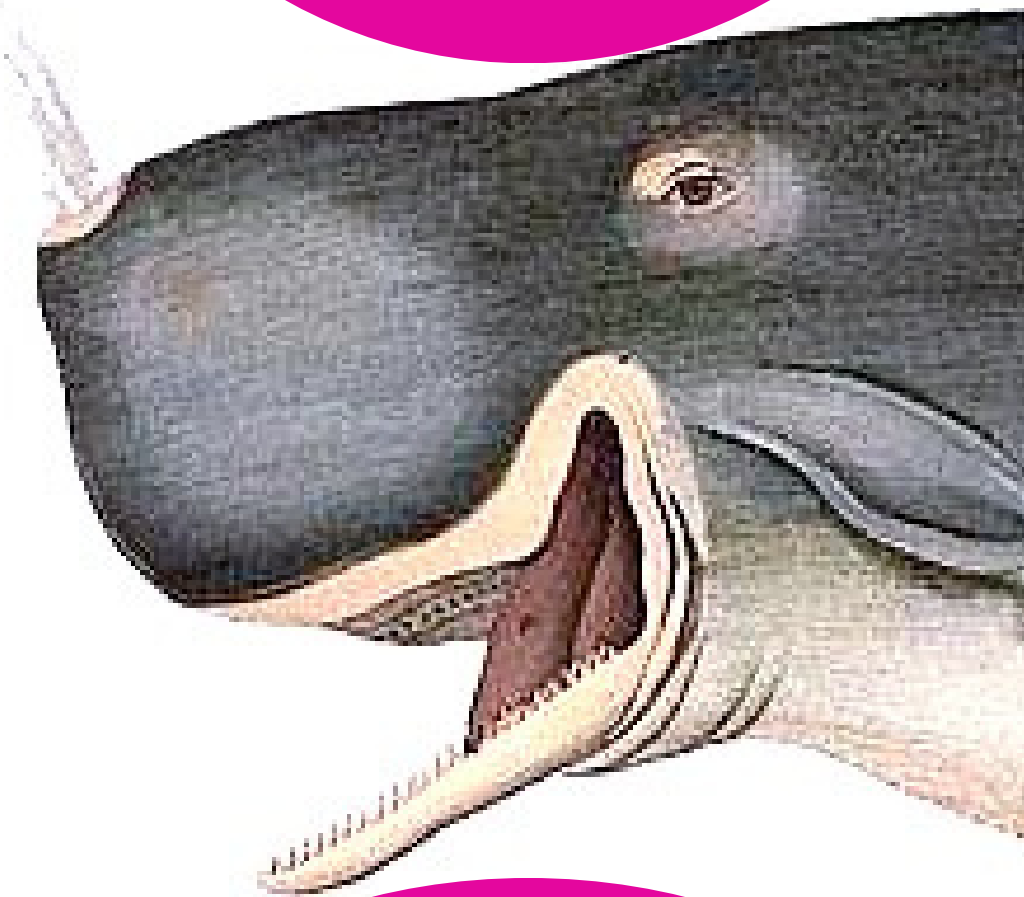


THERE SHE BLOWS



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

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DUGONGS

In a
Word
or Two

Three capacious seas splash against Sri Lanka's beaches – from the east, the Bay of Bengal; from the west the Laccadive Sea; and from the south the Indian Ocean. Purists might clamour for a fourth – the shallow Palk Straights that link the north of the island to the south of India.

Either way, the country is blessed by being so central to a great mix of oceans. Like a roundabout amidst a myriad of roads, its shores are a nursery, school, home, and larder for a plenitude of marine creatures, not least its mammals.

Whale watching, with abundant side helpings of dolphin and the odd bit of porpoise watching, are propelling a whole new branch of environmental tourism.

But for every blue whale, spinner dolphin
or humpback sighted, the greatest sight,
rare and compelling as it is, must be that
of the dugong as they dance their silent
and ever more endangered dance on the
sandy floors of the mangroves.

Whales

Sri Lanka's oceans are one of the best whale-watching spots in the world, a fact little known outside the country – and a state for which the whales themselves are likely to be quietly grateful about. For amongst the many issues that are depressing and even reducing their global numbers, noise pollution is one of the most significant.

The eerie, enigmatic sounds of whale songs and whale pod communication are very easily disrupted by excessive noises. Used to vast stretches of silent waters, motorised ships, eager boaters, and the scores of other sounds that penetrate the waves all combine to blot out or seriously disrupt one of the key means by which they organise themselves. Imagine being trapped all day in a busy

MacDonalds – that is all too often the new reality for many whales.

Scientists estimate that across the ninety species of whales found today, there are some 1.5 million creatures, many centred around specific oceans. Even so, given that whales swim the world around, it is impossible to argue the case for endemic whales. Sri Lanka boasts an impressive number of these massive saline residents including that most magnificent of whales – the Blue Whale. The most common other species recorded include the Humpback Whale and the Sperm Whale. Others crop up from time to time but these dozen below are as good a selection as you might hope to find:

1. Bryde's Whale
2. Blue Whale
3. Southern Bottlenose Whale
4. Common Rorqual Or Fin Whale
5. False Killer Whale
6. Ginkgo-Tooth Beaked Whale
7. Goose-Beaked Or Cuvier Beaked
8. Hump-Backed Whale
9. Killer Or Grampus Whale
10. Little Picked Minke Or Lesser Rorqual Whale
11. Pigmy Sperm Whale
12. Sperm Whale Or Cachalot Whale

The best time to see whales depends on
where you are:

for Mirissa it is November to April;

for Trincomalee aim for May to September;

for Kalpitiya it is from December to March.

THE BLUE WHALE



IMAGE COURTESY OF METEORED

Measuring up to one hundred feet, there is nothing that still lives on our harried planet quite so large or inspiring as the Blue Whale (*Balaenoptera Musculus*). From Moby-Dick, and the prophet Jonah, to Aristotle and Kipling, they have become creatures whose literary heritage is almost as impressive as their mythological one.

They sing, live blamelessly on krill, and press on through the ups and downs of life for up to ninety years. The males sport a 3-metre penis, the largest of any species still alive.

They are truly one of our planet's greatest wonders, yet have been hunted to near extinction, their numbers falling from around 140,000 in 1926 to some 25,000 in 2018. Today they also face serious threats from collisions with ships, and rising noise pollution.

They take about ten years to reach sexual maturity and produce calves every two to three years - a low, slow reproductive process that puts further strain on their global numbers. The only area of the world they seem to avoid is the Arctic.

Remarkably, the blue whales found off Sri Lanka's beaches are permanent residents, their otherwise migratory inclinations negated by the sheer magnetic nutrient wealth of the country's waters, fed by run off and monsoon rain and captured by an ocean shelf that is perfectly constituted to maximise the availability and accessibility of food.

BRYDE'S WHALE



IMAGE COURTESY OF JORDI CHIAS.

So elongated as to resemble a fifty-foot torpedo on testosterone, Bryde's Whale is so little known about that scientists postulate that what is one species could actually be four. Or three. No-one knows, yet it is considered widely distributed and is regularly if infrequently, seen off Sri Lanka's shores.

THE COMMON RORQUAL OR FIN WHALE

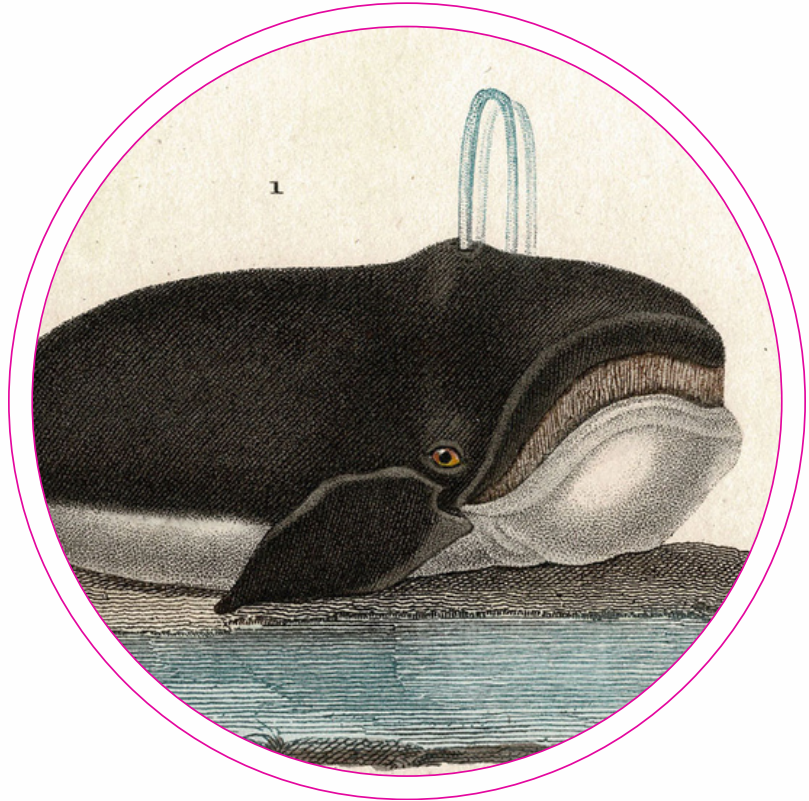


IMAGE: PUBLIC DOMAIN.

At almost ninety feet in length, the Fin Whale (*Balaenoptera Physalus*) is only pipped to the post of longest living animal on earth by the Blue Whale. The American explorer Roy Chapman Andrews memorably described it as "the greyhound of the sea," with a "beautiful, slender body built like a racing yacht."

Able to swim at speeds of twenty-five miles per hour, they are creatures that like to take their time about things, reaching full sexual maturity at around twenty-five years, and going onto to enjoy a life expectancy that in some cases has been recorded to be as long as one hundred and thirty years.

Migratory by nature, they are distributed right around the world except the Arctic, but sightings of them around Sri Lanka remain relatively rare.

THE FALSE KILLER WHALE



PICTURE COURTESY OF NATUREISMETAL.

The False Killer Whale (*Pseudorca Crassidens*) gets its unfortunate name from being easily confused with killer whales; a similarity that taxed vexed Victorian marine biologists ever eager to pin them down. Found all around the world, they prefer tropical waters – and deep ones at that but remain a rare and prized sight for Sri Lankan whale watchers.

They often travel in pods of a dozen or so animals so giving their infrequent appearances all the anticipation of London buses.

They grow to around twenty feet in length and frequently socialize with dolphins, especially the common bottlenose dolphin – sometimes rather excessively, their friendship descending into attempts at both sex and, even less happily, murder.

There are no reliable estimates for their global population, and although they can live up to almost sixty years their calving is a long and involved business.

THE GINKGO-TOOTH BEAKED WHALE



IMAGE COURTESY OF ALCHETRON.

A mere sixteen feet in length, the Ginkgo-Tooth Beaked Whale (*Mesoplodon Ginkgodens*) is one of the most mysterious of whales, little studied, and rarely seen. It inhabits tropical and warm temperate waters in the Pacific and Indian Oceans and whilst there have been the odd sighting off Sri Lanka, seeing one is an event worthy of newspaper headlines.

THE GOOSE-BEAKED OR CUVIER BEAKED WHALE



IMAGE COURTESY OF SIYABONA AFRICA.

Cuvier's Beaked Whale (*Ziphius Cavirostris*) is a relatively small beast in whale terms (around 20 feet in length) but holds the record for the deepest and longest dives, plunging to almost 3,000 metres for over 200 minutes. When not displaying such pressure-busting dexterity, it keeps to tropical or temperate seas of 1,000 feet in depth; and is occasionally spotted in the deeper seas around Sri Lanka.

THE HUMP-BACKED WHALE



IMAGE COURTESY OF US.WHALES.ORG.

The Hump-Backed Whale (*Megaptera Novceanglias*) is one of whale conservation's rare success stories. The future started extension in the face for by the 1960s hunting had driven the Hump Bac ked Whale's global numbers down to around 5,000.

Today they have recorded to stand at an estimated 135,000 – this, despite the continual and rising pressures the face from collision with ships and noise pollution.

They are migratory beasts, delighted to embark on journeys of 5,000 miles and are to be found almost everyone around the world.

Their name derives from their idiosyncratic body shape; a snug hump, to which are attached huge flippers, one third the length of their entire body (which itself usually measures fifty feet in length).

The males are much given to long songs – often thirty minutes in length. They can live for up to fifty years and become sexually active at around five to ten years.

Although rarely spotted off Sri Lanka's beaches, they is still sufficiently seen as to give hope to determined whale watchers.

THE KILLER OR GRAMPUS WHALE



IMAGE PUBLIC DOMAIN.

"Orcas," wrote Pliny the Elder around 70 CE, some time before his death during the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, have an "appearance of which no image can express, other than an enormous mass of savage flesh with teeth; they are the enemy of [other kinds of whale]... they charge and pierce them like warships ramming."

Their reputation has not recovered from this bleak assessment. Despite being known as Killer Whales (Orcinus Orca), they are actually a type of dolphin, albeit vast – around thirty feet in length. They live typically for thirty years or so but often do not become sexually active until halfway through this period.

They are strikingly intelligent, their brains weighing more than most other whales but the sperm whale. They have been recorded deliberating imitating one another and teaching exact skills to their young. Linguistically adroit, within the pods in which they live, they appear to communicate with one other in dialects different to those used by other pods. Their interaction with humans is more one of curiosity than a determined desire to consume what they see.

They prey on fish, seals, sharks, dolphins, porpoises and even whales much larger than themselves – but have also been recorded tossing sea lions to their death for the sheer fun of it. Play is in fact something that stands out in studies made of the creature: they are playful, strategic, and determined – the sort of whale you might chose to have next to you at a corporate dinner for the sheer pleasure of lively companionship.

THE LITTLE PICKED MINKE OR LESSER RORQUAL WHALE

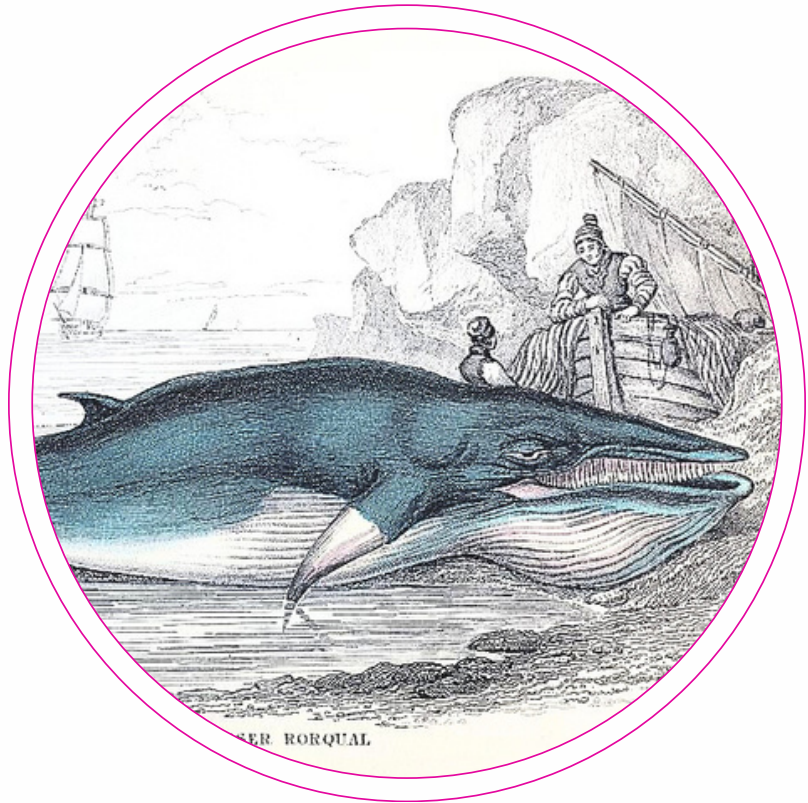


IMAGE PUBLIC DOMAIN.

The Little Picked Whale Minke Whale (*Balaenoptera Acutorostrata*) is a solitary beast, happiest roaming solo style like aquatic David Livingstones, albeit without the porters. They are only “little” in whale terms, measuring in at 30 feet or more. They are widely distributed, and enter sexual maturity at 8 years, living for up to 50 years. They are infrequent visitors to the Sri Lanka’s seas but common enough to have been regularly sighted.

THE PIGMY SPERM WHALE

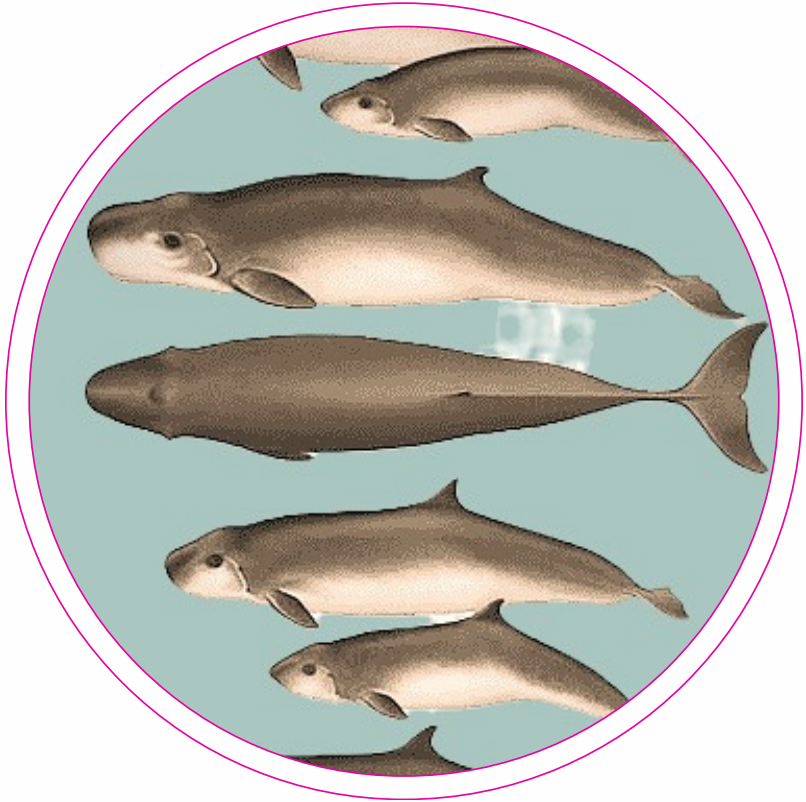


IMAGE COURTESY OF PNGWING.

The Pigmy Sperm Whale (*Kogia breviceps*) is the sprat of the whale world, measuring little more than 11 feet. It has a solid barrel-like body and notably fewer brain neurons than its cousins, making it more intellectually challenged than many other whales. They live for little over 20 years, and are shy, rarely spotted creatures, albeit ones occasionally seen off Sri Lanka's beaches.

THE SOUTHERN BOTTLENOSE WHALE



IMAGE COURTESY OF UK.WHALES.ORG

Spotting a Southern Bottlenose Whale (*Hyperoodon Planifrons*) off Sri Lanka's coast is rare. They live most typically in the Antarctic, but a few have been spotted near Sri Lanka, most possibly lost., and, if found in waters of less than around a1,000 metres deep, they are well off their preferred habitat. Measuring just over 20 feet , they can be mistaken for giant dolphins with their tubelike snout and bulbous head.

THE SPERM OR CACHALOT WHALE



IMAGE COURTESY OF REALAQUATICS.CO.UK.

Massive, migratory, equipped with the largest brain of any living creature, and able to live up to seventy years, the Sperm Whale (*Physeter Catodora*) is everything that a well bred species of whale aims to be. It abounds in superlatives: a four chambered stomach, the longest intestinal system of any creature in the world;

capable of emitting a sound louder than any other living beast, and happiest swimming in ice-free waters over 1,000 metres deep.

Hunted by commercial whalers for hundreds of years, their numbers were pushed to the point of extreme vulnerability but have since started to recover – slowly.

They are one of the most sighted whales off Sri Lanka's shores, tempted by warm and plentiful seas to group together and mate, forming super pods of sometimes a hundred beasts in March and April.

Dolphins
&
Porpoises

Even accepting their preference for tropical and sub-tropical waters, it is invidious to write of endemic dolphins in Sri Lanka, given the creature's ability to swim where it pleases. But the island is especially blessed in being able to attract quite so many species to so many parts of its off shore waters. Although all the common species are backed by plentiful numbers, their long term prospects are worrying and their (often long) life expectancy is threatened by fishing, pollution, noise, and climate change.

As the differences between dolphins and porpoises are only capable of being disentangled by only the most scholarly of cetologists, the island's only porpoises is included in this book's otherwise all-dolphin pool. Dolphin watchers can curse their bad fortune if they fail to see at least two or three of the most common species to swim with accustomed acrobatic ease around Sri Lanka – including:

1. Common Bottlenose Dolphin
2. Common Dolphin
3. Spinner Dolphin
4. Indian Ocean Humpback Dolphin
5. Little Indian Porpoise
6. Pantropical Spotted Dolphin
7. Risso's Dolphin
8. Fraser's Dolphin

THE COMMON BOTTLENOSE DOLPHIN



IMAGE COURTESY OF NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC.

The Common Bottlenose Dolphin (*Tursiops Truncatus*) is practically a citizen of the world so widespread is its distribution - which happily includes the oceans off Sri Lanka's coasts. Gunboat grey, with a single blowhole, a dorsal fin, and a length of anything up to thirteen feet,

they have a brain larger than that of humans, a good enough argument for replacing all the politicians of the world with aquariums of Common Bottlenose Dolphin.

They are also very sociable, usually living in pods of around 15 animals – though when the party mood takes them, the pod can dramatically expand to around 1000. They talk to one another with signature whistles.

Males are famous for their life long bromances, displaying the sort of impressive emotional intelligence that might have shocked John Wayne.

Females breed every 3 years or so, keeping their young with them till they are up to eight years old. Their enviably healthy fish diet helps promote a life expectancy that has been recorded as between 40–60 years. They can be seen off beaches as far apart as Trincomalee, Kalpitiya and Mirissa.

THE COMMON DOLPHIN

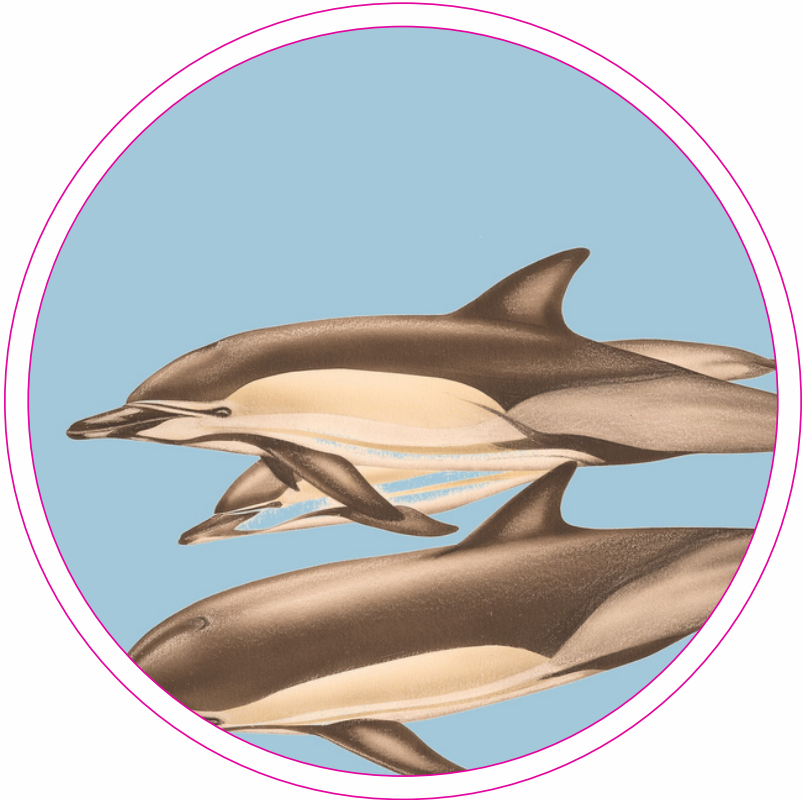


IMAGE COURTESY OF ESPAÇO TALASSA

Widely distributed and happily plentiful in number, the Common Dolphin (*Delphinus Delphis*) is a most sociable creature, living in packs of a dozen or so – but ones that have been known to come together with others to number 10,000 for short periods of time. Interestingly, unlike many other dolphins, their social order is not matriarchal

- indeed, male dolphins probably push the aqua pram more often than do females. Within the pods are to be found sub pods – mixed gender nursery pods, all male pods, and mixed gender pods of adults and wanna-be adults.

Measuring up to eight feet in length they display a beautiful two tone coloration: slate grey upper sides, and white undersides.

They can be seen off up and down the Sri Lankan coastline from Trincomalee to Point Dondra, and Kalpitiya around to Mirissa.

FRASER'S DOLPHIN



IMAGE COURTESY OF NOAA FISHERIES.

Fraser's Dolphin (*Lagenodelphis hosei*) is most typically found in the Americas but is so frequent a visitor of Asian oceans as to be a strong contender to spot around Sri Lanka. Like an old fashioned Skoda, they are tiny (about 3 feet in length) and stocky, with the uncertain accolade of having the smallest genitalia of any dolphin. Even so, they species is plentiful and highly social, living in pods of around 100 animals.

THE INDIAN OCEAN HUMPBACK DOLPHIN



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE GREMLIN.

The Indian Ocean Humpback Dolphin (*Sotalia Plumbea*) has a much more restricted range than many of its relatives and can only really be found along off the eastern African seaboard, around the Arabian peninsula, and the coast line of India and Sri Lanka.

They are an endangered species – so spotting one is unusual and special. Infant mortality rates are especially high as they are unduly sensitive to environmental pollution, habitat changes and noise.

They grow to around eight feet in length and live in pods of around a dozen or so family members, enjoying a life expectancy of well over forty years.

THE LITTLE INDIAN PORPOISE



IMAGE COURTESY OF R/AWWEDUCATIONAL.

It would take a good defence witness to convince a jury of the differences between a dolphin and a porpoise. Close scrutiny reveals that porpoises have shorter snouts, smaller mouths, less curved dorsal fins, and shorter tubbier bodies than dolphins.

And whilst Sri Lanka delights in making space in its oceans for seven types of dolphins, only one porpoise is seen here (and that very rarely) – the Little Indian Porpoise (*Neophocoena Phocaenoides*).

Also known as the finless porpoise, its distribution stretches from Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Bangladesh, the Persian Gulf, the Taiwan Strait – and Sri Lanka.

Shy, and most certainly not the boat leaping show-offs that characterise dolphins, they grow to around seven feet in length, talk to each other and, when not caught up in fishing nets or polluted out of existence, can live to around 30 years.

They are, of course, sadly at the Threatened/Vulnerable end of the Conservation Table.

THE PANTROPICAL SPOTTED DOLPHIN



IMAGE COURTESY OF CAREY AKIN.

Slender, elegant, playful, acrobatic, the Pantropical Spotted Dolphin (*Stenella Attenuata*) is exactly the kind of dolphin you might most want erupting around the prow of your gin palace as you steam out to sea for a hard day's sun bathing.

Although happily plentiful in quantity, their numbers have been falling dramatically over the past decade or so.

Found in tropical and sub-tropical waters, they can be seen off many of the beaches of Sri Lanka.

Their fondness for tuna has the depressing side result of ensuring that many are killed by fishermen, tragic by products of the race to keep the sushi bars of the world running smoothly.

RISSE'S DOLPHIN



IMAGE COURTESY OF GREG BOREHAM.

Risso's Dolphin (*Grampus Griseus*) hugs the coast line of most of the world's continents, and of course, the island of Sri Lanka. Measuring thirteen feet in length, connoisseurs of squid and seaweed, they are usually found in pods of a dozen or more. As with many other dolphin species, bromances are common, and the species enjoys a life expectancy of around 40 years.

THE SPINNER DOLPHIN



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE INERTIA.

The Spinner Dolphin (*Stenella Longirostris*) comes in at the smaller end of the dolphin spectrum – around seven feet in length, and can be found in gladdening numbers wherever there is tropical or subtropical water.

They gain their name (“spinner”) for the considerable athletic, ariel and acrobatic feats they are fond of performing – which may help account for their (compared to other dolphin species) relative short life expectancy of twenty five years.

Although highly sociable and found in pods, they are not as trenchantly tied to one another as some other dolphin species.

They are especially plentiful to see in Kalpitiya – but are also commonly sighted in such other locations as the beaches off Trincomalee and Mirissa.

Dugongs

THE COMMON DUGONG



IMAGE COURTESY OF AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC.

"On the previous day [8 Jan 1493]," read the Voyages of Columbus, "when the Admiral went to the Rio del Oro, he said he quite distinctly saw three mermaids, which rose well out of the sea; but they are not so beautiful as they are said to be, for their faces had some masculine traits."

In fact, what Columbus saw that day in early January off the coast of Haiti was a dugong, a remarkable creature whose DNA happily proves that real mermaids do not possess any of the plastic Barbie-and-Kens DNA that mermaids are more typically imaged with in films, cartoons, and illustrations.

Also known as the sea cow, it lives with bovine contentment, grazing on sea grass meadows in shallow bays, mangroves, the waters of inshore islands and inter-reef waters. Growing to around eleven feet in length, with poor eyesight but a good sense of smell, they propel themselves forward by flippers and tail, and although they can live to up to seventy years, they are so vulnerable as to be close to extinction. #

Widespread legal protection has not stopped them being hunted, whilst habitat pollution and degradation has also decimated their numbers. In Sri Lanka, their meat was highly sought and considered to have medicinal and aphrodisiac properties; and diaries note that as recently as the 1950s over one hundred and fifty slaughtered animals were offered for sale annually in Mannar alone. Their cautious reproductive habits do not much help them either, with males taking sometimes as many as eighteen years to reach sexual maturity. The impressive Dugong and Seagrass Conservation Project reports

depressingly that “large herds of dugongs were reported to have occurred in the Palk Strait between India and Sri Lanka in the early 1900s; however, none were sighted during aerial surveys conducted of Palk Bay and the waters off western Sri Lanka in the 1980s, and their current status and distribution are unknown.”

Even so, they have been uncorroborated reports of more recent sightings – including one in 2017 in Puttalam Lagoon.



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.

Read its story in *A History of Sri Lanka*, or hear it as a podcast. The *Companion to Sri Lanka* makes visible more of the whole. The digital Museum of Sri Lanka unites the island's artefacts – scattered around the world – into a single exhibition. Its downloadable eBooks cover all Sri Lankan subjects. Its podcast, *Poetry from the Jungle*, presents the work of 80 poets to reset the literary canon. And in case it all gets too serious, enjoy the off-grid *Jungle Diaries* blog and Podcast. All these works are added to weekly and available free at theceylonpress.com.



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