

A TINY GUIDE TO SRI LANKA'S

ENDEMIC MAMMALS



THE
CEYLON PRESS

In a
Word
or Two

Counting Sri Lanka's endemic mammals is like painting the Forth Bridge: just when you get to the end you have to start all over again.

Somewhere, with deft hands and glowing fervour, there is always to be found a scientist who has craftily and credibly reclassified the endemic civet into three distinct sub species; or added in a shrew recently discovered to have one toe longer than the rest, or a bat readmitted to the hallowed list after a much disputed and injurious explosion.

Any number of endemic mammals from 19 to 30 is likely to be correct or totally wrong, depending on what the latest research papers have to say.

The list of beasts presented below is, therefore, more of a vox pop video of endemic mammals than a static photograph. Broad in front and broad in mind (like a Wykehamist), it errs optimistically on the side of generosity. Certainty about anything, this included, is only given to God, and he is playing his cards very close to his chest. But whatever your viewpoint, this small proportion – are endemic.

Collectively, they may lack the innate glamour of a white tiger, the brooding menace of a yak or the familial delight of a Highland Gorilla; but they exude instead a profound and pleasing subtlety, their apparent modest position in the Food Chain being as powerful an argument as any to cherish what is unique.

Unique – and threatened, for many if not all the country's endemic mammals are threatened by a rising tide of habitat loss, pollution, and climate change. And this is where these mammals' lack of obvious glitz cuts against them.

Who cares if a shrew vanishes, or a bat ceases to fly? Not enough people – yet.

Even so, for a country so gladly patriotic, these creatures, flashy or not, are ones to celebrate.

Nearly half of the country's mouse species are endemic: 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.

Of its many rat species, two can only be found within these shores: the rare Ohiya Rat and its equally endangered cousin, the Nillu Rat. Shrews – that most modest and retiring of tiny mammals – accounts for over a fifth of the country's endemic mammals.

Just one of the thirty bat species that fly its skies is endemic - the Sri Lankan Woolly Bat. Of its seven squirrel species, two are simply Sri Lankan through and through: the Dusky-Striped Squirrel and Layard's Palm Squirrel.

Of its gorgeous secretive lorises, one – the Sri Lankan Red Slender Loris - can claim without argument to be endemic, though scientists are putting forward an equal status for at least three more: the Ceylon Mountain Slender Loris; the Northern Ceylon Slender Loris and the Highland Ceylon Slender Loris.

All three of its unforgettable monkeys

are endemic: Hanuman's Langur; the Purple-Faced Langur and the Toque Macaque.

Three of its shy civets, rare and endangered as they are, come only from the island: the Wet Zone Golden Palm Civet; the Montane Golden Palm Civet; and the Dry-Zone Palm Civet; as do three of its deer - the Yellow-Striped Chevrotain; its cousin the White-Spotted Chevrotain and the lovely Ceylon Spotted Axis Deer.

1

THE SRI LANKAN
WOOLLY BAT

The Sri Lankan Woolly Bat (*Kerivoula Malpasi*) is the country's only endemic bat. This tiny creature, barely 50 mm from head to body, was first described by a tea planter, W.W.A. Phillips in 1932.

It is said to enjoy sleeping in curled up banana fronds on hills between 500 to 1000 metres, though its sightings are so rare that it has not been properly assessed for a score on the IUCN list of endangered animals.



Image courtesy of mammalwatching.com.

2-4

CIVETS

When life was simple, long ago, and 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 photographers like Dhammika Malsinghe, Dr. Wolfgang Dittus, Dr Devka Weerakoon, and Channa Rajapaksha have in the past 15 years worked hard to evaluate this assumption. By careful observation, the checking of paw prints, the measurement of bodies and assessment of markings, they have instead come to the conclusion – now widely accepted in the scientific



Image: Public Domain.

community - that the country actually plays host to three endemic civets:

By careful observation, the checking of paw prints, the measurement of bodies and assessment of markings, they have instead come to the conclusion – now widely accepted in the scientific community - that the country actually plays host to three endemic civets:

1. Wet Zone Golden Palm Civet (*P. Aureus*)
2. Montane Golden Palm Civet (*P. montanus*)
3. Dry-Zone Palm Civet (*P. stenocephalus*)

In fact, the debate about numbers ongoing, with some scientists now claiming that a fourth civet also merits separate recognition: the Sri Lankan Mountain Palm Civet (*Paradoxurus supp*), found only in Dickoya, a refinement that makes Darwin's Galápagos 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 measure 40 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 a 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.

5-6

THE YELLOW-
STRIPED & WHITE-
SPOTTED
CHEVROTAINS

Barely twelve inches high, the Mouse Deer, or Chevrotain (*Tragulus Meminna*), lives scattered in the forests of Sri Lanka, South and South East Asia. It is tiny, gorgeous, even-toed and, unless you are a plant, entirely harmless – although popular superstition adds the terrible caveat that a man who gets scratched by the hind foot of a mouse deer will develop leprosy.

This has yet to be fully verified by scientists, and in the meantime, the miniscule creature has happily got on with its life, flourishing in good numbers



Image Public Domain.

in Sri Lanka, the species has become so evolved as to present scientists with the opportunity to award it with full endemic status as the Sri Lankan Spotted Chevrotain (*Moschiola Meminna*).

7

THE CEYLON
SPOTTED AXIS DEER

Troubled by the sheer lack of scientific information about the behaviour of the Ceylon Spotted Deer (*Axis Axis Ceylonensis*), 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 play."

Scientists are much divided on the subject of animal play, and tortured monographs have been written



Image courtesy of Ahamed Mohideen Riyas Ahamed.

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 increasing 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, crocodile, 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.

8

THE CEYLON SPINY
MOUSE

A mere maximum of 18 centimetres length, from nose to tail, the Ceylon Spiny Mouse (*Mus Fernandoni*) is found only in Sri Lanka, one of its prized endemic species. It is now so endangered that it can be seen in a few locations, becoming sadly ever more rare than. nightclubs on Neptune. 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.



Image courtesy of iNaturalist.

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MAYOR'S
MOUSE

Mayor's Spiny Mouse (*Mus Mayori*) inhabits the smaller end of the mouse spectrum, and comes in two (still quite widespread) variants – *Mus Mayori Mayori*, which inhabit the hill country; and *Mus Mayori Pococki* 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.



Image courtesy of Pearl of the Earth.

10

THE SRI LANKAN
LONG-TAILED
CLIMBING MOUSE

Discovered in 1929 by the Dutch tea planter, Adriaan Constant Tutein-Nolthenius, the Ceylon Highland Long-Tailed Tree Mouse (*Vendeleuria Oleracea Nolthenii*) is an increasingly rare creature, little more than 21 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.

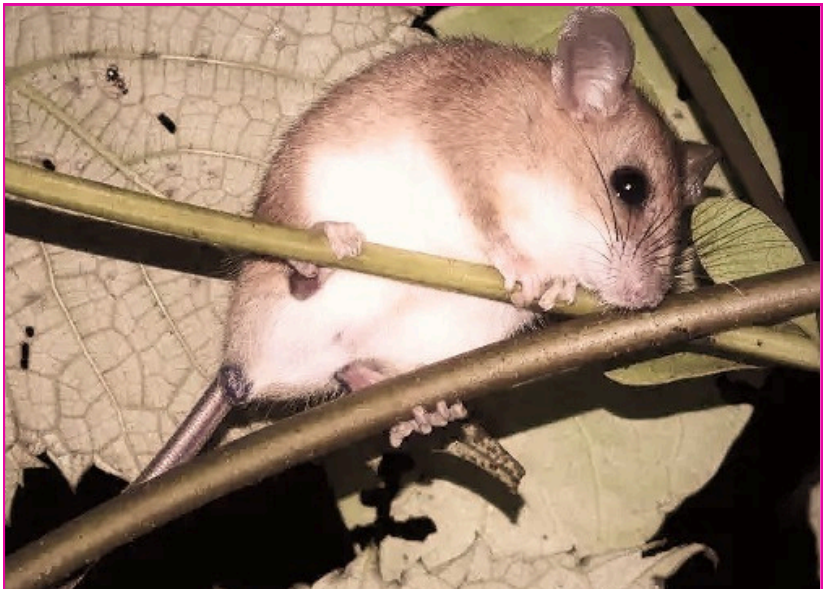


Image courtesy of ANIMALIA.

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HANUMAN'S
LANGUR

The Hanuman langur, *Semnopithecus priam thersites* or Tufted Gray langur, is one of three *Semnopithecus priam* variants, the other two being found in India. Like all langurs, it is a monkey in all but name. 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. It is a doubtful honour to bestow on this, one of Sri Lanka's elite endemic mammals.



Image courtesy of Senthil Aathavan Senthilverl.

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 dry zone 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 50 members, the larger ones being curiously non sexist with leadership shared between a male female pair.

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THE PURPLE-
FACED LANGUR

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. Within the groups however strict social hierarchies are observed.

The Purple-Faced Leaf Langur (*Trachypithecus vetulus*) is the rarer of the two langur species found on the island, and one of the country's cherished

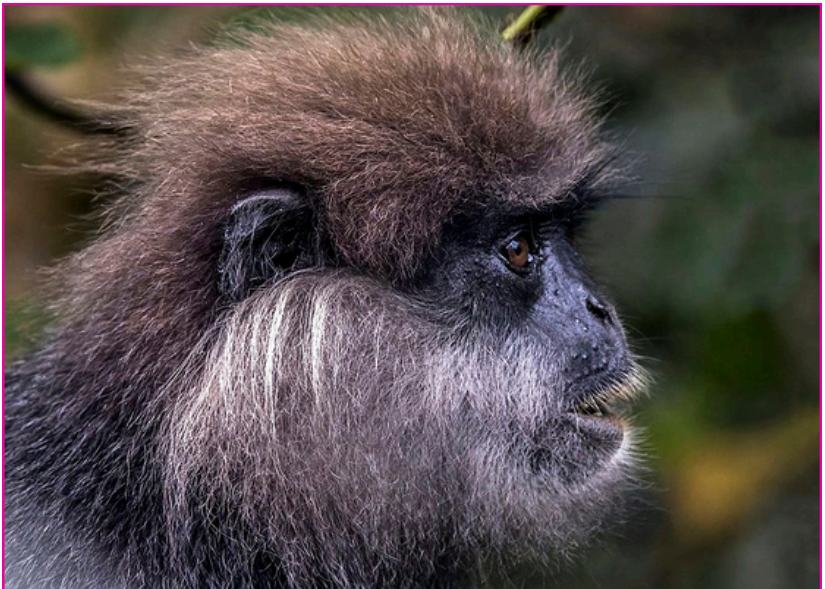


Image courtesy of Charles J. Sharp.

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The Purple-Faced Leaf Langur (*Trachypithecus vetulus*) is the rarer of the two langur species found on the island, and one of the country's cherished endemic mammals. It lives largely in dense forest but is now threatened by habitat loss that has noticeably and recently 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.

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THE RED
SLENDER LORIS

A tiny, tree-living creature with heart-stoppingly adorable panda eyes, the Loris tardigradus (and its close cousin the Loris Tardigradus Tardigradus or Western Ceylon Slender Loris), is the country's most celebrated loris species, not least because it is just one of 24 (the number can vary depending on the latest science) endemic mammals on the island. Like all lorises, it is a creature of the night, so unless you are a lucky insomniac you are unlikely to see them. Mothers have the intriguing habit of coating their offspring in allergenic saliva, a toxin that repels most predators.



Image courtesy of Sri Lankan Safari.

This sub species 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 tree tops 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 the loris 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.

14

THE TOQUE
MACAQUE

A fully paid up member of Sri Lanka's exclusive group of endemic mammals, Toque Macaques (*Macaca sinica*) – monkeys in all but name – come in three apparently distinct island variants. The Pale-Fronted or Dusky Toque Macaques (*Macaca sinica Aurifrons*) stick to the wet zones in the south west.

The Common Toque Macaques (*Macaca sinica sinica*) favour the dry zone areas of the north and east. The Highland Toque Macaque (*Macaca sinica opisthomelas*), favour the hilly centre of the island.



Image courtesy of Carlos Delgado.

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 saited on fruit.

Their capacious cheek pouches are specially adapted to allow them to store food for consuming later, a technical refinement that helps them steal, store, and run with their pilfered bounty. 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 comprised 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.

15

THE OHIYA
RAT

Thirty centimetres in length, nose to tail, with steel grey fur and white undersides, the Ohiya Rat (*Srilankamys Ohiensis*) is one of just two rat species that are endemic to Sri Lanka.

Quite why it is named after a small village of barely 700 souls near Badulla is a mystery. It lives quietly in forests and has gradually become ever scarcer in counts done by depressed biologists.



Image courtesy of Devika Antharjanam.

16

THE SRI LANKAN
MOUNTAIN RAT

Like its only other endemic cousin, the Ohiya Rat, the Nillu Rat (*Rattus Montanus*) is an increasingly endangered species and is found in restricted highland locations such as the Knuckles, Horton Plains, Nuwara Eliya, and Ohiya. Little more than thirty nine centimetres length nose to tail, its fur tends to be slightly redder than the typical grey of many of its relatives.

Its name – Nillu, which means cease/settle/ stay/stand/stop - gives something of a clue about its willingness to get out and about.



Image courtesy of Nature Nibble.

17

THE JUNGLE
SHREW

Barely twenty centimetres long, nose to nail, with grey fur and a preference for subtropical or tropical forests, the Ceylon Jungle Shrew (*Suncus Zeylanicus*) is one of just six endemic shrews on the island.

Seeing one is a rare sight for the tiny creature is highly endangered as well as being, like most shrews, a determinedly nocturnal beast.



Image courtesy of Ecology Asia.

18

THE SINHARAJA
WHITE-TOOTHED
SHREW

The rarified world of shrew scientists became jubilantly animated in 2007 when an entirely new endemic species of Sri Lankan shrew was agreed upon: the Sinharaja White-Toothed Shrew (*Crocidura hikmiya*), so taking the agreed number of endemic shrews up to six.

The result of extensive research by Suyama Meegaskumbura, Madhava Meegaskumbura, Rohan Pethiyagoda, Kelum Manamendra-Arachchi and Christopher J. Schneider, the scientists determined that what had been masquerading in Sinharaja as the



Image courtesy of gbif.org.

Ceylon Long-tailed Shrew (*Crocidura Miya*) 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.

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THE SRI LANKAN
HIGHLAND SHREW

Closely related to the medium / large sized shrew, *Suncus Murinus* that is commonly found in India, the Ceylon Highland Shrew (*Suncus Murinus Montanus*) is so distinctly different in scientific terms as to win a place as one of just six endemic shrews that live in Sri Lanka.

Highly endangered and 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 any endangered animal merits.



Image courtesy of ISGG.

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THE SRI LANKAN
SHREW

Noted for their extreme smallness, the Ceylon Pigmy Shrew (*Suncus Etruscus Fellowes-Gordoni*) 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 shrew than many of its relatives and sports fur that is nicely chocolate brown to dark grey. As benefits so small a 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.



Image courtesy of ConservationBot 1964.

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. It is one of only six endemic shrews on the island.

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PEARSON'S LONG-
CLAWED SHREW

New year's day in 1924 was to be a very special year 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 (*Solisorex Pearson*). It is one of merely six shrews endemic to the island.

At the time, it would have been a much more common sight than it is today,



Image courtesy of Pearl of the Earth.

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.

22

THE SRI LANKAN
WHITE-TOOTHED
SHREW

Measuring a mere twelve centimetres nose to tail, the Ceylon White-Toothed Shrew (*Crocidura Miya*) is one of the island's six endemic shrews but 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.



Image courtesy of Sjonge.

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LAYARD'S
PALM SQUIRREL

Layard's Palm Squirrel (*Funambulus layardi*) 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, the popular and endemic island squirrel, sometimes also known as the Flame-Striped Jungle Squirrel for the beautiful markings that run along its back.



A lithograph by Jan Brandes of the Palm Squirrel. Public Domain.

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

24

THE DUSKY-
STRIPED SQUIRREL

The Dusky-Striped Squirrel (*Funambulus sublineatus obscurus*) is one of two Sri Lankan squirrels considered unimpeachable members of the island's endemic mammal club. It is also the smallest of its squirrels. It was first documented in 1935 by the tea planter 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 its comforts cold and lives most



Image courtesy of Voelbaarsanket.

happily in such high elevations as
Horton Palins and Nuwara Eliya where
even frosts can occur. It is also
something of a lyrical chatter box, with
a strange bird like sound that modulates
depending on its message.



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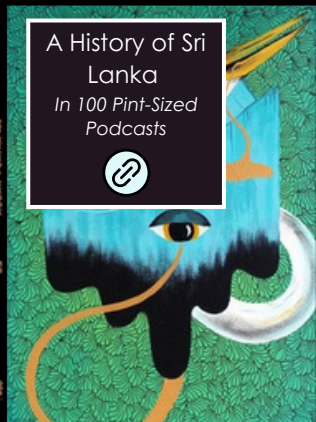
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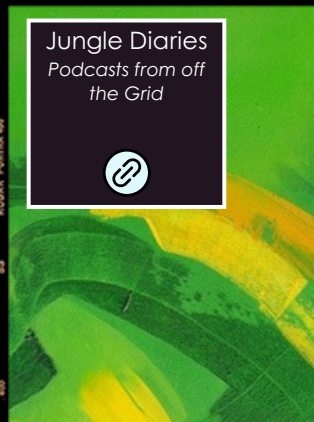
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