

A TINY GUIDE TO SRI LANKA'S

SHREWS



THE
CEYLON PRESS

In a
Word
or Two

Shrews have a considerable way to go in attracting the sort of adulatory attention bestowed on other rare and endemic Sri Lankan mammals such as the Toque Macaque or Golden Palm Civet. Yet of the nine shrews found on the island, a staggering six are considered to be endemic. Lilliputian they may be in size, but for any species, this is a more than commendable achievement. Shrews, with their rat like appearance, tiny size, invisible nocturnal habit, and modest behaviour rarely hit any headline.

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. threatened prestige that goes with it are the: Ceylon Highland Shrew; Ceylon Jungle Shrew; Ceylon Pigmy Shrew; Sinharaja White-Toothed Shrew; Ceylon Long-Tailed Shrew; Pearson's Long-Claw.

1

THE CEYLON
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 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.

2

THE CEYLON
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.

3

THE CEYLON LONG-
TAILED SHREW

Measuring a mere 12 centimetres nose to tail, the Ceylon Long-Tailed Shrew (*Crocidura Miya*) is one of the island's 6 endemic shrews but so deeply threatened by habitat loss and logging that it has recently only been recorded in 5 highly fragmented areas in the Central and Sabaragamuwa provinces, despite its record of 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 old adage: never judge a book (or shrew) by its cover.



Image courtesy of Sjonge.

4

THE CEYLON PIGMY
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



Image courtesy of ConservationBot 1964.

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

5

HORSFIELD'S
SHREW

1856 was a big year - the Crimea War came to an end, the Second Opium War erupted, the first casino was approved in Mone Carlo - and a diminutive nine inch shrew, to be named Horsfield's Shrew (*Crocidura Horsfield*), was discovered. But in the almost 200 years that were to follow, scientists gave what amounted to the cold shoulder to the pocket-sized beast; and even 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



Image Public Domain

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6

KELAART'S LONG-
TAILED SHREW

A Burger from a long established family, and with numerous scientific discoveries to his name, Kelaart was also to be remembered as the man who discovered Kelaart's Long-Tailed Shrew (*Feroculus Feroculus*), 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.



Image courtesy of havahart.com.

The species has managed to cling to both its name and its original scientific evaluation, unlike many other shrews who suffer the continual reevaluation, 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.

7

THE MUSK SHREW

Found right across South and South East Asia, the Asian House Shrew (*Suncus murinus*) - more notably called the Common Indian Musk Shrew - and its very close cousin, the Indian Grey Musk-Rat Shrew (*Suncus Murinus Caerulescens*) are both 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.



Image courtesy of dailymirror.lk.

8

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 Pearsoni*).

It is one of merely six shrews endemic to the island. At the time, it would have been a much more common



Image courtesy of Pearl of the Earth.

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.

9

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 Ceylon Long-tailed Shrew (*Crocidura Miya*) was actually a quite different



Image courtesy of gbif.org.

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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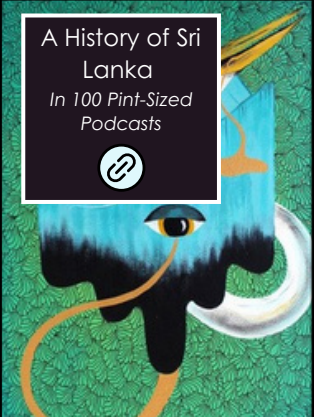
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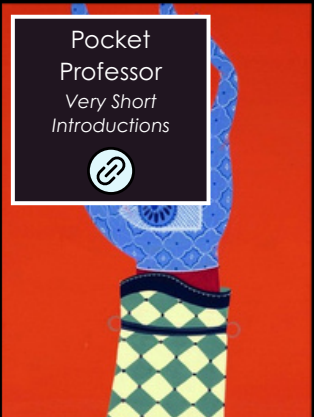
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