THE CEYLON PRESS POCKET PROFESSOR

A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION TO THE LAND MAMMALS OF SRI LANKA

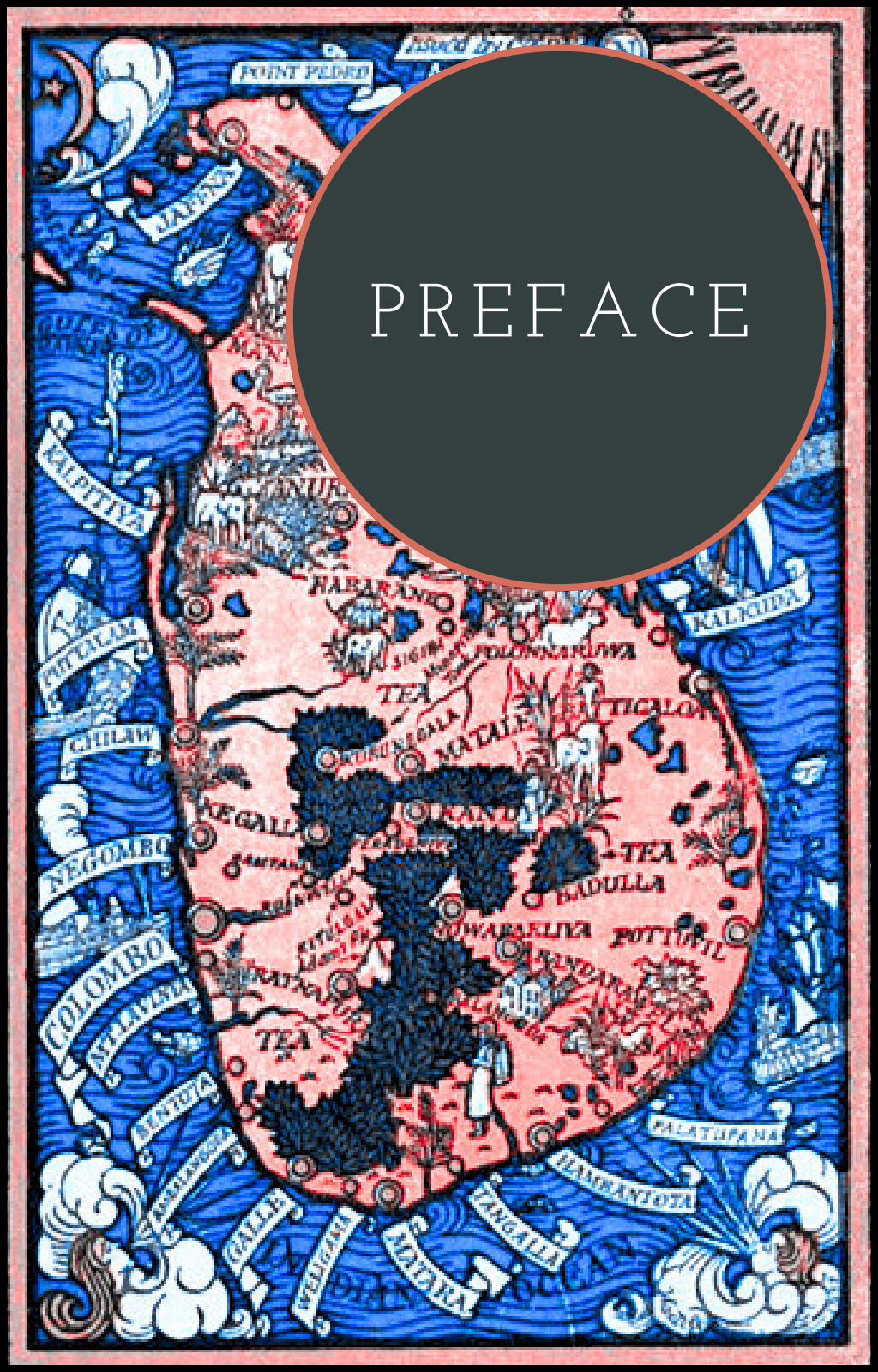
M

THE POCKET PROFESSOR

A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION TO THE LAND MAMMALS OF SRI LANKA

DAVID SWARBRICK
& The Editors of The Ceylon Press

Published By The Ceylon Press 2024


PREFACE

“The world is indeed full of peril, and in it there are many dark places; but still there is much that is fair, and though in all lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater.”

J.R.R. Tolkien

Endangered though so many of them are, Sri Lanka's land mammals are nevertheless a breeding ground for argument. The disputes start by attempting to agree the actual number of land mammals on the island. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, 103 mammals, endemic or otherwise, are found across Sri Lanka – but that number is a red rag to the tens of thousands of scientists with a passion for post 1700 CE Linnaean taxology. Some argue for more, others for less.

Looked at from the mammals' perspective, this is akin to asking how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. A much more relevant question would be, how many mammals are there likely to be in 2050? For survival is, of course, the critical question. As Darwin meant to say: "it is not the strongest or the most intelligent who will survive but those who can best manage change." And change is demanding profoundly impossible things of the country's diminishing mammals.

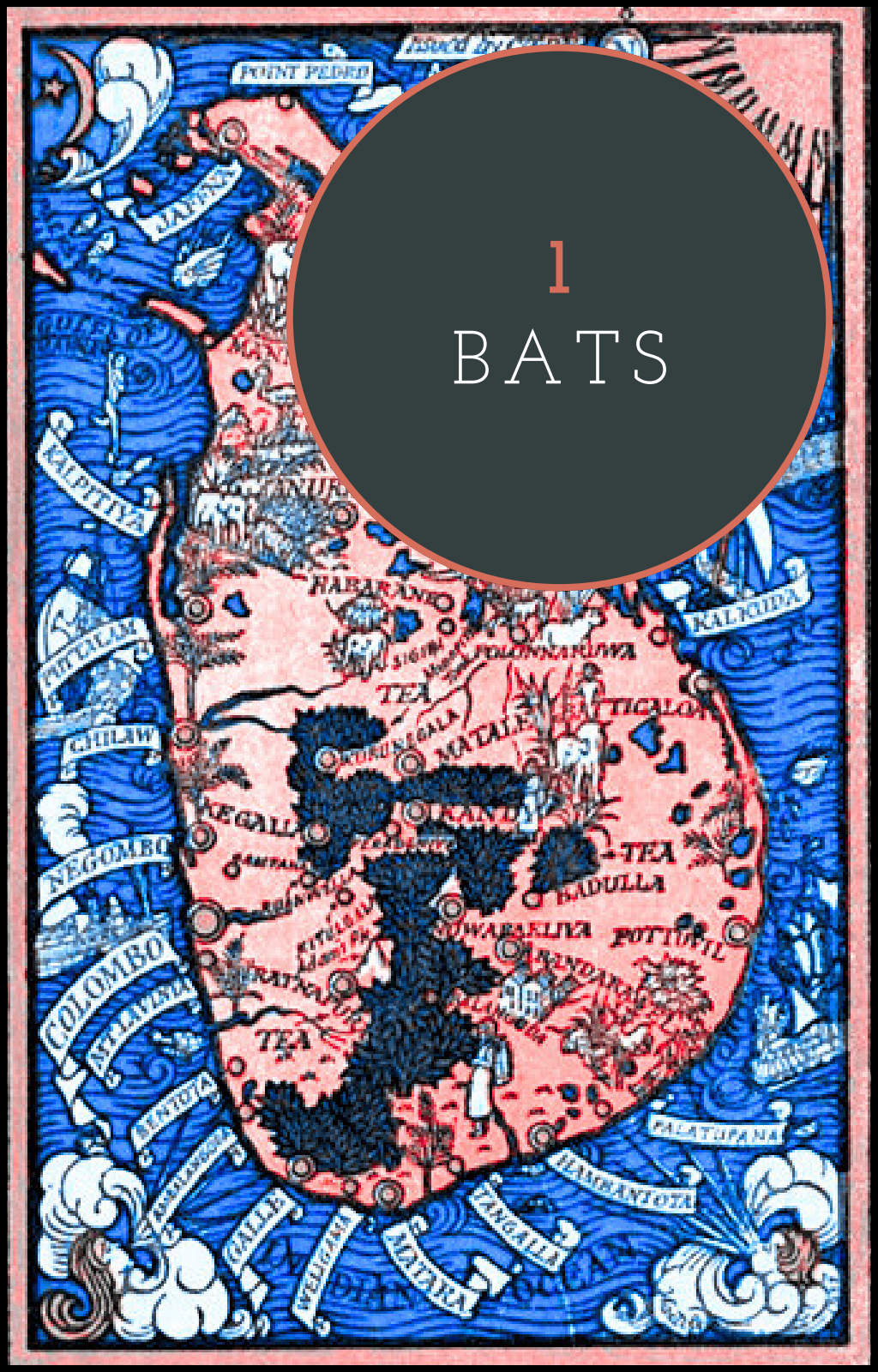
Disputes surround the conservation status of all the island's mammals. The list of mammals published by the International Union for Conservation of Nature is among the more optimistic. Even so, many scientists who have conducted on the ground research into specific species numbers, would, and do, vehemently disagree with the organization's sanguine classification. The Red List, for example, takes a more negative stance. Even the most optimistic

of figures are little less than distressing and depressing. Over a third of the total mammals on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's list face such threats to their existence that they are more than likely to become extinct. Twenty-one species face such an existential threat to their future existence that they are judged to be Endangered. These include such iconic mammals as the Sri Lankan Elephant, the Leopard and two of its most celebrated monkeys.

Nine others are teetering on the edge of becoming extinct in the wild - including the famous Sloth Bear and Golden Palm Civet. Six more, including the Ottar and the Tufted Gray Langur, are likely to face the prospect of being so vulnerable as to join these nine. Just over half the balance are judged to be of Least Concern – include thirteen shrews, mice, and rats, thirty bats, leaving what is left to own up to so little data as to be unclassifiable.

"Sometimes," said Seneca, "even to live is an act of courage," a sentiment of particular personal relevance to the philosopher who had been ordered to kill himself by Nero but made such a hash of it that it took several attempts and many hours to accomplish. But suicide is a peculiarly human undertaking. For Sri Lanka's land mammals, their march to the precipice of oblivion is one prompted not by them but by human actions - poaching, deforestation, urbanization, pollution, and climate change.

What you see today, however ordinary, is likely to be suspended tomorrow. Superseded – and contracted. Which makes their observation now such a privilege and a thrill – be it a bat or rat, alpha cat, or elephant; bear, loris or shrew. Size, contrary to all rumours, really does not matter, whatsoever. Once you start to witness any creature every bit as entitled to share with you your scrap of earth, you move inexorably from a human centric view of life, to sometime more universal; and with it perhaps, the radical dawning and deeply shocking conclusion that neither of you has a greater right to have things just their way. "The world," noted Yates, "is full of magic things, patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper."


POINT PEDRO
MANNAR
JAFFNA
PUTTALAM
CHILAW
NEGOMBO
COLOMBO
RATNAPURA
GALLE
MATARA
TRINCOMALEE
BATTICALOA
KALUTARA
HAMBANTOTA
TEA
TEA
TEA

1
BATS

"The wide world is all about you: you can fence yourselves in, but you cannot forever fence it out."

J.R.R. Tolkien

Bats, oddly enough, are the best place for an emergent Sri Lankan zoologist to start his or her observations, for Sri Lanka is bat country, its incredible range of environments supporting thirty of the world's fourteen hundred bat species.

They range in size from ones tiny enough to sit comfortably upon a thumbnail to those with a wingspan of one and a half 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.

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 forty-one years. But watch them from a distance for they are enthusiastic harbingers of diseases, especially those best able to leap from animal to human.

Should the Sri Lankan Woolly Bat fly first across your binocular lens, then you are among the blessed for it is the country's only endemic bat. This tiny creature, barely fifty milometers 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 five hundred to a thousand metres, though its sightings are so rare that it has not been properly assessed for a score on the list of endangered animals.

The Tube-Nosed Bat is also the sole ambassador of his particular bat family, its two closest cousins living elsewhere in South & SE Asia. Averaging little more than eighty-nine centimetres in length and weighing less than twelve grams, this midget gets its somewhat anatomical name from its tubular nostrils; and sports a darkish brown covering of fur. Also solo is the unfortunately named Long-Winded Bat – though twelve cousins live more companionably in other countries as far afield as Austria to Korea. A small creature with reddish grey fur, it is happiest grouping together with relatives in caves, caverns, and rock holes.

Eight of the country's bats come in pairs from just four bat families. The reassuringly named False Vampire has two bats in its grouping (with three others elsewhere in the world), the family name coming from a folk belief that they enjoy feasting on blood. Both are tiny – around one hundred centimetres in length, but whilst the Ceylon False Vampire Bat prefers dining on insects (and occasionally other bats), the Indian False Vampire Bat is a big meat eater, happiest devouring birds, and

fish. It differs in colour with the Ceylon variant having fur that is noticeably browner than the grey-blue fur of its Indian cousin.

The two happily named Free-Tailed Bat come from one of the largest bat families – with one hundred and ten other variants globally. They are well named for they have an uncommon ability to fly fast – and well above the norm. Just two of the world's ninety Horseshoe Bats are found on the island, which is perhaps just as well.

They are far from popular, being linked to the 2002–2004 SARS and COVID-19 outbreak. The Rufous Horseshoe Bat is the more glamorous of the pair, with a bright orange body, its cousin the Ceylon Great Horse-Shoe Bat being darker in colour. Both are tiny beasts, happiest in moist evergreen forests.

The glamorous Painted Bat is a relatively rare creature to encounter. One variety, the Painted Bat, is a solitary beast despite its opulent colouring: bright orange or scarlet, with black wings; and tiny, barely a hundred millimetres from tail to nose. Its cousin, the Malpas Bat 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 soldiers,

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

The Sheath-Tailed Bat has three variants in its grouping, the happy hounds of the bat world with faces that resemble a dog, and fur that is reddish grey, though the Pouch-Bearing Sheath-Tailed Bat, a retiring creature, tends to be blacker in its markings. It is larger and less gregarious than the Black-Bearded Sheath-Tailed Bat which can sometimes be found in colonies of many hundreds. The Long-Armed Sheath-Tailed Bat is the most familiar of the three, as happy in cities in the forest.

Eight of the island's bats come from just two families. The Fruit Bat has four bats in its grouping, though sixty across the rest of the world. They are famously gregarious and groups of between fifteen thousand to one hundred thousand cluster together like airborne townships.

The Ceylon Fruit Bat is brown to grey brown, and fourteen centimetres head to tail. Similarly coloured, though smaller is the Indian Short-Nosed Fruit Bat - almost impossible to tell apart from the Ceylon Short-Nosed Fruit Bat. But the unquestioned head of this family is the Common Flying Fox Bat. These are the megabats of the bat world. With a wingspan of one and a half 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. 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 second family, the Leaf-Nosed-Shoe Bats have been much poured over by scientists eager to classify and reclassify its many members.

Of the seventy species 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 habitats above a thousand metres, though the Ceylon Bi-Coloured Leaf-Nosed Bat, first described in 1834, is willing to move a little higher up the hills.

Barely ten years later, in 1846, as the East Indian Company 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. Both came lower down in the pecking order from Schneider Leaf-Nosed Bat, 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 which was first described in1850.

2

MICE


POINT PEDRO
JAFFNA
KALPITIYA
CHILAW
NEGOMBO
COLOMBO
HABARANE
TEA
MATALE
KANDY
TEA
BADULLA
TEA
PALATUPANA
HAMBANTOTA
TANGALLA
MATARA
WELIGAMA
GALLE

"Even the smallest person can change the course of the future."

J.R.R. Tolkien

The Insectivorous bats are the largest of the bat families that occur in Sri Lanka. There are eight bats in this 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, unkindly known as “pungent “is rarely seen.

Its tiny (five gram) reddish brown cousin, Kelaart's Pipistrel Bat is a little more noticeable but a sad member of the List of Endangered Species, just like its equally tiny cousin, the Indian Pipistrel Bat.

The Indian Pygmy Pipistrel Bat – whose touching Latin name is Pipistrellus Mimus Mimus – is even smaller, just three grams in weight. Of the remaining four, two – the Greater Yellow Bat and the Lesser Yellow Bat - gain their name for their yellowish bronze brown fur, and can weigh in at up to fifty grams.

The other two, also well proportioned, are Van Hasselt's Bat, discovered in 1840; and Tickell's Bat, discovered in1851.

If bats present a bit of a challenge to zoologies due to their modest size, mice demand even greater helping of patience. Sri Lanka is home to a very respectable range of mouse species, three of which are endemic to the island - Mayor's Spiny Mouse (which actually comes into two distinct but impossible to tell apart variants); the very rare Sri Lankan Spiny Mouse; and the almost equally rare Ceylon Highland Long-Tailed Tree Mouse.

The Ceylon Highland Long-Tailed Tree Mouse was discovered in 1929 by the Dutch tea planter, Adriaan Constant Tutein-Nolthenius, and is an increasingly rare creature, little more than twenty-one centimetres in length, nose to tail.

It is found in Sri Lanka's hill country where it lives in trees, venturing out only by night. Like most mice, it has reddish brown fur that occasionally grows darker but compared to its many cousins, presents somewhat disappointingly small ears.

The Sri Lankan Spiny Mouse barely reaches eighteen centimetres in length, from nose to tail, and is now so endangered that it can be seen in a few locations.

Its reddish grey back and sides morph into white underparts, with huge gorgeous smooth scooped out ears that stand like parasols above large dark eyes. It is a mouse to fall in love with.

Mayor's Spiny Mouse inhabits the smaller end of the mouse spectrum, and comes in two variants, one which inhabits the hill country; and one which prefers the low wetlands. Telling them apart is almost impossible, and both are covered with reddish grey fur and exhibit rather unsatisfactorily small ears. Seeing them is also a challenge for they are both nocturnal creatures.

One of their more interesting (albeit worrying) points of difference to other mice is their capacity to carry quite so many other creatures on them – including mites, ticks, sucking louses and small scorpions.

These three tiny patriotic native creatures are joined by a range of other mice typically found in across South and Southeast Asia.

As widely distributed as only the most successful mammals are, the Ceylon Field Mouse is to be found well outside the island's shores from India to Cambodia - as well as within them.

It happily populates almost all kinds of habitats. It is often called the Fawn Colour Mouse for its light fur, and grows to little more than fifteen centimetres in length, nose to tail.

The tiny (thirteen centimetres in length, nose to tail) Indian Field Mouse is one of those mammals of the Indian sub-continent that has long term residency rights in Sri Lanka where it is found almost everywhere. It is all a

mouse aims to be, with a small rounded hunched body, lovely rounded smooth ears, and light brown to white fur.

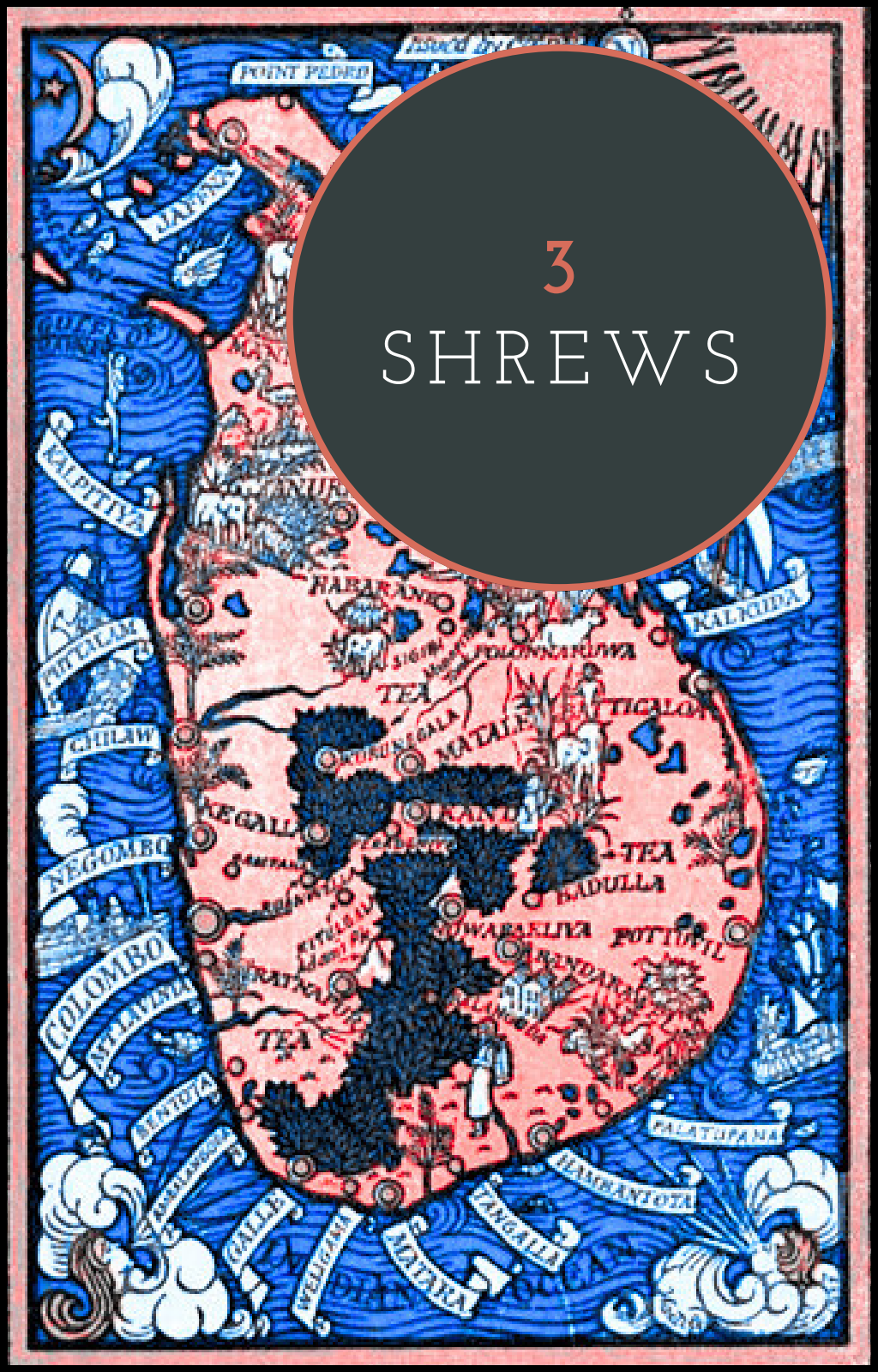
Common throughout South and Southeast Asia, the Asiatic or Indian Long-Tailed Climbing Mouse grows to little more than twenty centimetres in length, nose to tail, and sports reddish brown fur that fades to white on its underparts.

It is widely distributed – but not a creature to go out of your way to befriend for it is notorious for spreading the tick-borne viral Kyasanur Forest Disease that causes headaches, chills, muscle pain, and vomiting and can take months to recover from.

A less noxious animal, beloved of mouse pet owners, science and regularly used in laboratories, is the Indian House Mouse, a creature that most commonly comes to mind when one thinks of a mouse.

It is widely distributed across Asia and elsewhere and in urban areas it has become an almost tame companion to the humans its lives around.

Rarely more than twenty centimetres in length, nose to tail, it is one of the most studied and understood mammals in the world, its typical behavioural characteristics itemized even down to the differences exhibited if it lives in sandy dunes as opposed to apartment buildings.


POINT PEDRO
MANNAR
JAFFNA
PUTTALAM
CHILAW
NEGOMBO
COLOMBO
RATNAPURA
GALLE
MATARA
TRINCOMALEE
BATTICALOA
KANDY
KURUNEGALA
TEA
TEA
TEA
BADULLA
POTTUVIL
HAMBANTOTA

3
SHREWS

"Courage is found in unlikely places."

J.R.R. Tolkien

Shrews, secretive, tiny, shy, and elusive, make mice-spotting easy work. With their rat-like appearance, petite size, invisible nocturnal habit, and modest behaviour, shrew rarely hit any headlines.

Although shrews have a considerable way to go in attracting the sort of adulatory attention bestowed on other rare and endemic Sri Lankan mammals, six of the nine shrew species found on the island are endemic. Lilliputian they may be in size, but for any species, this is a more than commendable achievement.

Most commonly seen are the various sub species of the Musk Shrew, an invasive and little loved creature that counts countries other than just Sri Lanka as home. The rare Kelaart's Long-Tailed Shrew and Horsfield's Shrew are also found on the island – as well as into India. But of the six that take gold as endemic beasts – with the questionably rare, and threatened prestige that goes with it, the Sinharaja White Toothed Shrew take pole position. The rarified world of shrew scientists became jubilantly animated in 2007 when this entirely new endemic species was agreed upon.

Extensive research by Sri Lankan scientists determined that what had been masquerading in Sinharaja as the Ceylon Long-tailed Shrew was actually a quite different shrew species, and one that had, till then, not been properly recognised or identified. A closer study of its bone structure, taken with the simple

observation that it had a shorter tail, resulted in the formal recognition of this new endemic species. Sadly however, it is so restricted in distribution as to be almost entirely invisible – and has been found in only two areas of the edge of the Sinharaja Forest.

Almost as elusive is the Ceylon Jungle Shrew - barely twenty centimetres long, nose to nail, with grey fur and a preference for subtropical or tropical forests. Seeing one is a rare sight for the tiny creature is highly endangered as well as being, like most shrews, a determinedly nocturnal beast.

Noted for their extreme smallness, the Ceylon Pygmy Shrew takes this characterization one stage further, being so tiny as to barely measure nine centimetres, nose to tail. But though minuscule, it is a much more handsome than many of its relatives and sports fur that is nicely chocolate brown to dark grey.

As benefits so small beast, it has a commendably long Latin moniker, much of it deriving from being named for Marjory née Fellowes-Gordon, the wife of the amateur Dutch naturalist who first recorded it.

Highly endangered, it has been recorded as living in the low mountain rainforests of the Sabaragamuwa and Central Provinces, with a possible third sighting in the Western Province.

Equally hard to see is the Ceylon Long-Tailed Shrew, which measures a mere twelve centimetres nose to tail. It is so deeply threatened by habitat loss and logging that it has recently only been recorded in five highly fragmented areas in the Central and Sabaragamuwa provinces, despite its record of once living as happily in the high mountain forests as much as the lowland ones.

Covered in predictably modest brown fur with hints of grey, there is little about its appearance to help mark out the treasured and rare life it still attempts to cleave to, so validating that adage: never judge a shrew by its cover.

The Ceylon Highland Shrew is also endangered. Restricted to the central highlands of the country, it presents itself with an unapologetic style, being rat-like and grey, its take-it-or-leave-it attitude of little help to environmental publicists eager to drum up the sympathy that these endangered animal merit.

The Musk Shrew is a much more common sight and is found right across South and Southeast Asia, along with its very close cousin, the Indian Grey Musk-Rat Shrew .

Indeed both are so widely found as to be considered invasive species. Able to live almost anywhere, they breed with alarming ease, and eat anything vaguely edible to keep their large rat-like (fifteen-centimetre nose to tail) bodies in peak condition.

Three other shrews of more refined parentage make up the island's tally, the first of them discovered in 1856 - the year the Crimean War ended, the Second Opium War erupted, and the first casino was approved in Monte Carlo.

The diminutive nine-inch Horsfield's Shrew was forgotten almost as soon as it was classified and to this day it remains little understood or studied, its distribution across India and Sri Lanka only patchily comprehended; and its habits and description limited to a few notes about its unremarkable brown grey fur.

New year's day in 1924 was also a special date – especially for Joseph Pearson, a young biologist who had come to Sri Lanka from Liverpool to assume the position of Director of the Colombo Museum. That morning, as the rest of Colombo's beau monde were nursing hangovers and trying to rid their heads of the tune of Auld Lang Syne, he discovered what would come to be called Pearson's Long-Clawed Shrew.

At the time, it would have been a much more common sight than it is today, commonly found in forests and grasslands – habitats that are now so embattled as to render the creature highly endangered. It is at the petite spectrum of island shrews, measuring just twelve centimetres nose to tail and sporting rather mundane grey brown fur. A second man dear to shrews was a Burger from a long-established family, and with other

numerous scientific discoveries to his name. Kelaart was to be remembered as the man who discovered Kelaart's Long-Tailed Shrew, a species now restricted to the grasslands, swamps and forest of Sri Lanka and southern India.

A colossal (for shrews) twenty centimetres in length nose to tail, it has grey black fur and is ever more endangered, largely due to shrinking habitat options.

The species has managed to cling to both its name and its original scientific evaluation, unlike many other shrews who suffer the continual revaluation, name changes and shifting designations of over busy shrew scientists; but not so poor Kelaart, who was to die, just forty-one years old on a ship bound for England.

4

RATS


POINT PEDRO
JAFFNA
CHILAW
NEGOMBO
COLOMBO
HABARANE
TEA
MATALE
KANDY
TEA
BADULLA
TEA
PALATUPANA
HAMBANTOTA
TANGALLA
MATARA

"We are plain quiet folk and have no use for adventures. Nasty disturbing uncomfortable things! Make you late for dinner! I can't think what anybody sees in them."

J.R.R. Tolkien

Whatever passing cuteness shrews command, it all sadly breaks down when the amateur zoologist turns his attention to rats.
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 Southeast Asia, and all much more successful in establishing an enduring if unattractive dominance.

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."

Thirty centimetres in length, nose to tail, with steel grey fur and white undersides, the Ohiya Rat is one of the island's two endemic rats. 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 scarcer in counts done by depressed biologists. It's only other endemic cousin, the Ohiya Rat, is even more endangered 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.

All the other many rats found on the island are common across the region. Blanford's Rat, 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 Indian Soft-Furred Rat has a similar distribution. It is wholly unfussy about its habitat, happy in grass or forest, tropical or subtropical regions. Almost thirty centimetres in length nose to tail, it has the brown grey fur that blends to white on its undersides.

Equally widespread is the Indian Bush Rat which even boasts a tiny pocket-sized colony outside of South Asia, 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 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 30centimetres nose to tail,. It has brown to yellow fur on its back and white across its tummy.

A similar geographical distribution is enjoyed by the two bandicoot rates. The Greater Bandicoot Rat – known also as the Pig Rat – is 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. Nor is it small - measuring almost sixty centimetres in length nose to tail. Slightly smaller – at forty centimetres length nose to tail is the Lesser Bandicoot Rat. Its fondness for burrowing in farm lands and gardens has earnt 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.

Happily widespread, the Ceylon Gerbil or Antelope-Rat inhabits the cuter end of the rat world. 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 than4 centimetres head to tail and clothed in brownish grey fur, all the better to pass unnoticed.

The island's two more ex-patriot rats are, like supermarkets, mobile phones or tin ears, global citizens who count Sri Lanka one of their many, many haunts. The Black Rat comes in at least five distinct sub species -the Common House-Rat Rat, the Egyptian House Rat, the Indian House Rat, the Common Ceylon House Rat, and the Ceylon Highland Rat.

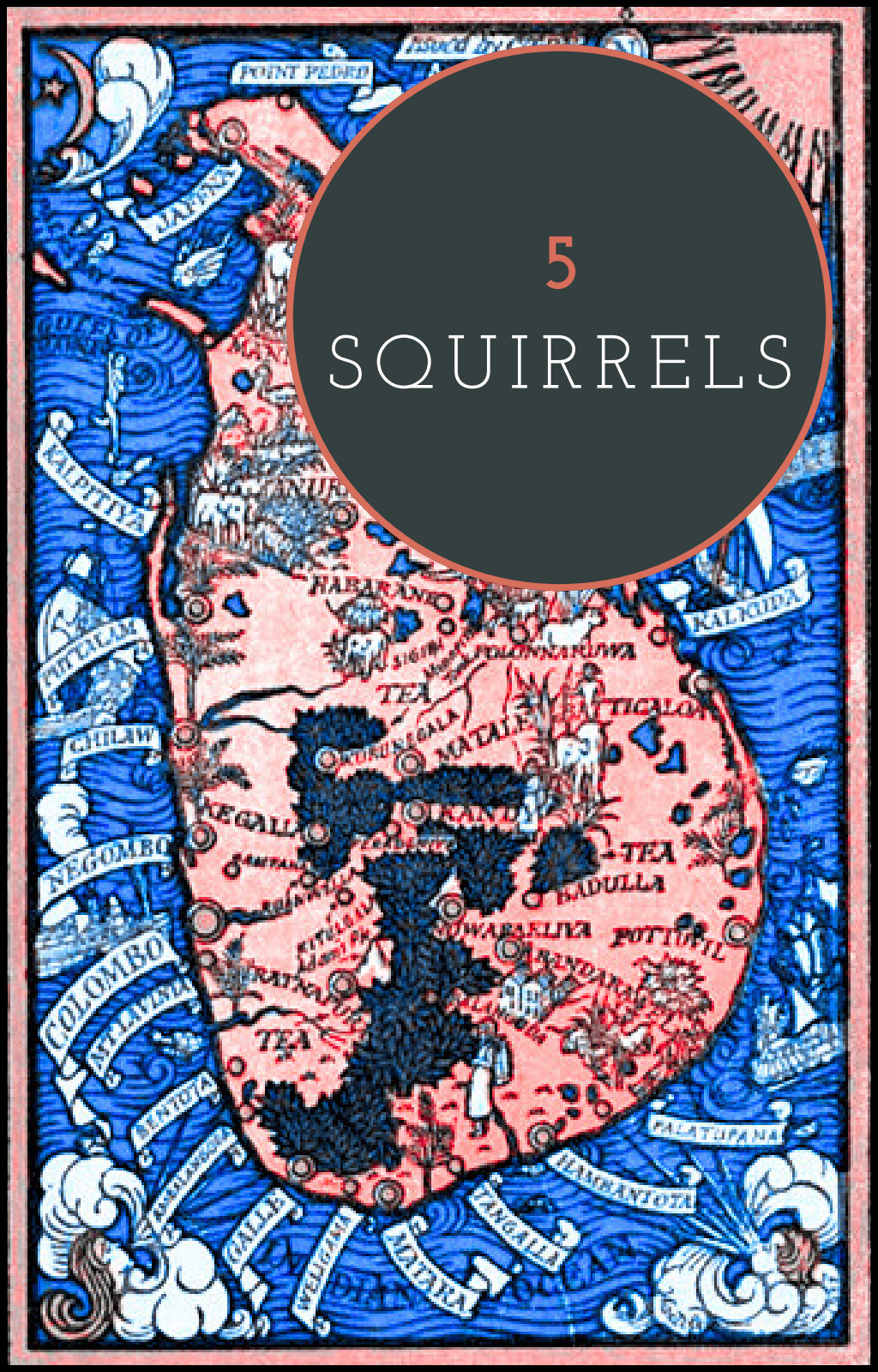
None are much longer than thirty-three centimetres nose to tail and despite their reputation for being black, also sport the occasional lighter brown fur.

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.

The Brown Rat 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. 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.


5
SQUIRRELS

"Sorry! I don't want any adventures, thank you. Not Today. Good morning! But please come to tea – any time you like! Why not tomorrow? Good bye!"

J.R.R. Tolkien

Collectively, squirrels are what rats might be - if rats had any sense of fashion, PR or merely a dude-cool attitude. Nimble, beautiful, curious, and cute, squirrels are rodents merely by genus. Even so, there remains something edgy about them. It is a squirrel after all who provokes the discovery of a massive diamond in F Scott Fitzgerald's story "A Diamond as Big as the Ritz," a tale of excess and debauchery. Nor does Beatrix Potter's Squirrel Nutkin do much better, being chronically naughty. "Proud, wayward squirrel," noted Yeats.

Sri Lanka is home to seven squirrel species, only two of which are endemic, the Dusky-Striped Squirrel and Layard's Palm Squirrel. The Dusky-Striped Squirrel is the smallest of island squirrels. It was first documented in 1935 by the tea planter by W.W.A. Phillips in his celebrated book, The Manual of the Mammals of Ceylon - and has since gone through the taxological wringer in terms of classification and reclassification before being stamped and approved as a distinct sub species in its own right.

It takes it comforts cold and lives most happily in such high elevations as Horton Plains and Nuwara Eliya where even frosts can occur. It is also something of a lyrical chatterbox, with a strange birdlike sound that modulates depending on its message. Layard's Palm Squirrel is named for Edgar Leopold Layard, one of those legendary Victorian all-rounders,

who took on a diplomatic career, the better to document the natural world, a passion he put down to lacking any siblings when growing up. He spent ten years on the island, leaving behind a variety of animals named after him, including a parrot and this popular beast, sometimes also known as the Flame-Striped Jungle Squirrel for the beautiful markings that run along its back.

It is about thirty centimetres nose to tail, with black fur that fades to reddish brown on its stomach and can be seen all around the central highlands. By day they forage for fruit and nuts; by night they chatter from tree to tree, living, like swans, in pairs that bond for life. With their natural forest habitat eroded steadily, they are categorised as Vulnerable.

The other five island squirrels are globetrotters. Like all squirrels, they feat off almost any plants including nuts, seeds, fruits, fungi, and green vegetation, and have been known to enrich their diet with bird eggs and insects too.

Their constant nibbling of course wears down their teeth, and so, in a little bit of evolution that mankind might have benefited from as well, their teeth just keep on growing, to make up the loss.

The Grizzled Giant Squirrel is the king of the pack, with a nose to tail length of one and a half metres and death-defying skills enabling it to make the most impossible leaps from tree to

tree.

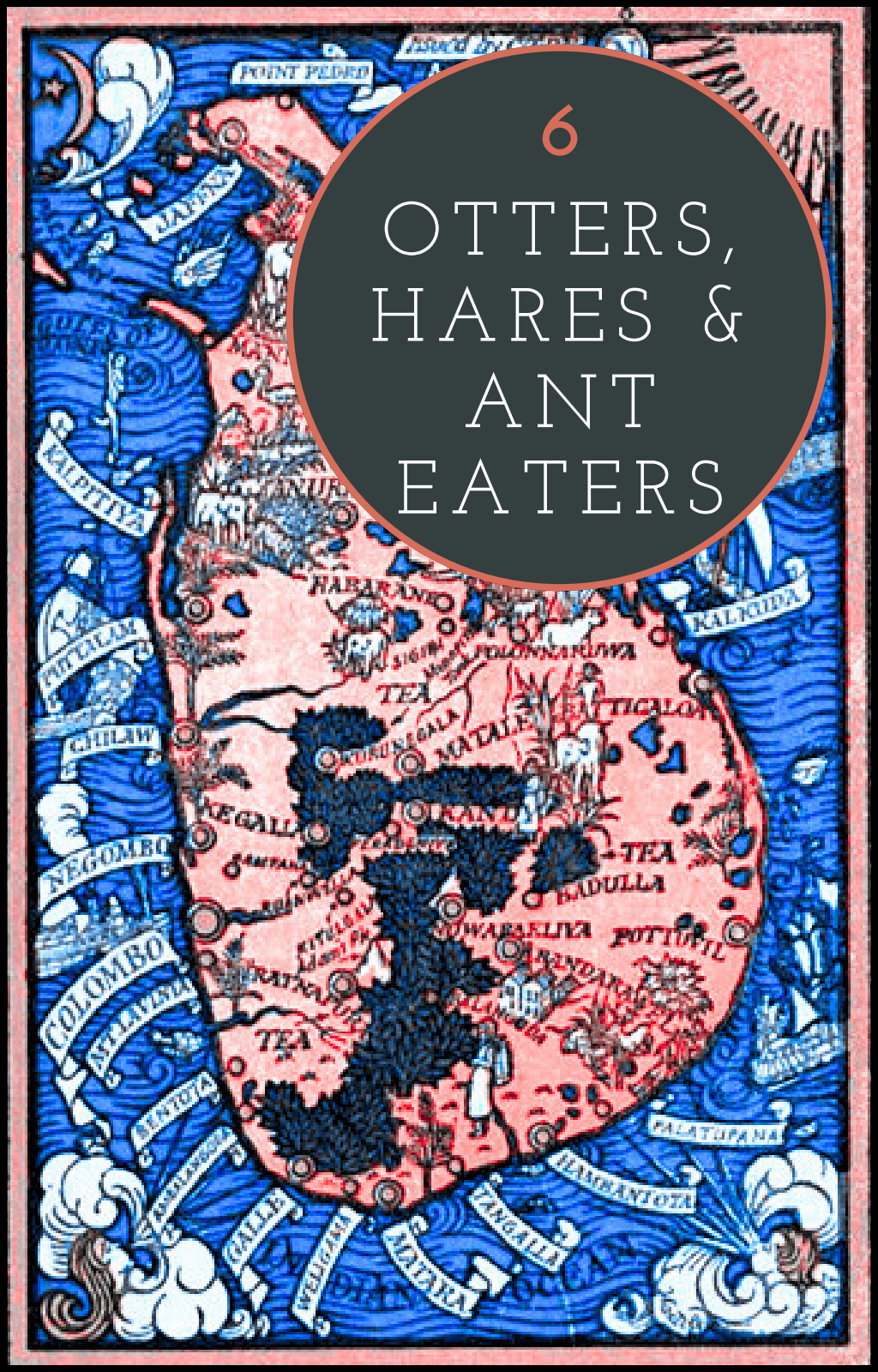
In Sri Lanka it hugs the central highlands and comes in three sub variants that are all but impossible to tell apart. Grizzled brown, with white legs, stomach, and frosted face, they have excellent vision but poor hearing –which is something of a blessing for them as their cry -a shrill staccato cackle – is the sort of sound that can easily curdle milk.

The most elegantly avian of the island's squirrels is the Indian Giant Flying Squirrel which has evolved a remarkable wing membrane between its limbs to enable it to glide like the 1891 Lilienthal Glider that marked man's first recorded flight, near Potsdam.

The Black Giant Squirrel is dark all over but for a small expanse of orange on its chin and chest. It is very rarely seen, preferring the deeper most inaccessible parts of evergreen forests.

The Indian Palm Squirrel or Three-Striped Palm Squirrel is another island visitor that is easily confused with the endemic Layard's Palm Squirrel.

Confusion also hangs over the tiny dark brown Nilgiri Striped Squirrel. This is the mystery of the squirrel pack for almost nothing is known about it except for the fact that it is different to the Dusky-Striped Squirrel with which it was once confused.



6

OTTERS, HARES & ANT EATERS

"Not all those who wander are lost."

J.R.R. Tolkien

"What is this life, if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare," wrote Henry Williamson, the man who put otters firmly on the literary map with "Tarka the Otter."

Care is what otters now so badly need. Right around the world they face the very real threat of extinction; their potential demise a possible calamity still only being faced up to with modest corrective steps.

The Ceylon Ottar faces just the same, if not greater levels, of existential threat, though this does not appear to erode their abiding alacrity for play.

Famously family-orientated (so much so that there is even a recorded case of an otter puppy being given by its mother to another mother who had given birth to a still born pup), they live in family groups and play and play – when not eating or sleeping.

They are also scrupulously hygienic, with specific areas designed as ottar loos –this despite the fact that their poo is said to give off a scent not unlike that of jasmine tea.

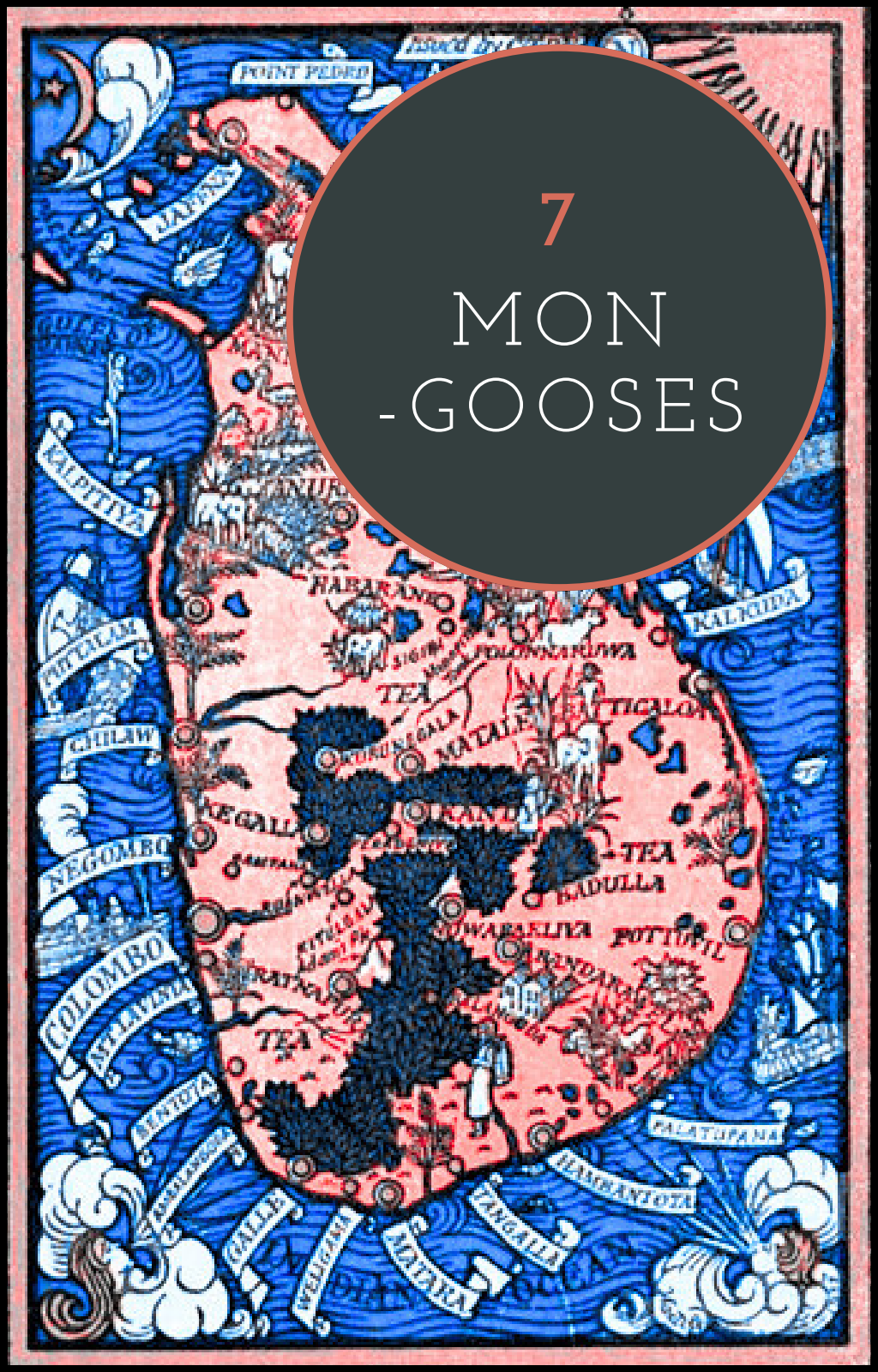
A distinctive sub species of the Eurasian Otter, the Ceylon Ottar is shy to the point of near invisibility. Covered in dark brown fur and about a metre long, weighing in at eight kilos, it lives off fish but is more than partial to any other smaller creature incautious enough to stay close to it in the rivers it inhabits.

Curiously, Sri Lanka lacks rabbits –though it does have a hare. Just the one. And an endemic one too, a distinct variant of the Indian Hare. The Ceylon Black-Naped Hare is a mere fifty centimetres head to body, and distinguished by having a black patch on the back of its neck. It is notable also for its dozy daytime habit – being more of a night creature, leaving the day for alone sleeping in the grassland that is its preferred habitat. Blessed with excellent sight, hearing, and smell, it can usually outrun any would-be enemy; and remains happily widespread across the island.

Gifted in dexterous overlapping and generously rounded scales, the Indian Pangolin or Scaly Anteater, is a unique cross between an architectural marvel, a desert tank, and a Viking warrior clad in chain mail. Measuring some six feet nose to tail, it makes its home in rainforest and grassland and even colonizes modest hill country - right across the Indian subcontinent and all across Sri Lanka.

It lives in burrows, some designed for sleeping, others for eating, its diet consisting of ants and termites, or, at a push, beetles. Its long sticky tongue has specially evolved to dig deeply into insect nests. Pregnancies last around two months and the cub (for there is usually only one)gets carried on its mother's tail until it is able to move around confidently. Yet the Pangolin is teetering on the very edge of being critically endangered, not helped by increasing deforestation, but more

especially because it is poached for its meat and its scales which are internationally traded as aphrodisiacs, rings, charm or crafted in grisly leathergoods, like boots and shoes that surely shame their wearers more than they might be if caught dancing naked down Galle Face Green on the top of big red bus.


7
MON
-GOOSES
POINT PEDRO
MANNAR
JAFFNA
PUTTALAM
CHILAW
NEGOMBO
COLOMBO
RATNAPURA
GALLE
MATARA
TRINCOMALEE
BATTICALOA
KANDY
KURUNEGALA
TEA
KEGALLE
KALUTARA
BADULLA
POTTUVIL
HAMBANTOTA

"'If ever you are passing my way,' said Bilbo, 'don't wait to knock! Tea is at four; but any of you are welcome at any time!'"

J.R.R. Tolkien

“Rikki-tikki,” wrote Rudyard Kipling in1894, “had a right to be proud of himself. But he did not grow too proud, and he kept that garden as a mongoose should keep it, with tooth and jump and spring and bite, till never a cobra dared show its head inside the walls.”

Kipling’s immortal mongoose was in fact the Indian Grey Mongoose, sometimes called the Common Ceylon Grey Mongoose. It is the smallest of the four main species found in Sri Lanka.

Shy around people it is fearless with snakes, its kill strategy focused on tiring the snake by tempting it to make bites it easily avoids. Its thick grizzled iron-grey fur and neuro transmitting receptors leave it immune to snake venom; and for anyone living up-country, it is a fine companion to have around. Around thirty inches nose to tail, it lives right across the country, often in pairs, eating fruit, roots, and small animals. It lives for around seven years, breeding twice yearly and producing up to four cubs.

Marginally more colour is the Brown Mongoose – a species that comes in several iterations, each so marginally different as to be as impossible to tell apart as Herge’s Thomson and Thompson. The Highland Ceylon Brown Mongoose, the Western Ceylon Brown Mongoose and the Ceylon Brown Mongoose are, to all but the most scrutinizing scientific eye, practically

alike. Over eighty centimetres nose to tail with dark brown fur and black legs, and along black enviably tufted tail, it is a sight of simple, breathtaking beauty. Widespread through it is, seeing one is something of a challenge for it is an introverted beast, with a marked preference for deeper cover, dark forests; and, like Greta Garbo, a preference for being left alone.

But there can be little doubt that you've seen a mongoose, once you've clapped eyes on the Ceylon Ruddy Mongoose. Measuring thirty-two inches nose to tail, he too is found right across Sri Lanka and India.

A retiring forest dweller, it has grizzled ruddy brown hair, a sleek body and a tail that ends in a flourish of black tufts.

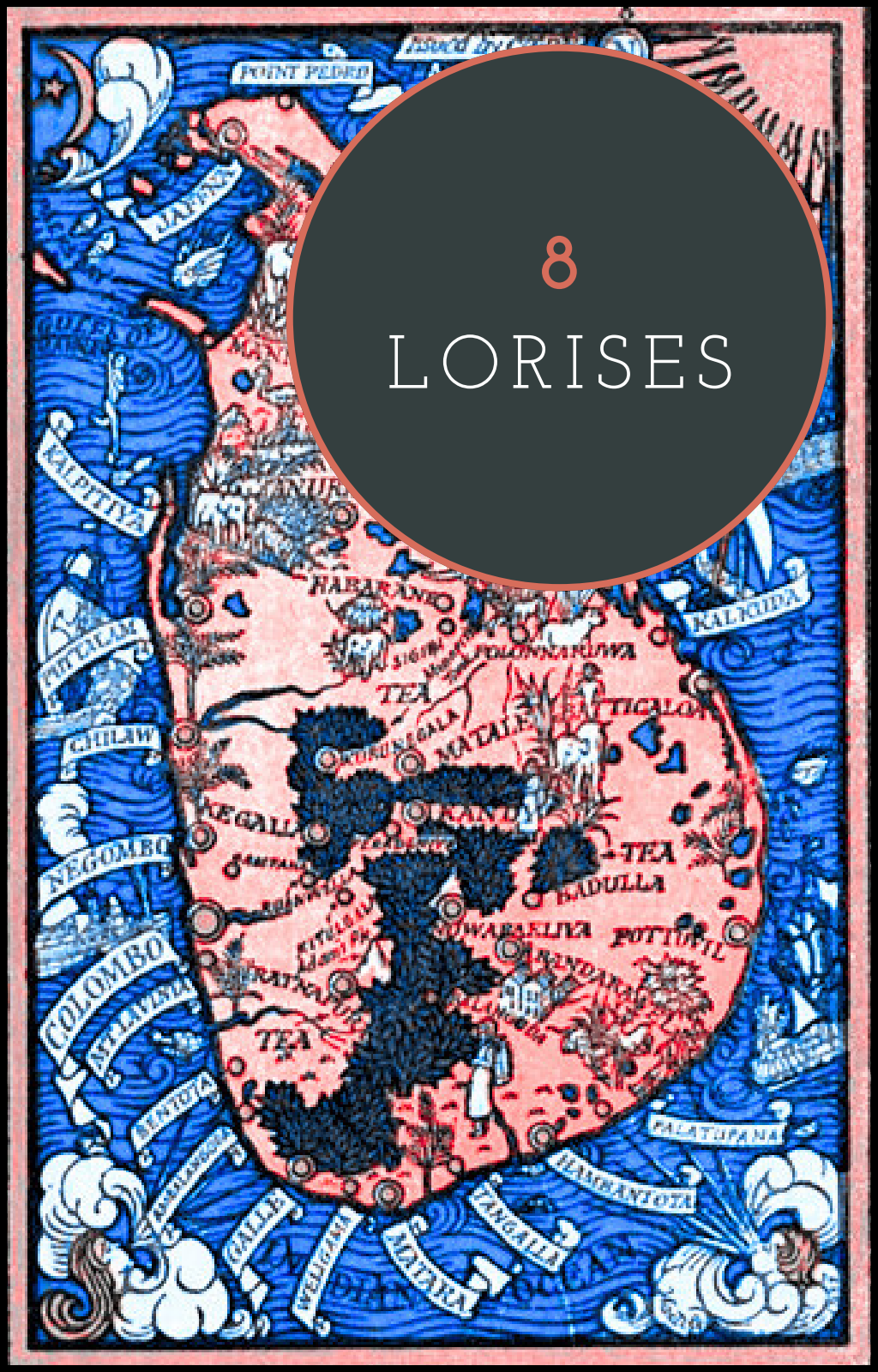
Although it rarely lives more than seven or eight years, a Mr W. W. Phillips from Namunukula in Sri Lanka wrote to inform the Bombay Natural History Society (in those halcyon, fallible days when science was a passion shared equally with amateurs) that "the mongoose in question died on September 8, 1955, aged approximately17 years. It ate quite well right up to the last day and died peacefully during the night, apparently of old age and /or heart failure. "For although the Ruddy Mongoose is among the more aggressive of the species, it seems that with the right kind of parenting it the beast can be a beloved and longish term part of aninter-species family.

But the Versace of the mongoose world, is the Stripe-Necked Mongoose, sporting an outfit that marks it out as one of the island's most striking and fetching mammals.

A dark grey head morphs to reddish brown and grey on its neck- before blooming into a heady grizzled covering of bouffant fur that gets redder and longer the further down the body it goes.

A pink nose, black legs and a reddish tail that ends in a curved tuft of black hair make up the rest of this most alluring of beasts. It has a sturdy frame and –measuring at often over eighty-five centimetres nose to tail – is the largest mongoose on the island and is widespread across South India and Sri Lanka,.

Its proclivity for calling forests its home can make sighting it a challenge, but it is a sight well worth the effort.


POINT PEDRO
MANNAR
JAFFNA
PUTTALAM
CHILAW
NEGOMBO
COLOMBO
RATNAPURA
GALLE
MATARA
TRINCOMALEE
BATTICALOA
KANDY
KURUNEGALA
TEA
TEA
TEA
BADULLA
POTTUVIL
HAMBANTOTA

8

LORISES

"The wise speak only of what they know."

J.R.R. Tolkien

Lorises are the mammals world's most famous recluses. Indeed, few people have ever heard of them unless they have been to Sri Lanka; and had a good look around.

Restricted to Sri Lanka and parts of India, a few loris species can also be spotted (with difficulty) in places like Borneo or Java. They are the ultimate tree hugger's tree hugger – mammals of beguiling rarity and beauty, whose talent for invisibility outsteps even that of Tolkien's Frodo when wearing The Ring.

Constructed with small bodies, and lean, outsized limbs, their round heads bear a set of disproportionately immense panda eyes set within circles of black fur that give them the look of learned, albeit eccentric, professors of philosophy peering at you through dark Tortoiseshell spectacles, like happy-looking Gollums. It is no surprise therefore to learn that they have large brains for so tiny an animal. Their ears are almost invisible, but should they grasp you with their fingers or toes, you would immediately feel the resolute strength that comes from a creature that lives almost entirely on tree branches. Placing one hand before another, they move along boughs with great deliberation, and often upside down - but unlike monkeys, neither leap nor jump.

How they communicate with one another remains one of many scientific mysteries that surround the species, but they are

known to be inordinately social, wrestling for the sheer fun of it and sleeping together in tightly packed groups within tree branches, specially built tree nests or tree holes. And whilst they particularly like to eat insects – especially ants – they are also eager consumers of eggs, berries, leaves, buds, and unlucky lizards. They live for around 15 to 18 years, a little longer than that of the average dog, with the females coming into heat twice yearly for a 23-week pregnancy that usually results in just one or two young being born. And they live an upside down life, sleeping by day and out and about by night.

This makes them almost impossible to see, a task made all the harder given their diminutive size, extreme shyness, rapidly diminishing numbers, and preference for calling home the tops of trees. Of the eleven loris sub species firmly agreed upon and recorded, four are based in Sri Lanka.

The Highland Ceylon Slender Loris is the larger of the three grey slender lorises. Its limbs are more heavily furred and, according to its less charitable observers, presented a less delicate appearance than that of its cousins.

It can weigh up to 227 grams and has been known to extend 256 mm from head to body. Like most lorises, it has grey and white fur, but its frosting is more striking. It favours wet mountain dwellings below 1500 metres.

Its close cousin, the Northern Ceylon Slender Loris was only discovered in 1932 – in the Gammaduwa region of the Knuckles Range, though it has subsequently been said to also frequent such different areas as Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Kurunegala, Puttalam, Vouniya, Trincomalee and Matale.

This loris species sports a very distinctive facial stripe, a greyish coat of thin fur and can weigh in at 293 grams. What little is really known about it comes largely from a captive breeding program run in1980 that focused on wild-caught specimens from Polonnaruwa.

The name of the third, the Ceylon Mountain Slender Loris is “kada papa” or "baby of the forest” in Tamil. It has shorter limbs and longer, thicker fur as might be required to keep warm on cool mountaintops. It is considered to be endemic to Sri Lanka’s mountain rain and mist forests – those above 1,500 meters but it is so rare that it has only ever been reliably found on Horton Plains. There, in 1937, a certain Mr. A. C. Tutein-Nolthenius, who had spent twenty years looking for the species, discovered a mother with two offspring. They were to die in captivity. The last recorded sighting was in 2002, also on Horton Plains when a researcher got but a glimpse of a secretive pair.

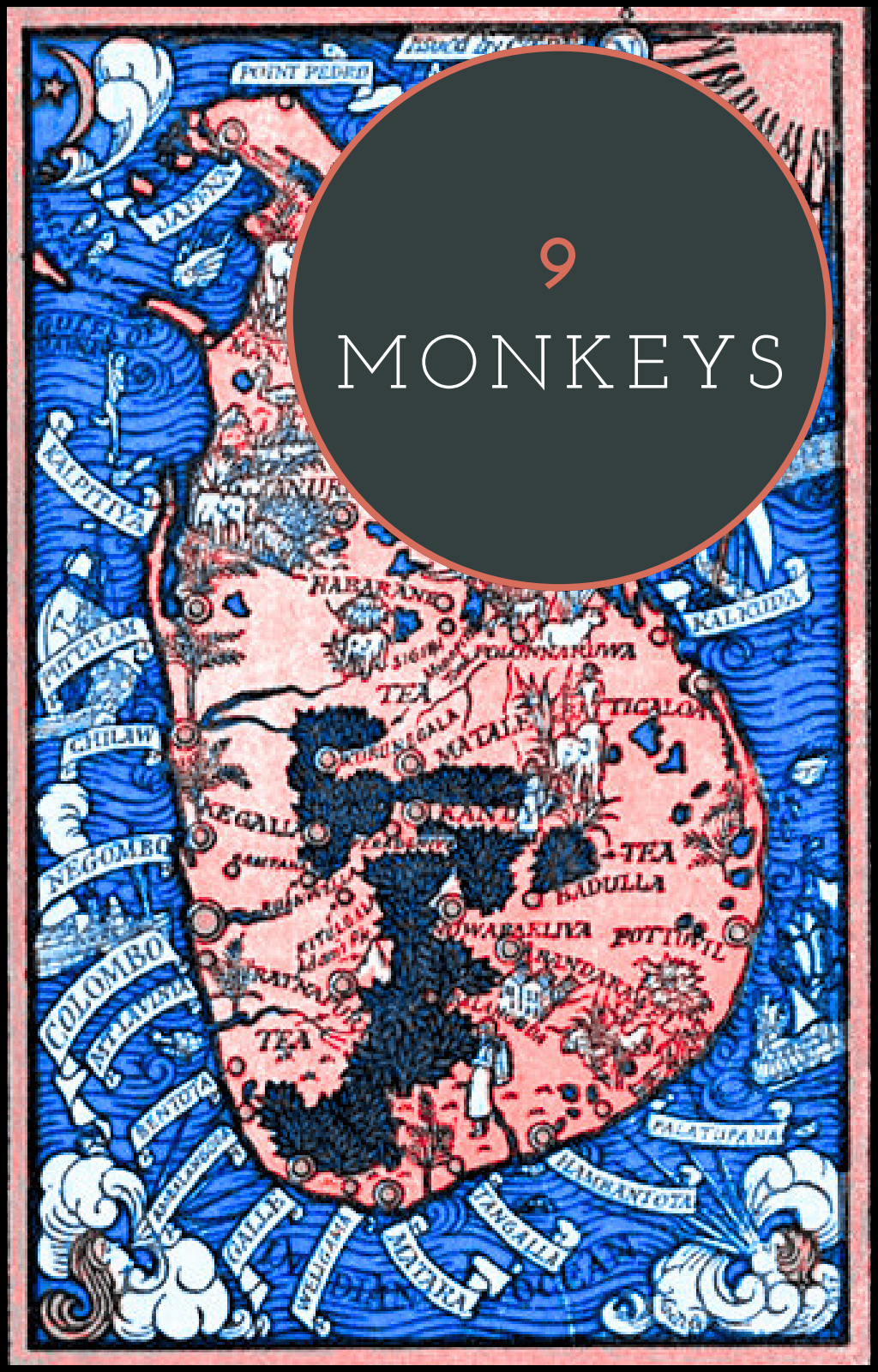
But it is the Red Slender Loris that is the most celebrated on the island for it is the only endemic species. A tiny, tree-living

creature with heart-stoppingly adorable panda eyes, its mothers have the intriguing habit of coating their offspring in allergenic saliva, a toxin that repels most predators. This subspecies weighs in at up to 172 grams and a body that extends to little more than 17 centimetres.

It has dense reddish-brown fur and the classic slender hands and legs of all its species, an evolutionary peculiarity that enables it to climb easily through treetops to gather the fruits, berries, leaves on which it feasts.

By day they sleep in leaf covered tree holes, a habit that must help account for their relatively long life span (15-18 years). In island folklore it has a cry that can call devils to a house, so it is often regarded with a certain amount of dread.

To wake up and find one staring at you is considered to be one of the worst possible omens; should it then reach out and touch you, your body will respond by becoming skin and bones.


POINT PEDRO
MANNAR
JAFFNA
PUTTALAM
CHILAW
NEGOMBO
COLOMBO
RATNAPURA
GALLE
MATARA
TRINCOMALEE
BATTICALOA
KANDY
KURUNEGALA
TEA
KEGALLE
BADULLA
POTTUVIL
HAMBANTOTA

9

MONKEYS

"Do not meddle in the affairs of Wizards, for they are subtle and quick to anger."

J.R.R. Tolkien

Money may not grow on trees, but monkeys do. With over a third of the country still covered in forest and over eight trees and shrubs to choose from, the island is a tree hugger's Shangri-la. Its most illustrious member is the endemic Toque Macaques – a monkey that comes in three distinct island variants.

The Pale-Fronted or Dusky Toque Macaques stick to the wet zones in the southwest. The Common Toque Macaques favours the dry zone areas of the north and east. The Highland Toque Macaque prefers the hilly centre of the island.

Telling them apart however is a pastime best left to scientists with lots of patience and sturdy magnifying glasses. They can weigh up to twelve pounds with a head to tail length of almost a metre. Whilst they have been known to live for thirty-five years, most die within five, victims to infant mortality or fights within troops for dominance.

With white undersides, golden brown fur on their backs and a car crash of an almost orange coiffure, they look as if they have got lost in a cheap tanning salon or a Trump rally. Pink faces peer out below recherché hairstyles, giving substance to their name -"toque," the brimless cap that is their bob.

They are accomplished scavengers, their vegetarian fancies best sated on fruit. Their capacious cheek pouches are specially adapted to allow them to store

food for consumption later, a technical refinement that helps them steal, store, and run with their pilfered bounty. Their guts have evolved the dazzling specificity of allowing them to wolf down large quantities of mature leaves in perfect digestive order – which means they have almost no reason or inclination to lower themselves from the trees to which they cleave. As dexterous leaping through trees as capering across the ground, or even swimming, they move in self-protective groups and sleep huddled together, every night in a different place like chastened celebrities or terrorists.

They are easy to spot for they are active during daylight hours, appearing in groups of 20 members led by an alpha male, with half the group composed of infants or juveniles. Young adult males wisely leave the group on attaining maturity, for fear or otherwise being chased out. But they also have a reputation for being very matey with other species – the family dog, for example. And they talk to one another. Naturalists have recorded over thirty different sounds, each conveying a very specific meaning.

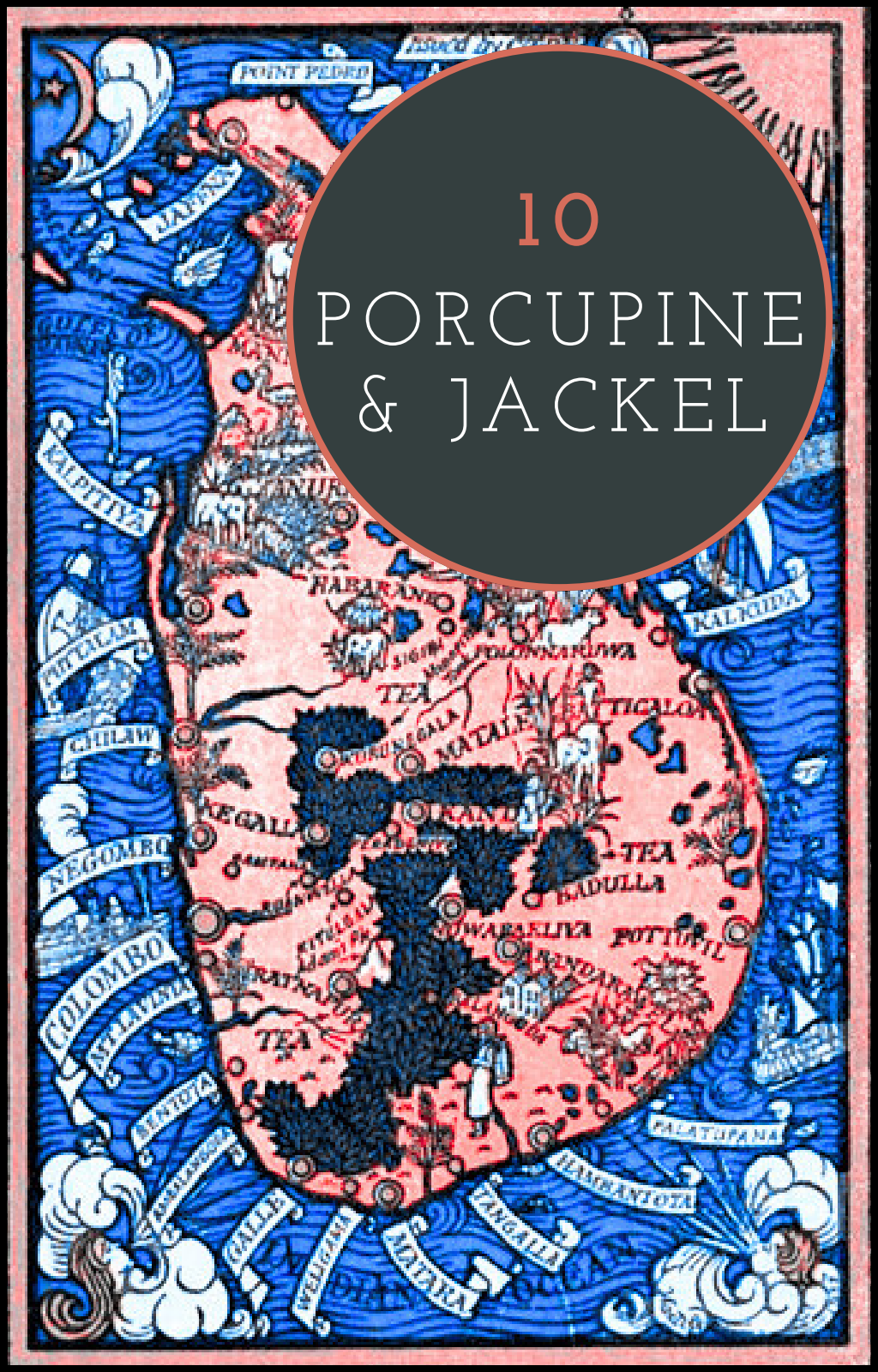
Quite how many monkey species belong to the Langur family is a modestly debated subject amongst mammalian Taxonomists, but at the last count there were eight. Or seven, depending. Stretching from the Himalayas to Sri Lanka, they live in groups that rarely seem to do anything but fight one another although within the groups

strict social hierarchies are observed. The island owns to two langur families - the Hanuman Langur, or Tufted Gray Langur; and the Purple-Faced Langur.

The Hanuman langur, or Tufted Gray langur, is one of three variants, the other two being found in India. The Sri Lankan variant – "thersites" – is named rather eccentrically for an anti-hero in Homer, who was later promoted by Plato as a man best fit for the afterlife - a doubtful honour. Up to sixty inches long head to tail, with a weight that can hit close to fifteen kilos, its black face is framed in a wispy white beard that runs from forehead to chin. It is a light grey in colour, and lives as readily in Dryzone forests as urban areas – showing a strong preference for antique cultural sites if their dwellings in such places as Polonnaruwa, Dambulla, Anuradhapura, and Sigiriya are anything to go by. Once settled, they tend to stay put, having little of the gypsy tendency within them. Eagerly vegetarian, they live in troops of up to fifty members, the larger ones being curiously non-sexist with leadership shared between a male female pair.

The Purple-Faced Leaf Langur is the rarer of the two langur species found on the island. It lives largely in dense forest but is now threatened by habitat loss that has noticeably and recently significantly eroded its numbers. Vegetarian, with a tendency to opt for leaves ahead of other foods, it is shy and slightly smaller than its close

cousin, the Tufted Gray Langur but easy to tell apart for its darker colouring, the black brown fur of its body contrasting with the mop of wispy white fur that surrounds its face and sit atop its head.


10
PORCUPINE
& JACKEL
POINT PEDRO
MANNAR
JAFFNA
PUTTALAM
CHILAW
NEGOMBO
COLOMBO
KALUTARA
GALLE
MATARA
HAMBANTOTA
BATTICALOA
TRINCOMALEE
KANDY
KURUNEGALA
RATNAPURA
BADULLA
POTTUVIL
TEA

"Elves seldom give unguarded advice, for advice is a dangerous gift, even from the wise to the wise."

J.R.R. Tolkien

“It is far better,” wrote Tipu Sultan, shortly before being killed by the future Duke of Wellington in Srirangapatna in 1799, “to live like a lion for a day then to live like a jackal for a hundred years”.

The Sultan, who of course, saw himself as the lion, was merely channelling the unrelentingly poor press that jackals have endured since recorded time -in Arabic holy writ, the Bible; even in Buddhist Pali literature which depicts them as inferior, greedy, cunning creatures.

Small wonder then that their numbers face increasing pressure.

The future of the Sri Lankan Jackal generates little of the media alarm that surrounds other, more politically correct species.

Threatened by habitat loss and infected by dog borne rabies, the Sri Lankan Jackal is second only to the Leopard in the pecking order of island predators.

A skilled hunter, slightly smaller than a wolf, it is, like them, a pack animal and scavenger, and will eat anything from rodents, birds, and mice to young gazelles, reptiles, and even fruit.

Commendably patriotic, they have evolved to be a little larger than Indian jackals, with a darker richer colouring and a subtly different tooth arrangement whose close study is best avoided.

A happier story is to be found with the Indian Crested Porcupine that is widespread, and at home in most habitats, right across Sri Lanka and India.

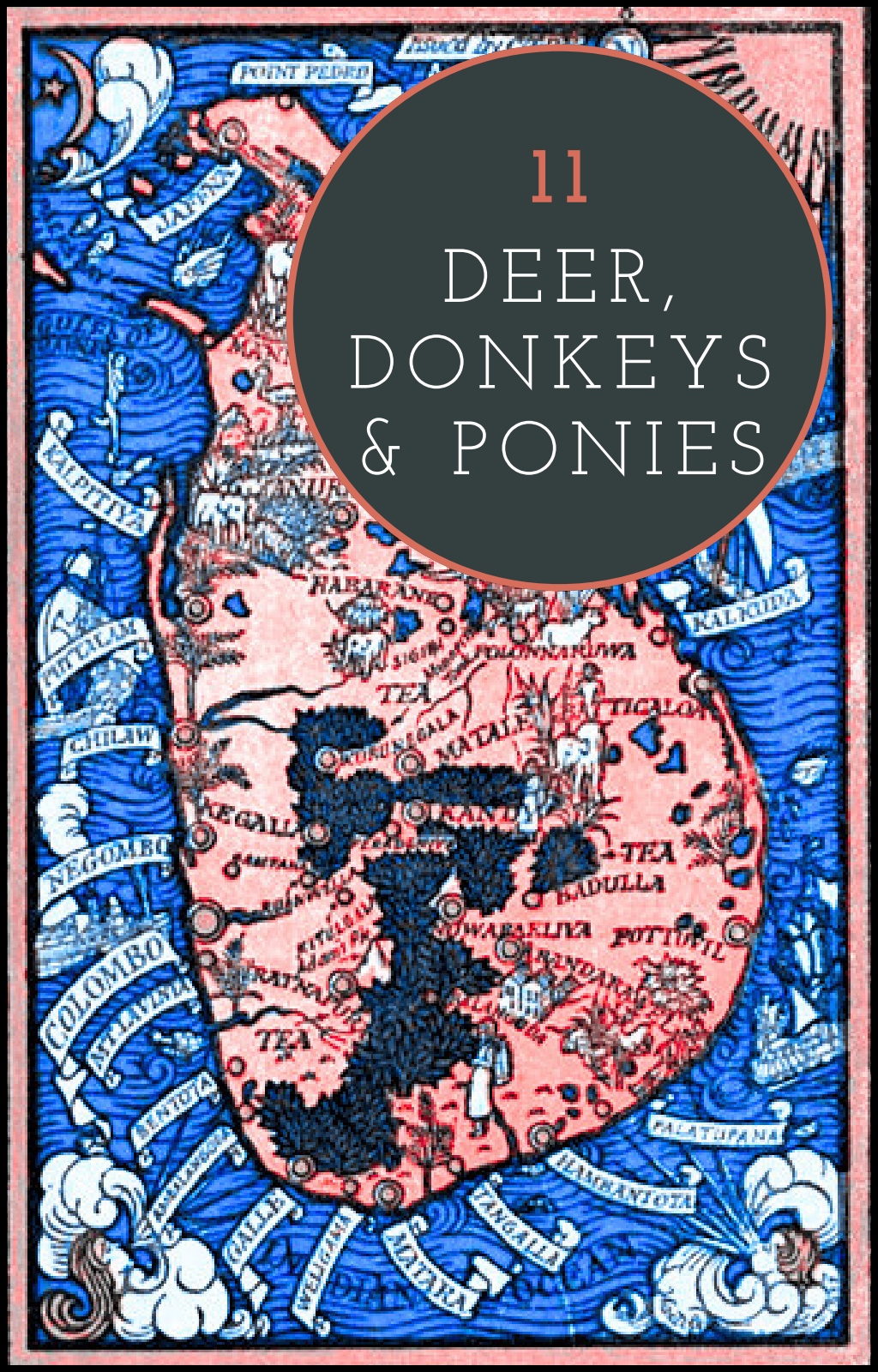
Nikita Khrushchev, the bombastic Russian leader, was unexpectedly wise to the beast, stating to his enemies that "if you start throwing hedgehogs at me, I shall throw a couple of porcupines under you."

Up to three feet long and sixteen kilos in weight, they are, like Khrushchev, highly territorial.

When they feel threatened or their territory unacceptably encroached upon, their sharp quills will spring up, their teeth will clack loudly and, emitting a most unpleasant smell, they will go on the attack.

Nocturnal, and usually hidden in the burrows that are their homes, they are eager consumers of bark, fruit, berries, vegetables and almost most plants in gardens and plantations.

Gratifyingly monogamous, their pregnancies last eight months and the two to four cubs that are born live on with the parents until they are two or three years old.



11

DEER, DONKEYS & PONIES

"What a tale we have been in, Mr. Frodo, haven't we?"

J.R.R. Tolkien

Deer abound across Sri Lanka, some –like the Ceylon Spotted Deer –increasingly vulnerable, prey to poachers and habitat loss; others – like the Barking Deer – flourishing and presenting little concern to the scientists who maintain the Red List of Threatened Species.

Two species are considered endemic to the island – the Ceylon Spotted Deer, the Sri Lankan Spotted Chevrotain, with Sri Lankan Sambar Deer the subject of mild debate among patriotic environmentalists trying to assess if it is so significantly more evolved as to present nature with what amounts to a new sub species unique to the island. The remaining three species found in Sri Lanka are also found across South and Southeast India – the Hog Deer, the Mouse Deer, and the Barking Deer. Joining these quadrupeds are an extraordinary herd of feral ponies, abandoned by departing colonists; and a pack of wild donkeys, descendants of beasts brought to the island by ancient traders.

Troubled by the sheer lack of scientific information about the behaviour of the Ceylon Spotted Deer, the Department of Zoology, at Sri Lanka's Eastern University, conducted a detailed study of a particular population in Trincomalee. After months of observation, they concluded, reassuringly, that "their main activities were feeding and lay. "Scientists are much divided on the subject of animal play, and tortured monographs have been written attempting to pin down the very

concept of animal play. To some it is merely an evolutionary by-product; others claim it ensures animals teach one another about fairness and consequences. That the Sri Lankan Axis Deer should be minded to play at all is encouraging for it an increasingly vulnerable species, its preferred habitats - lowland forests, and shrub lands –shrinking, and with it the grasses, leaves, and fruit it lives on.

Their numbers are now counted in just several thousands. They live in herds of up to one hundred, and are seen by leopards, bears, crocodiles, jackals, and hungry villagers, as living supermarkets of fresh meat.

Standing up to a hundred centimetres high, their delicately white spotted fawn coats present them as everything a perfect deer ought to be, as is appropriate for an animal that is part of the island's select few endemic mammals.

The Mouse Deer or Sri Lankan Spotted Chevrotain is the second of the island's two endemic deer species, and although it can also be found scattered in the forests of South & Southeast Asia, the Sri Lankan variant as has become so evolved as to present scientists with the opportunity to award it full endemic status.

Barely twelve inches high, it is tiny, gorgeous, even-toed and, unless you are a plant, entirely harmless– although popular superstition adds the caveat that a man who gets

scratched by the hind foot of one will develop leprosy. This has yet to be verified by scientists.

Across Sri Lanka and India, the Sambar Deer claims gold as the largest and most impressive of the several deer species with which it shares its genes. Within Sri Lanka, the species has evolved still further and teeters on the edge of being declared endemic – as the Sri Lankan Sambar.

Much mistaken for an elk by early British colonists eager to shoot it, it can be seen in herds in places like Horton Plains – but it is classified as extremely vulnerable all the same. It is a tempting target for poachers stocking up on game meat to sell, and the pressures on its grassland habitats are not getting any easier.

Typically one and half metres high(sometimes more), their herds consist of females with their fawns, which they usually produce yearly. The males, like men with sheds who have taken the designation to extremes, prefer to live alone - except when the mating urge overcomes them.

Its equally endangered albeit much smaller cousin, standing at seventy centimetres tall, with short legs, a predilection to whistle, fine antlers, and dark brown fur, is the Indian Hog Deer. It looks nothing like a pig, but gains that interspecies appellation for its tendency to rush through the forest, head down like one of the racing pigs at Bob Hale Racing Stables in

far-off Michigan. Stretching right across the grasslands of Sri Lanka and South and Southeast Asia, it is now classified as extremely vulnerable, its small herds shrinking in the face of habitat loss.

Vulnerable cannot be said to characterise the Barking Deer. Carefree, with a propensity to eat almost anything, it is a cuddly irritant in jungle and on low hill estates, its numbers flourishing both here and across South and Southeast Asia. It grows to around sixty centimetres in height and is covered in reddish brown fur and, for males, throws in a modest set of antlers. Shy, solidity, rarely seen in numbers more than two, it gets its name for the dog-barking sound it makes
when alarmed. It is a modest, if reliable breeder, with pregnancies lasting six months after which one or, occasionally, two pups are born.

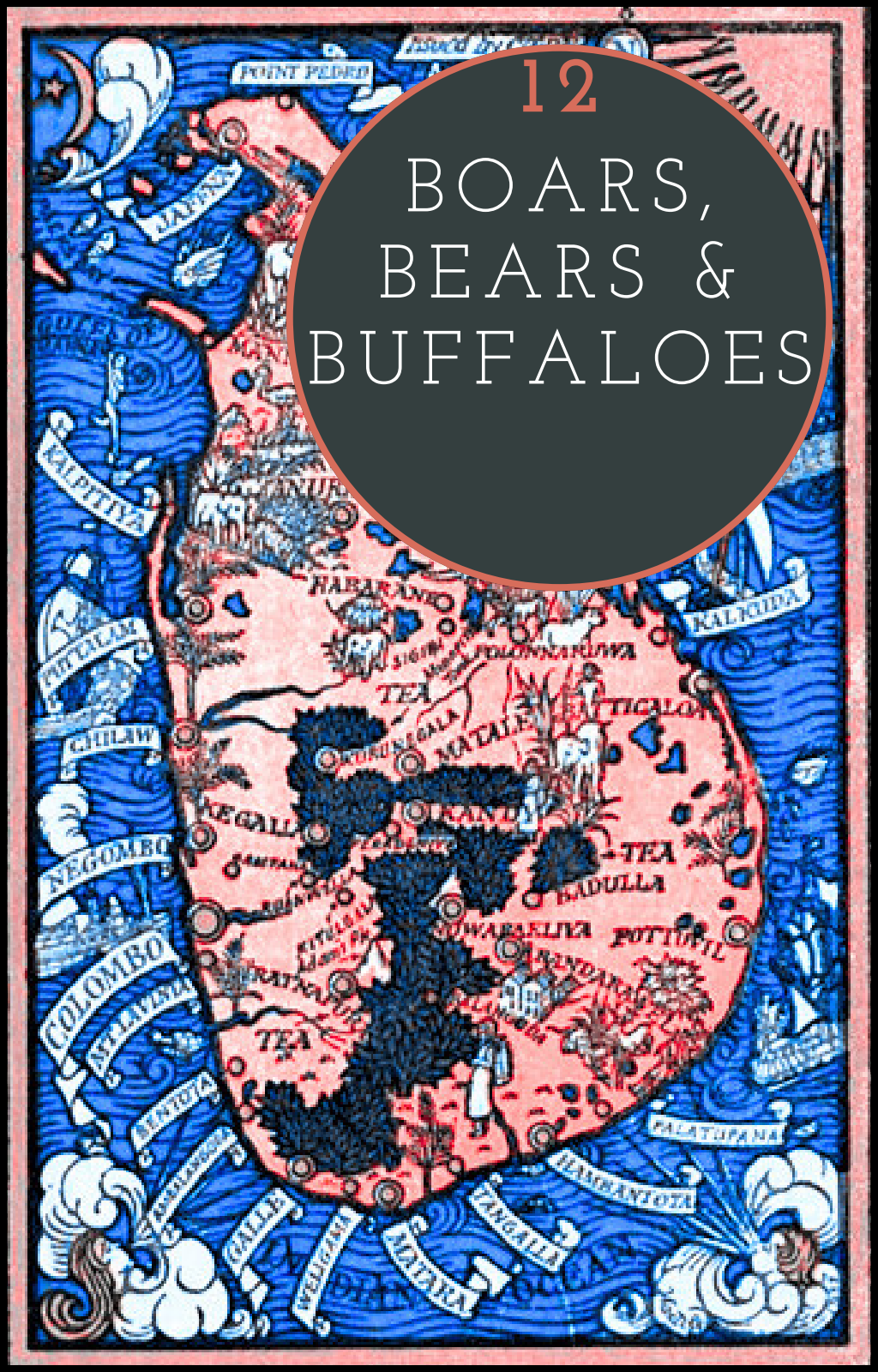
Sri Lanka is also home to diminishing herds of feral donkeys. These are found mostly in Mannar, Talaimannar and Puttalam, descendants of equine immigrants that entered the great port of Maathottam near Mannar - once the shipping gateway to the ancient Anuradhapura Kingdom. Arab traders were probably most responsible for importing the beasts to carry their cargos inland. The species that lives here is said to be a direct descendant of the Nubian African Wild Ass, now extinct in its native Ethiopia and Sudan. Extinction also faces it in Sri Lanka, its habitat ever diminishing; and hungry villagers

occasionally helping themselves to what will become tomorrow's stew. There are said to be under 3,000 still alive, though a wonderful charity, Bridging Lanka, has stepped in to try and nurse them back to happier times.

As sorry a tale can also be found among the Mannar Ponies. Strung out to the west of Jaffna in the Palk Strait is the tiny coral island of Delft, bared fifty square mile and home to less than five thousand people. And five hundred wild ponies.

Dotted with Baobab trees, archaeological marvels from ancient to colonial times, and abundant wildlife, Delft has become the last refuge for the Sri Lankan Wild Pony, the direct descendant of the ponies exported to the island by the Portuguese and Dutch from Europe and their colonies in the East, to provide basic transportation.

Left behind at Independence, and superseded by cars and lorries, they have carved out a fringe existence on the hot dry island, fighting off as best they can dehydration and occasional starvation.



12

BOARS, BEARS & BUFFALOES

"Oft the unbidden guest proves the best company."

J.R.R. Tolkien

The smallest of Sri Lana's mid-sized mammals, the Indian Boar or Pig is widespread across Sri Lanka and the Indian subcontinent. 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 imagination. 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.

Also very commonly seen is the Water Buffalo. Constructed by loving gods with luxuriant, solid, confident proportions, the Water Buffalo 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 that is richer in fat and protein than that of dairy cattle; and all produce the dung that fertilize fields or is used to light cooking fires.

But of these three mammals, the Sri Lankan Sloth Bear is the most special. It is a unique endemic subspecies of the very same Sloth bear that inhabits the Indian subcontinent in ever declining numbers from India to Bhutan, Nepal, and, until recently Bangladesh. It is a little smaller in size than its Indian cousin, with shorter fur and, sadly, sometimes without the cuddly-looking white tummy fur of its northern relative.

Even so, it is no midget, typically measuring six feet in length and weighing in at up to three hundred pounds for a male or two hundred for a female.

Once found in plentiful numbers across the dry zone forests of the island, they are now in serious and significant retreat, with an estimated five hundred to a thousand bears in the wild today. The destruction of their habitats has been instrumental in their decline, but the fear they engender amongst the village population has also played its part. They are

often hunted and killed, with a reputation for damaging property and killing or maiming domestic animals, humans running like a wave of terror before them. The "sloth" part of their name is rather misleading for the bears are quite capable of reaching speeds of thirty miles an hour – faster than the fastest human yet recorded.

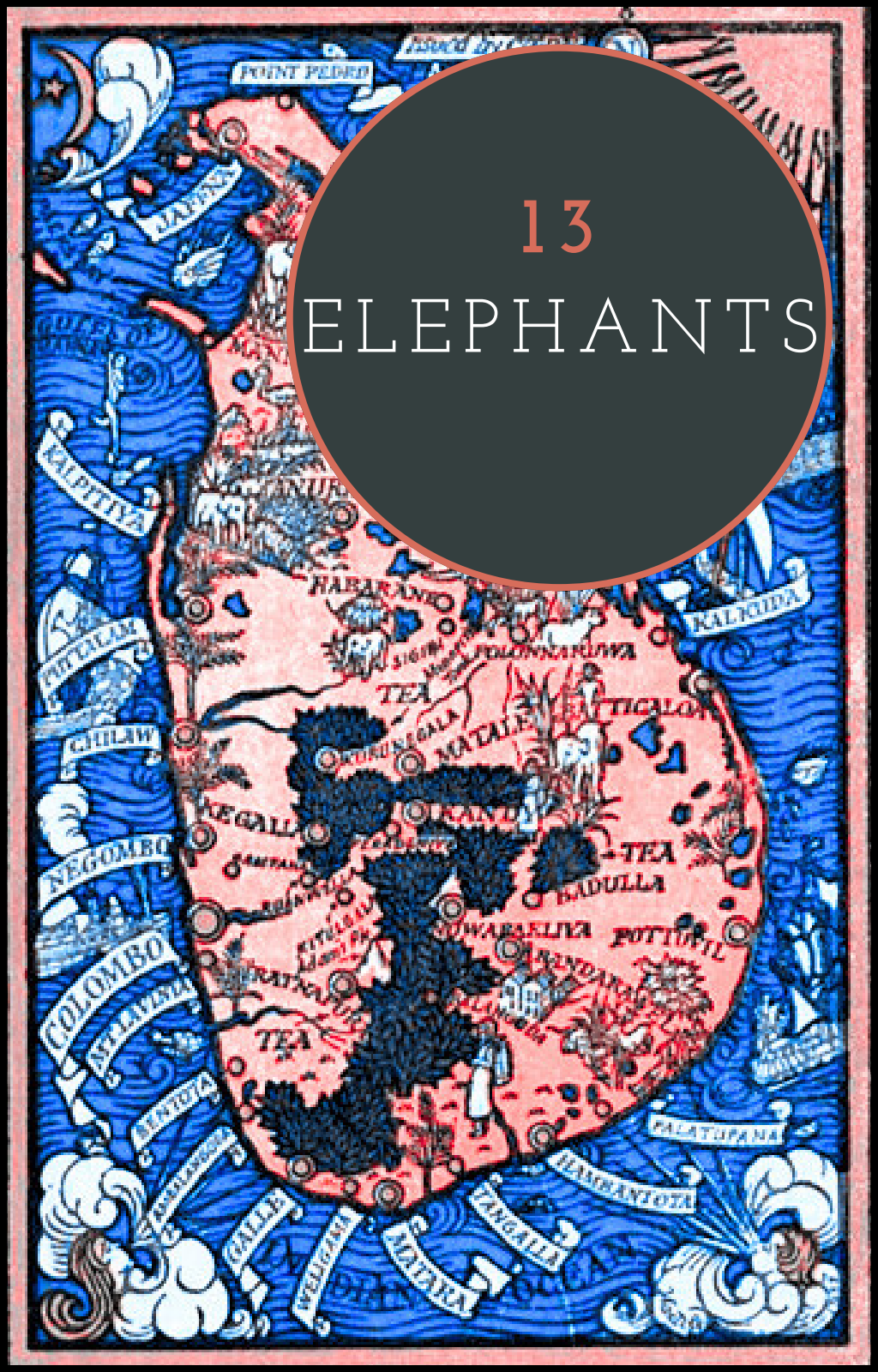
Although willing to eat almost anything, their preferred diet are termites for which their highly mobile snouts are especially well designed. With nostrils closed, the snouts become vacuums, sucking out the termites from their nest. Long curved claws enable them to dig the nest ever deeper till the last juicy termite has been consumed.

The claws are also handy for rapidly scaling up trees to suck out honey from bee nests.

Evolution has cast the sloth bear towards the Grumpy Old Man side of the mammalian spectrum. Its poor sight and hearing leaves it very dependent on its sense of smell, so it can all too often be surprised by what seems like the abrupt appearance of something threatening – like a human – which it will attack with warrior-like ferocity before asking any questions. It is very solitary, living alone in the forest except for those rare moments when it seeks a mate. Reproduction is not its strongest skill, and most females produce a single cup that stays with them for two to

three years, the first months of which are endearingly spent living or travelling on its mothers back.

D.J.G Hennessy, a policeman who had a couple of bears on his land in Horowapotana in 1939,noted the emotive articulateness of their paw suckling: “The significance of the notes on which the bear sucks his paw is interesting; a high whine and rapid sucking denotes impatience and anger, a deep note like the humming of a hive full of bees on a summer’s day indicates that he is contented and pleased with life, a barely audible note shows great happiness while a silent suck in which he usually indulges in just before going to sleep on a full stomach denotes the acme of bliss”.



13 ELEPHANTS

"My precious."

J.R.R. Tolkien

Elephants are the ultimate Pachyderms – those mammals with skins thicker than that of any a populist politician. Once elephants were widespread across Sri Lanka; today they are mostly to be found in the dry parts of the north, east and southeast – 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 increasingly existential. In 2023, four hundred and seventy 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

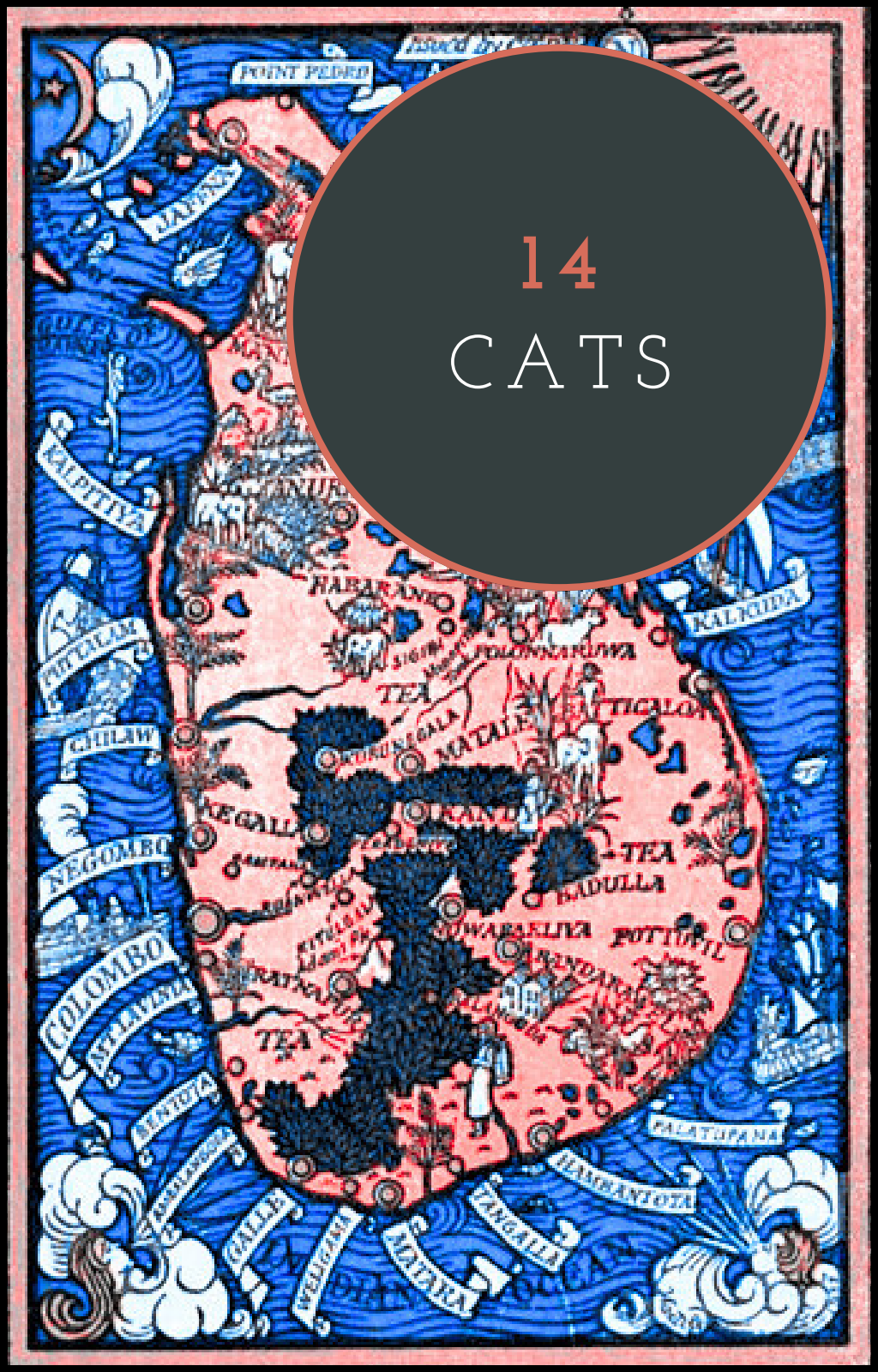
an elephant brings with it immense prestige and the more ambitious temples are as eager as tourist sites to host their own animal. One such unfortunate beast – Raja – even has his own museum dedicated to him, next to Kandy's temple of the Tooth. For decades he had the responsibility for carrying the sacred casket at the Kandy Perahera, until his death in 1988, a day which prompted the then government to declare National Mourning, and have the luckless beast stuffed and displayed for all time.

More recently, one of the leading elephants 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.

A noted sub species of Elephas Maximus Maximus is the Ceylon Marsh, a 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. Rarer still – indeed almost as rare as the dodo, is the Sri Lankan pygmy elephant.

It was first recorded in 2012 in the Udawalawe 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.


POINT PEDRO
MANNAR
JAFFNA
PUTTALAM
CHILAW
NEGOMBO
COLOMBO
RATNAPURA
GALLE
MATARA
TRINCOMALEE
BATTICALOA
KANDY
KURUNEGALA
TEA
KEGALLE
BADULLA
POTTUVIL
HAMBANTOTA

14 CATS

“I warn you, if you bore me, I shall take my revenge.”

J.R.R. Tolkien

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 as 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 smalltown near Nuwara Eliya, waiting for taxological promotion like a good, albeit dead man before the Catholic Dicastery for the Causes of Saints.

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 photographs 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: the Wet Zone Golden Palm Civet; the Montane Golden Palm Civet and the Dry-Zone Palm Civet.

In fact, the debate about numbers is a passionately ongoing one, with some scientists now claiming that a fourth civet also merits separate recognition: the Sri Lankan Mountain Palm Civet, found only in Dickoya, a refinement that makes Darwin's Galapagos 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 measure40 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 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.

Far more common is the Asian Palm Civet, more happily known as the Toddy Cat, which lives in generous numbers across Sri Lanka, South and Southeast 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.

The Rusty-Spotted Cat 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.

Double the size of a domestic cat, and weighing up to almost forty pounds, the Indian Fishing Cat, though increasingly vulnerable due to habitat loss, is found in Sri Lanka and across South and Southeast 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 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 subspecies, including one in Sri Lanka - 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.

Shrewd, secretive, elusive, the Ceylon Leopard is without doubt the greatest endemic jewel in Sri Lanka's mammalian

crown. It is the largest of the country's four cat species. 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 PRESS

A small island surrounded by large oceans. Sri Lanka is a well-kept secret. The Ceylon Press aims to make its story more accessible.

The Ceylon Press is based at and partially funded by The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, a jungle luxe retreat abandoned in war, reclaimed by nature, and now, gorgeously restored and there to be enjoyed by anyone in search of utter peace

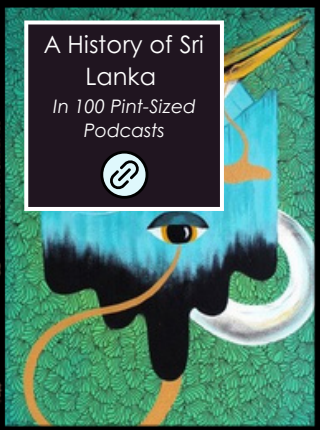
FT

Companions to Sri Lanka's

History; Travel & Place; Food, Fauna & Flora; Belief, Society & Culture.

A History of Sri Lanka

In 100 Pint-Sized Podcasts



The Story of Sri Lanka

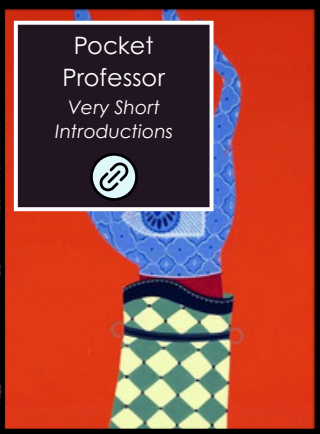
Podcast Pictures of the Island

Jungle Diaries

Podcasts from off the Grid

Pocket Professor

Very Short Introductions



Tiny Guides

Sri Lanka, Instantly

ALT Guides

Magical alternatives