

A TINY GUIDE TO SRI LANKA'S

# DEER PONIES & DONKEYS



THE  
CEYLON PRESS

In a  
Word  
or Two

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 South East India – the Hog Deer, the Mouse Deer, and the Barkling 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.

1

THE CEYLON  
SPOTTED 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 attempting to pin down the very concept



*Image courtesy of Ahamed Mohideen Riyas Ahamed.*

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.

2

THE HOG DEER

Seventy centimetres tall, with short legs, a predilection to whistle, fine antlers and dark brown fur, the Indian Hog Deer (*Axis Porcinus*) 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 grass lands of Sri Lanka and South and South East Asia, it is now classified as extremely vulnerable, its small herds shrinking in the face of habitat loss.



*Image courtesy of Jared Matthews.*

3

THE INDIAN  
MUNTJAK OR  
BARKING DEER

Carefree, with a propensity to eat almost anything, the Barking Deer (*Muntiacus Muntjak Malabaricus*), is a cuddly irritant in jungle and on low hill estates, its numbers flourishing both here and across South and South East 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, solitary, 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.



*Illustration by the celebrated artist Samuel Daniell of a Landscape in Ceylon with Barking Deer and Fawn c1808-11. Public Domain.*

4

THE MOUSE DEER  
OR SRI LANKAN  
SPOTTED  
CHEVROTAIN

Barely twelve inches high, the Mouse Deer (*Tragulus Meminna*), lives scattered in the forests of South & South East Asia.

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, Meantime, the miniscule creature has got on with life. In Sri Lanka, the species has become so evolved as to present scientists with the opportunity to award it full endemic status as the Sri Lankan Spotted Chevrotain (*Moschiola Meminna*).



*Image Public Domain.*

5

THE SAMBAR DEER

Across Sri Lanka and India, the Sambar Deer (*Cervus Unicolor Unicolor*) claims gold as the largest and most impressive of the several deer species with which 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 (*Rusa unicolor unicolor*). 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 venerable all the same.



*Image courtesy of Charles J. Sharp.*

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.

Fossil records from tens of thousands of years earlier, show the existence of a now extinct ancestor, the Muva Sinhaleya. A species of Sambur smaller in size than the one alive today.

6

THE PONIES OF  
MANNAR

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- the Mannar Pony (Eques Eques) to be exact. 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.



*Image courtesy of [window2nature.wordpress.com](http://window2nature.wordpress.com).*

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.

The Wildlife Department has since offered them a much greater degree of protection but if there are any deep-pocketed millionaires out there dissatisfied by the sight of the likely heirs, the wild ponies of Delft offer a much more attractive option for legacies and reputational garnishing.

7

SRI LANKAN  
DONKEYS

Sri Lanka's diminishing herds of feral donkeys (*Equus Caballos*) 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 decendent of the Nubian African Wild Ass, now extinct in its native Ethiopia and Sudan.



*Image courtesy of dailymirror.lk.*

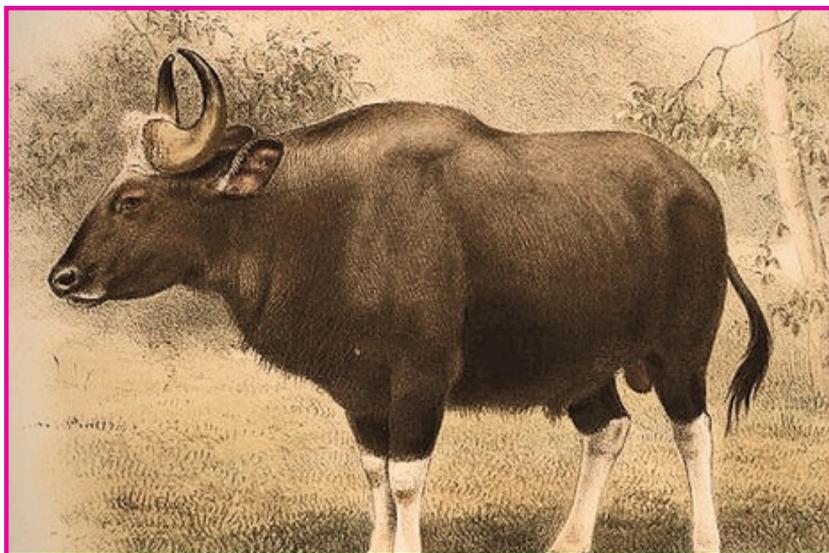
Extinction also faces it in Sri Lanka, its habitat every diminishing; and hungry villagers occasionally helping themselves to what will become tomorrow's stew.

There are said to be under 3,000 still alive, through a wonderful charity, Bridging Lanka, has stepped in to try and nurse them back to happier times.

8

THE GAUR, OR  
INDIAN BISON

Once common throughout South and South East Asia, the Gaur, or Indian bison, is moving inexorably towards extinction, with a just 21,000 mature specimens still living. Related to yaks and water buffalo, they are the largest of all wild cattle and out ranked in size by other land mammals only by elephants, rhinoceros, and hippopotamus. The Ceylon Gaur (*Bibos Sinhaleyus Deraniyagala*) is a distinct sub species that used to be found in Sri Lanka but was last spotted by British adventurers in 1681 in the menagerie of King Rajasinghe II of Kandy.



*image public domain*

Proving its ability to juggle many varied priorities (political reform, economic stability, improved educational standards etc etc.), the Sri Lankan government recently proposed to its Indian counterpart that they send half a dozen gaur to the island as part of a reintroduction programme.



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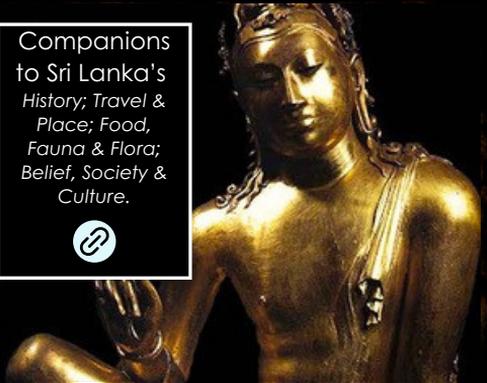
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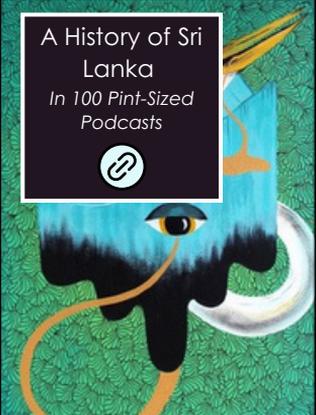
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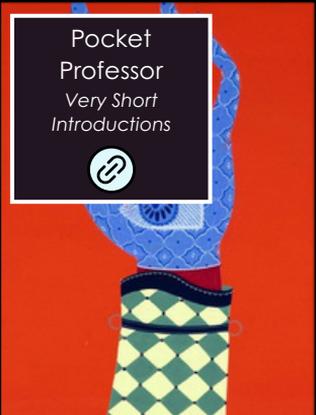
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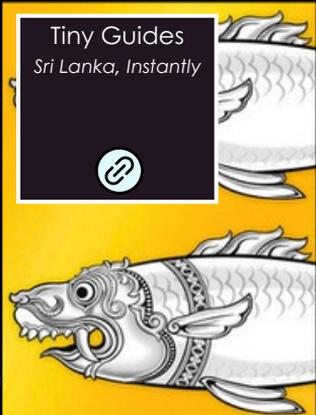
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