, and the creatures are seen less as living wild animals and more as cute commodities, to be petted, prodded, tamed, photographed, and then forgotten.

# THE CEYLON MARSH ELEPHANT



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE PARTYING TRAVELER.

A noted sub species of Sri Lanka's endemic elephant, *Elephas Maximus Maximus*, the Ceylon Marsh (*Elephas Maximus Vil-Aliya*) is a still rarer beast, barely seen outside the flood plains of the Mahaweli Basin. It is a vast animal, its size and habitat preference marking it out more than anything else from its cousin.



# THE EXCTINCT CEYLON ELEPHANTS



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 PYGMY ELEPHANT



IMAGE COURTESY OF BRAD ABBOTT.

Almost as rare as the dodo, the Sri Lankan pygmy elephant was first recorded in 2012 in the Uda Walawe National Park. Standing barely two metres tall, it was the first confirmed case of disproportionate dwarfism in a fully-grown wild Asian elephant. When filmed he was busy attacking (and winning) a duel with a rival twice his size.

# THE SRI LANKAN HIPPOPOTAMUS



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 INDIAN WILD PIG OR BOAR



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. It looks nothing like the naked pink pigs

of popular imagining. They can weigh up to three hundred pounds and measure some five feet in length, with male boars being especially formidable in busting these averages.

They are beautiful looking creatures, well able to cheer up the most fashionable of cat walks, should they ever be called to do so. They are 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*.

# THE SRI LANKAN RHINOCEROS



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 INDIAN WATER BUFFALO



IMAGE PUBLIC DOMAIN.

Constructed by loving gods with luxuriant, solid, confident proportions, the Water Buffalo (*Bubalus Bubalis Bubalis*) makes its many other bovine relatives come across as whispery ragamuffins. Their literary pedigree dates back at least to the Akkadian kingdom of 2,500 BCE. They are fine sturdy creatures,

fit to grace any field or lawn. Black to slate grey with generously curved horns and reassuringly stocky bodies, they typically weigh 1,200 pounds, though double that weight has been recorded in some instances.

They work hard – often up to forty years with little holiday, living tractors for threshing and transportation.

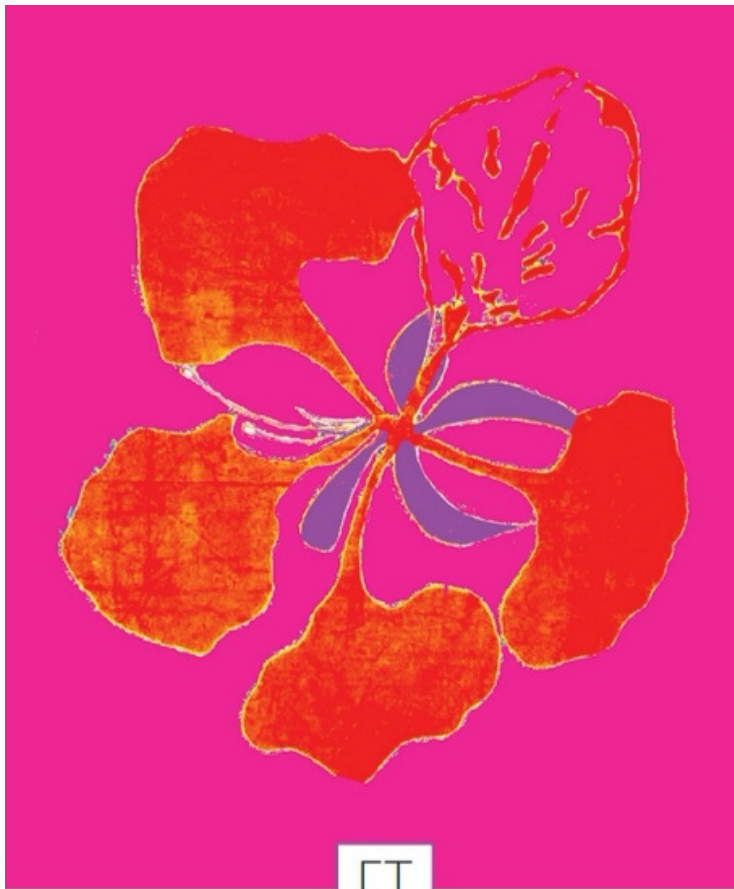
The unlucky ones are raised for meat; the lucky ones produce milk is richer in fat and protein than that of dairy cattle; and all produce the dung that fertilizes fields or is used to light cooking fires.



## DISCOVER MORE

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