



LA MANGOUSTE · *Herpestes edwardsi*

PATRIOT GUARDIANS

A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE
TO THE MONGOOSES OF SRI LANKA

A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE
TO THE MONGOOSES OF SRI LANKA

PATRIOT GUARDIANS

A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE
TO THE MONGOOSES OF SRI LANKA

PATRIOT GUARDIANS

DAVID SWARBRICK
& Coco Horton



Published By The Ceylon Press 2025

Copyright The Ceylon Press

COPYRIGHT
2025 David Swarbrick

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

THIS BOOK IS PUBLISHED BY

The Ceylon Press
The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel
Mudunhena Walawwa,
Galagedera 20100,
Kandy,
Sri Lanka.

www.theceylonpress.com

FOR FLORIN

GUARDIAN OF GOODNESS

“We're not alone!”

ASTERIX THE GAUL



1
IN THE
BEGINNING

Looking at animals from a purely Kandyan perspective (Kandy being the heart of Sri Lanka), in the beginning were not early life form sponges, or even aardvarks – but mongooses.

For it was, according to the best of legends, mongooses who were responsible for Kandy being built where it was. The city's earliest history is an impossible mosaic of hearsay, myth, the odd inscription, and later recollections. First founded as an offshoot of the Kurunegala kingdom sometime after 1357, it lapsed into impenetrable obscurity until Vikramabāhu, a rebellious cousin of the Kotte kings remade it as his petite capital.

But by the time his grandson, Karalliyadde Bandāra, came to take over in 1551, the wafer-thin royal line had all but petered out in a poorly judged wave of conversions to Catholicism and acquiescence to the invading Portuguese. It took the rise of a patriotic nobleman noted his machoness, Vimaladharmasuriya, to relaunch the kingdom in 1592 with sufficient vigour as to ensure it lasted as an independent state for 223 years.

The king, casting around for the best spot on which to rebuild his capital, has his attention down to the threshing ground that overlooked a large paddy field – now the Sea of Milk or Kandy Lake. The threshing ground, his astrologers advised him, was lucky. Safe even - for it was frequented by a white mongoose, a beast that, as everyone knew, was more effective in keeping a house free rats, mice, snakes, and scorpions than any cat.

And so, all around what is today known as the Maha Maluva, the city grew, as serpentine in shape and arrangement as any of the snakes hunted by the king's favoured mongooses.

2

THE COMMON
- OR NOT SO
COMMON -
GREY

In fact, the particular mongoose the king was drawn to was more grey than white – being the Common Ceylon Grey Mongoose, or, given its non-endemic status, the Indian Grey Mongoose, as it is also known. It is the smallest of the 7 mongoose species or subspecies found on the island.

The creature was, wrote Rudyard Kipling in 1894, “rather like a little cat in his fur and his tail, but quite like a weasel in his head and habits. His eyes and the end of his restless nose were pink; he could scratch himself anywhere he pleased, with any leg, front or back, that he chose to use; he could fluff up his tail till it looked like a bottle-brush, and his war-cry, as he scuttled through the long grass, was: 'Rikk-tikk-tikki-tikki-tchk!'”.

Kipling’s famous mongoose demonstrated all the attributes of a perfect mongoose. For despite being somewhat 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 in Sri Lanka, it is a fine companion to have around.

Herpestes Edwardsii, as the beast is known more formally, is little more than 32 inches nose to tail it lives right across the island, often in pairs, eating fruit, roots, and small animals.

It lives for around seven years, breeding twice yearly and producing up to four cubs, who pop out of eggs, like all mongoose babies. Its fur, stiffer than that of other mongooses, is more interesting than the word grey implies as each individual hair is ringed with creamy white and black markings that make even

stationary beasts look as if they are running with blurred go-faster stripes streaking their whole body all the way down to a long bouffant tail.

There are in fact 5 sub species of grey mongoose living in India and other parts of South Asia; and whilst *Herpestes Edwardsii* is the one most seen in Sri Lanka, a second variant, *Urva Edwardsii Lanka*, has been identified as sufficiently different as to merit its classification as a subspecies unique to the island.

Whilst its more Indian cousin lives almost anywhere, the Sri Lankan variant has a marked preference for habitats of 2000 meters or more, and avoids built up areas in favour of jungle, shrublands and riverbanks.

For a time it also excited scientist for its superior olfactory capabilities – even to the extent of finding itself being trialled to detect narcotic drugs in police raids.

3

GOLDILOCKS
AND THE THREE
BEARS

Telling apart the different grey mongooses by looks is a challenge even committed mongoose scientists baulk at.

So imagine their consternation at having to tell apart the three variants of the Brown Mongoose, two of whom are only to be found on the island. Like Goldilocks with the Three Bears, they have their work cut out.

At around 30 to 34 inches nose to tail, the Ceylon Brown Mongoose (*Herpestes Fuscus Macarthiaae*), the only one common to both Sri Lanka and India, is marginally larger than either the Highland Ceylon Brown Mongoose (*Herpestes Fuscus Flavidents*), or the Western Ceylon Brown Mongoose (*Herpestes Fuscus Rubidior*).

But there the more apparent differences end. All three species have dark brown fur, black legs, and long black enviably tufted tails. All three are sights of simple, breathtaking beauty. But seeing them is something a challenge for they are introverted beasts, with a marked preference for deeper cover, dark forests; and, like Greta Garbo, a preference for being left alone.



4
THE
MONGOOSE
THAT GLOWS

Identification is much easier in the case of the island's next mongoose, the Ceylon Ruddy Mongoose (*Herpestes Smithi Zeylanicus*).

Its grey brown fur is decidedly reddish in tone, to the point of glowing, and comes with a tail that curves sharply upwards at its tasselled tip where the fur turns to a deep and even brown. Like all mongoose of any variety it feeds day and night on anything smaller than moves – and often on larger creatures too – like land monitors.

Its closest relative is found in India, *Herpestes Smithii Smithii*, named for the Victorian zoologist, John Gray in 1837, with the Sri Lankan variant only being separated out in 1852 by another zoologist, Oldfield Thomas.

Although happily widespread, it is pathologically shy, hiding out in forest and paddy and under normal circumstances has a rather short life.

That said, 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 the September 8, 1955, aged approximately 17 years and it months. It ate quite well right up to the last day and died peacefully during the night, apparently of old age and /or heart failure."

5

THE VERSACE
MONGOOSE

The last of the island's mongoose, the Striped Necked Mongoose, is the Versace of the mongoose world, for it has been given an outfit by its Maker 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.

Widespread across Sri Lanka and southern India, it has sturdy frame and often measuring over 35 inches nose to tail – is the largest mongoose on the island. Its proclivity for calling forests its home can make sighting it a challenge, but it is a sight well worth the effort.

Although all mongooses are famous for their snake killing instincts, they have a curiously moral side too, endearing magnetic in a world besotted by luxury.

In amongst the byzantine reaches of tantric Buddhism, one particular semi deified Buddhist luminary, Ratnasam bhava, is to be seen holding – or perhaps squeezing a mongoose. The animal is preoccupied vomiting up jewels of every kind, in an attempt to capture the wealth of the world and redistribute it for spiritual abundance.

For anyone seeking out that elusive fourth Michelin star or Diamond Himalaya Birkin handbag, this is a most comforting deed – that this most modest of animals should offer not just protection against cobras but also against cupidity.

As the hero of The Mighty Boosh put it: "make sure you own a good bed and a good pair of shoes because if you're not in one, you're in the other."

DISCOVER MORE

A HISTORY LIKE NO OTHER

Contrary & creative, Sri Lanka built a tropical Versailles as the West constructed in wattle & daub. When the Cold War ebbed, its own began. The Ceylon Press *History of Sri Lanka* - in eBook and Podcast - unpicks its serpentine history.

BEHIND EACH GREAT STORY

Island Stories: The Sri Lanka Podcast and the Press's *Complete Audio Books* explore the things that make Sri Lanka, Sri Lankan.

OFF PISTE

The Ceylon Press' *Alternative Guides* concern themselves with subjects and places without crowds; forgotten as they are by most academics, historians, and modern travellers.

LESS IS MORE

The Ceylon Press' *Tiny Guides* fillet the essentials of their subject from nature to history, culture to travel.

INSTANT OVERVIEWS

With their short, and readable introductions, The Ceylon Press' *Pocket Professor Short Introductions* illuminate Sri Lankan subjects from ancient dynasties to endemic mammals.

COMPANIONABLE LOOK-UPS

The Ceylon Press's subject *Companions to Sri Lanka* makes visible the whole island – from its arts, wildlife, & landmarks to religion, food, & history.

A LITTLE LIGHT RELIEF

And least it gets too serious, enjoy the off-grid *Jungle Diaries* blog & Podcast; and *Archaeologies*, the blank verse diaries of an occasional hermit.

ABOUT THE FLAME TREE ESTATE & HOTEL

"It's absolute paradise," wrote one guest recently; "I would fly back to Sri Lanka simply to stay in this place for a couple more days."

Centred on a 25-acre organic spice and timber plantation, The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel is a secret to most and a companion to some. Its 1,000 high rocky hills stalled the Dutch army in 1765; and until the civil war the estate stretched over 100 acres with 3 working elephants.

Renovated and furnished with art & antiques, its hills and valleys keep safe a rare seclusion.

Its restored plantations grow cardamom, turmeric, ginger, cloves, pepper, cocoa; rubber, coffee, vanilla; cinnamon, coconuts; and scores of trees – best enjoyed from the vantage point of the hotel's infinity pool. Its healthy menus fuse east with west, street food with fine dining. It can be viewed at www.flametreestate.com.

A GIFT FOR READERS

Of course, as a reader, you naturally qualify for special treatment should a holiday bring you to Sri Lanka and The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel.

Drop the general manager a note to tell him how you came across us and to make arrangements to best suit your time and budget:
generalmanager@flametreestate.com

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, writer, and hermit.

He was raised, with few concessions to modernity, in Sri Lanka, India, Singapore, and the Middle East.

He gained various degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales, and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as was decently possible.

He launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online before running various homeless units at HarperCollins UK, India, and Hachette.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom divas and bottom lines diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

Today, as the Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers. The hotel is also the location for The Ceylon Press.

Besides running the Hotel and Press, he enjoys his hobbies of books, trees, dogs and, as a Cornishman, following the progress of the Cornish Independence Movement from afar.

Bianca C'Ffore, an expert on Sri Lankan fauna and flora, is also an accomplished opera singer, known to her admirers as The Milanese Nightingale. When not investigating the jungle around her, she spends her time taking care of the many needs of her capacious family.