

A TINY GUIDE TO SRI LANKA'S

MONKEYS

& LORISES



THE
CEYLON PRESS

In a
Word
or Two

"I think," wrote Joyce Kilmer, "that I shall never see / A poem lovely as a tree / A tree whose hungry mouth is prest/ Against the earth's sweet flowing breast / A tree that looks at God all day/ And lifts her leafy arms to pray ..."

And not just pray, might add Sri Lanka's three tree-hugging mammals – the Langur, the Toque Macaque, and the Loris; but eat, sleep, and make a secure home within as well.

Money may not grow on trees, but these three creatures do. With over a third of the country still covered in forest and over 800 trees and shrubs to choose from, the island remains a tree hugger's Shangri-la.

This is especially true of the Purple-Faced Toque Macaque, a monkey only found in Sri Lanka whose 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 cleve.

The Tufted Gray Langur, Sri Lanka's second monkey species, is part of a wider langur family spread across India, though, as with almost anything Sri Lankan – be it culture, animals, saris, or food – this island variety has evolved so deeply and so contentedly on its own as to present itself as a credible endemic sub species within the wider langur family.

But the ultimate tree hugger's tree hugger is the Loris, a mammal of beguiling rarity and beauty, whose talent for invisibility outsteps even that of Tolkien's Frodo when wearing The Ring.



MONKEYS

Given their volume, impact, and sheer effrontery, it would seem quite logical to assume that Sri Lanka was overrun with monkeys of many species.

But in fact, the reverse is true. Quality trumps quantity. Just three variants are found on the island -

The Hanuman Langur, or Tufted Gray Langur;

The Purple-Faced Langur (which comes in four marginally different versions);

and The Toque Macaque, who has evolved, with indiscernibly subtly, into three sub species.

1

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 number of endemic mammals.

Up to sixty inches long head to tail,



Image courtesy of Senthil Aathavan Senthilverl.

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.

2

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 endemic mammals.



Image courtesy of Charles J. Sharp.

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.

3

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. Telling them apart however is a pastime best left to scientists with lots of patience and sturdy



Image courtesy of Carlos Delgado.

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.



LORISES

Constructed with small bodies, and lean, outsized limbs, the lorises' 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

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 recoded, four are based in Sri Lanka. Three of the loris sub species come from the grey slender loris family, the Sri Lankan variants so distinct as to form a separate strand within the wider family whose offspring range from Sri Lanka to Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh. But the Red Slender Loris has no such family connections being rooted firmly, only, and entirely in Sri Lanka alone.

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

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THE CEYLON
MOUNTAIN
SLENDER LORIS

Known in Latin as “Loris Tardigradus Nycticeboides,” it is this loris’ Tamil name that is most appealing - kada papa or "baby of the forest".

The Ceylon Mountain Slender Loris is now thought to be a distinct and different species of loris to its cousins, with shorter limbs and longer, thicker fur as might be required to keep warm on cool mountain tops. It is considered to be endemic to Sri Lanka’s mountain rain and mist forests – those above 1,500 metres but it is so rare that it has only ever been reliably found on Horton Plains.

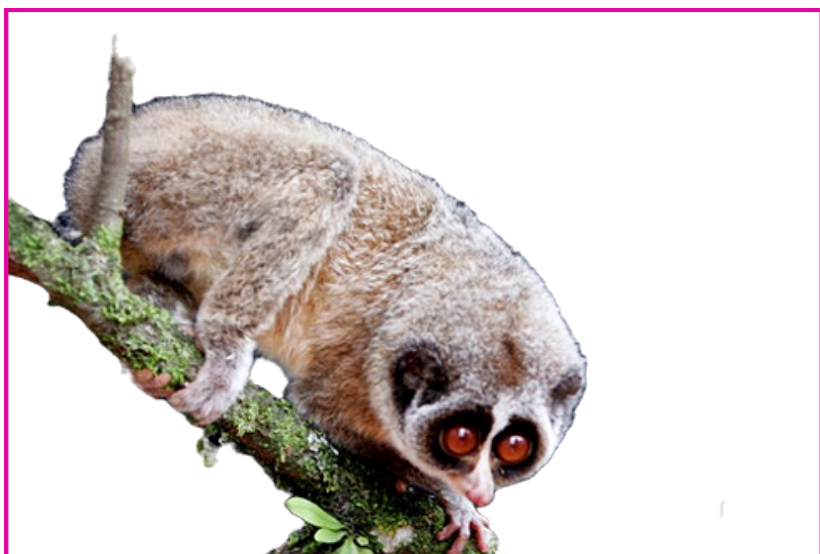


Image courtesy of Zoological Society of London

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.

5

THE HIGHLAND
CEYLON SLENDER
LORIS

As its Latin names (*Loris Tardigradus Grandis*) implies, this loris sub species is larger than most other lorises, its limbs more heavily furred and, according to its less charitable observers, presenting 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 closest cousin the sub species ,*Loris Llydekkerianus Uva*, sports a fur that is more redder in colour.



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THE NORTHERN
CEYLON SLENDER
LORIS

In 1932 a new sub species of the slender loris was discovered – the Loris Tardigradus Nordicus – 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, Trincomale 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 in 1980 that focused on wild-caught specimens from Polonnaruwa.



Image courtesy of windowznature.wordpress.com.

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THE SRI LANKAN
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 19 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. This sub species weighs in at up to 172 grams and a body that extends to little more than 17 centimetres.



Image courtesy of dailymirror.lk.

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).



THE CEYLON PRESS

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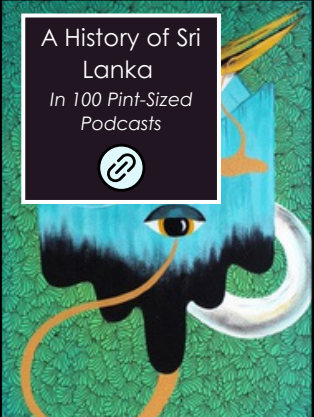
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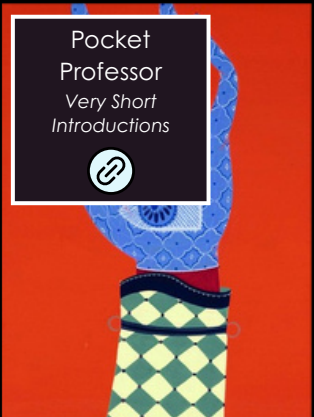
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