



NOBS & NOBLES

THE WILD CATS OF LANKA

A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE
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FOR KATI

...OF COURSE

"Whenever You Feel Alone, Just
Remember That Those Kings Will
Always Be There to Guide You."

MUFASA, THE LION KING



1
CAT
COUNTING

Counting Sri Lanka's wild cats is no minor feat. None of them care to be counted, still less seen. Some have vanished; and at least one is the subject of such impassioned scientific debate that its righteous credentials as distinct species or sub species still hang in the balance.

Even so, of the many mighty mammals that once sat, enthroned, like Phidias' Olympian Zeus gazing at the lesser world around him, so too did a dazzling assembly of cats lord it over the island, at the very apex of Sri Lanka's food chain. Some of the most glamorous members of this ancient feline club have long since vanished, predators who themselves fell prey - less to other predators but to climate change, and the accompanying alternations in vegetation.

Others, thriving, or perhaps now just clinging on to life with grim resilience in other corners of the world, never made it to the island in the first place. This, today, is not the country where you might glimpse cougars, lynx, ocelot, or jaguars slipping stealthily through scrub forests.

But, as benefits of one the world's most notable biospheres, the island has instead as astonishing variety of surviving predator cats, including one that has moulded its appearance so intimately around a particular environment that scientists have eagerly given it endemic status three times over, with a fourth, identified from a small town near Nuwara Eliya, waiting for taxological promotion like a good, albeit dead man before the Catholic Dicastery for the Causes of Saints.

2

THE CEYLON
LEOPARD

Today, tourists come in teeming numbers to catch a glimpse of the Ceylon Leopard. Indeed, some are so overwrought if denied the sight they are wont to demand their money back from hapless safari operators. For the leopard, shrewd, secretive, elusive, has its own quite firm ideas about just to whom and when it might offer itself up for a selfie.

It is without doubt the greatest endemic jewels in Sri Lanka's mammalian crown and the largest of the country's cat species. Unlike other leopards, notably the ones that inhabit India, it has no other rival predators, and this has inspired so great a degree of evolution that Sri Lanka's leopards are now considered to be a separate and quite distinct sub species, only to be found on the island.

This lack of competition has probably helped account for their size - averaging six feet in length, head to tail, and weighing anything up to two hundred and twenty pounds, making it larger than other leopard species.

Solitary and with a life expectancy of around 15 years, it is also far less aggressive than others; and quite comfortable hunting through both day and night, rather than restricting itself to the usual nocturnal habits of its Indian counterpart. It is beautifully attuned to hunting, an observer noting that "if the lion is the king of the jungle, then the leopard is the king of stealth," able to run seventy kilometres an hour and leap as far as six metres.

Despite habitats that stretch right across the island, it has a preference for the cooler highlands – places like Horton Palins for example – and has developed thicker fur and fat layers to stay warm. This fussiness has probably told against it: actual numbers of the Sri Lankan Leopard are falling fast and are currently

estimated to be around just eight hundred.

Conservation methods have failed to have any meaningful impact on their population in general and there is little sense of urgency in government circles about the pressing need to do more to protect the future of this apex predator. Habitat loss as much a disastrous history of human-animal interaction is largely to blame for this decline but if nothing is done soon about it the Sri Lanka Tourist Board may have to turn to promoting monkeys.

It is differentiated from other leopards too in its rosettes which are closer-set and smaller than any other species. And an errant gene in the leopard population provides the rarest of leopards, the Black Leopard, of whom there have been only a few firm sightings. One in every three hundred leopards born has the propensity to be black and so able to live up to Karl Lagerfeld's gimlet observation: "One is never overor underdressed with a little black dress."

3

THE LOST
CATS

Thousands of centuries ago it had a lot more competition from wild cats that were much larger and more fearsome. And the spectral remains of three of these giants of the cat world live on in the minds of those wise enough to be ever mindful of history. Indeed, the simple process of discovering these beasts made searching for the proverbial needle in a haystack look like a walk in the park.

Traces – the odd bit of tooth, or chip of bone – emerged during long hard digs by dedicated biologists in parts of the country not renowned for their embarrassment of facilities, hotels, bars or even air conditioned rooms. But the reward in finding these lost clues was immense, throwing open the country's far distant past to a yet more diverse era where Alpha mammals came with stripes or with beards, and not just spots.

The first of these, still adorning the national flag, is the Sri Lankan lion, thought to have become extinct in 37,000 BCE – about the same time as the famous Stone Age Balangoda Man walked his last steps.

Panthera Leo Sinhaleyus, as the sub species is known, only came to light in 1936 when the archaeologist, P.E.P. Deraniyagala, uncovered two fossilized teeth in Kuruwita, near Ratnapura.

With the passion of an Hercule Poirot, the archaeologist studied his modest clutch of teeth. One was so damaged as to be of little use in identifying the animal, but the other, a left molar presented so distinctive a structure as to not just twin it with lions but set it apart from all known species too.

From this single tooth, a lost sub species was uncovered, its size indicating that the beast was a lion much larger than the present Indian lion.

Back in 37,000 BCE, Sri Lanka was a very different place to what it would become, an island of open grasslands a habitat perfect for lions. But over time, as the monsoon rainforest fuelled the proliferation of trees, its habitat become ever more restricted and at some point, the creature just died out. The National Flag aside, the lion lives on still in many a temple and ancient fortress, in statues and even biscuits and breweries.

A more recent albeit extinct competitor was uncovered with a set of scant but intriguing fossil records of a Tiger (*Panthera Tigris*). These telling fossils amount to a left lower tooth found near Ratnapura in 1962 and a sub-fossil of a paw bone dated back 16,500 years, found near Kuruwita. Tigers appear to have arrived in India some 12,000 years ago and spread from there to Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan.

But it seems that it was not this Tiger sub species that wandered across the then existing land bridge from India to Sri Lanka – but another one altogether, one that was native to central Asia, eastern and northern China, Japan, northern Siberia, Sumatra, and Java. Little else is known of this now long departed mammal whose spectral remains sadly disproves the old German proverb “There is no off switch on a tiger.”

The last of these great competitors was the Ceylon Asiatic Cheetah. A distinctly different version of the Africa Cheetah, the Asiatic Cheetah once roamed the world from Arabia and the Caspian to South Asia and Sri Lanka, until around ten thousand years ago. Today they are no longer found in Sri Lanka and in Asia their numbers are so few that all but the most myopically optimistic enthusiasts, anticipate that it will soon cease to live in the wild at all, instead living a tragic mock life in cheetah print onesies and thongs.

4

THE LITTLE
CATS

Three small cats however live on, the happiest being the Jungle Cat (*Felis Chaus*) which appears to be thriving right across its distribution range – from Sri Lanka to China, the Middle East, to the Caucasus.

Wholly sandy in colour, and roughly twice the size of the house cat, it lives its very solitary life feasting off birds and small animals, the hermit of the cat world. It has a variety of sub species, including one in Sri Lanka (*Felis Chaus Kelaarti*) but none so distinct as to excite cries for endemic status. It sticks to warmer locations within Sri Lanka but abounds in grassland and forest - whatever offers the greatest cover and food.

Less seen is the Indian Fishing Cat. Double the size of a domestic cat, and weighing up to almost 40 pounds, the Indian Fishing Cat is found in Sri Lanka and across South and Southeast Asia – but is increasingly vulnerable due to habitat loss.

It has slightly webbed paws and, given its proclivity for fish, prefers to live around the island's wetlands, rivers, lake and stream banks, swamps, and mangroves. Its striking yellow grey fur displays confident black strips along the head and upper back that fray into dots and stipples further down the body. Its fur is specially layered to give it an extra barrier to water. It lives up to ten years, with pregnancies lasting two months, after which two or three kittens are born.

The last of the three is the Rusty-Spotted Cat - the world's smallest wild cat, smaller even than most domestic cats and one of the least studied and understood of the wild cat species.

Covered in reddish fur, it is found in dry forests and grasslands and is largely nocturnal, feasting off insects, small birds, rodents, frogs, and possibly small lizards

as well as domestic fowl. Territorial, and somewhat abstemious when it comes to sex (once a year, thank you), they produce a litter of rarely more than three kittens after a two month pregnancy. Found only in Sri Lanka and India, their conservation status is threatened, with unending encroachments on its habitats fragmenting its home range.

5

THE CIVETS

The island's last set of wild cats is the one that has provoked the greatest academic debate – the civets. The most commonly seen of this species is the Asian Palm Civet, more happily known as the Toddy Cat. It lives in generous numbers across Sri Lanka, South, and Southeast Asia.

It is a small beast, little more than five kilos in weight, its stocky body painted with gorgeous markings: grey fur with a white forehead, white dots under its eyes and beside its nostrils – a sort of Panda in the making.

Luckily, it displays none of the wearisome fastidiousness of the now almost extinct panda and, although primarily forest dwelling, it has acclimatised to urban life with alacrity, making its home in attics and unused civic spaces – and of course, palm plantations. And indeed wherever it can best find the fruit it most prefers. Like the golden palm civet, it is also famous in some countries for producing Civet Coffee, made from defecated and partially digested fermented coffee berries.

But it is around the identification of the palm civet that taxologists and feline scientists get most excited. When life was simple, long ago; and when 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 fifteen years worked hard to evaluate this assumption.

By careful observation, the checking of paw prints, the measurement of bodies and assessment of markings (beige or off-beige), they have instead come to the

conclusion – now widely accepted in the scientific community - that the country actually plays host to three endemic civets: the Wet Zone Golden Palm Civet (*P. Aureus*); the Montane Golden Palm Civet (*P. montanus*); and the Dry-Zone Palm Civet (*P. stenocephalus*).

Yet the debate about these sub species is on-going, 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

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.

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.

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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.