



# MISSING

**SRI LANKA'S VANISHED BEASTS**

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A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE  
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# FOR THE MOCKETTS

ALWAYS LATE, BUT ALWAYS THERE

“If you live to be a hundred, I hope I  
live to be a hundred minus one day,  
so that I never have to live a day  
without you.”

WINNIE THE POOH

1

NO GUESSING  
GAME

The mind blanks at the glare,"

wrote Philip Larkin -

"Not in remorse  
—The good not done, the love not given, time  
Torn off unused — nor wretchedly because  
An only life can take so long to climb  
Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never;  
But at the total emptiness for ever,  
The sure extinction that we travel to  
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,  
Not to be anywhere,  
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true."

Larkin's poem *Aubade* counts the cost of personal extension. But as Descartes might have gone onto conclude, with the value of hindsight, "If I don't exist then everything else probably can."

For it is by being human that we are triggering the party to which no-one desires an invitation, the earth's greatest extinction event.

We were not of course responsible for the earlier ones, but this is not modest guessing game and for anyone fond of models, they all offer scenarios that even Hollywood would balk at.

The first of these events, the Late Devonian extinction (383-359 million years ago) killed off about 75 percent of all living species.

One hundred million years later came the worst of all — the Permian-Triassic extinction, or Great Dying. This despatched 96% of all marine animals and 3 out of every 4 land animals that had managed to flourish since the previous extinction.

After fifty-one million years of later exhaustive recovery, the Triassic-Jurassic extinction swept down, exterminating 80% of all living species.

All three, it seems, were caused by the climate change sparked by volcanic eruptions and shifting plate tectonics.

The last, and most famous mass extermination, the Cretaceous-Paleogene extinction, 66 million years ago, was the one that claimed the life of the dinosaurs – and with them 76% of all earth's species. For this a wandering asteroid was probably to blame.

The credit for the next one is one we as a race must step up to take, the winner of the Oscars from Hell. Already the stage is being set, the tables set for the Oscars ceremony, the red carpet laid out, the invitations being sent for the pre and post ceremony parties, the Governors Ball, the Vanity Fair Party, cocktails in the Diamond 25 Lounge.

Invitations have already reached many in Sri Lanka. Anteaters, jackets, bears, otters, fishing cats, civets, axis deer, lorises and Toque Macaque have already propped up their gold embossed cards on their jungle mantelpieces. As have the Ceylon Highland Long Tailed Tree and Spiny Mice, the tiny Serendib Scops Owl, the Nillu and Ohiya Rats, the Dusky Striped Squirrel and the Ceylon Highland, Pigmy and Long-Tailed Shrews. Even the Ceylon Tree Skink had received an invitation to this perdition party.

The big beasts are of course, especially invited; and the island's elephants are the guest of honour. Before the British arrived, there were over 15,000 elephants in Sri Lanka – until that is big game hunting became fashionable. Its most notorious celebrity was a

government agent, a Major Thomas Rogers who managed to kill 1400 elephants in just 11 years.

“His whole house,” recalled one appalled guest in the 1840s “was filled with ivory, for amongst the hosts of the slain more than sixty were tusked elephants... At each door of his veranda stood huge tusks, while in his dining room every corner was adorned with similar trophies...”

Mercifully killed at just 41 years, Rogers’ grave, still to be found beside the gold course in Nuwara Eliya, offered him little by way of eternal rest as it has been stuck by lightning over 100 times, indicating one of the silver linings of climate change.

Today the island lays claim to less than half that pre-colonial number of elephants, with the BBC recently reporting that nearly 500 are dying annually, half of them at the hands of humans.

The maths for continued survival looks little better for the equally famous Sri Lankan leopard, now reduced to around 800 adults and desperately trying to recover from a 75% population decline during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

All across the globe, the more modest number crunchers calculate that a million species of plants and animals are facing total oblivion.

This seems especially impossible to be true in the fecund space of this island, which is so full of life, it appears as if nothing can ever end. Yet it can. It does. It has. From shore to shore lurk the traces of previous annihilations, their wrath like an imprint plotting a course as much forwards as it does back.

2

THE FOSSIL  
HUNTERS

Despite owing to pre Cambrian rocks of such antiquity they were old when Gondwana was young and producing the clearest evidence across the whole of South Asia for the first Homo sapiens, planetology is still a science that has far more to yield.

Much of what little we know about the island's earliest history and its disappeared animals dates back to the remarkable work carried out between the 1930s and 1963 by P. E. P. Deraniyagala, Director of National Museums. Uncommonly hands-on for so senior a civil servant, his life work was spent examining the alluvial strata better known for concealing gems around Rathnapura.

Within its sandy layers he uncovered fossils, fragments, teeth, and bones daring right back to the Pleistocene, when Sri Lanka was still – just about – joined physically to the Indian landmass and when the melting ice sheets caused the creation of these alluvial beds.

His work, and that of his successors, including his son Siran, uncovered the existence of animals that pointed back to an island that was very different to the one here to today.

Not just animals – but people too. The discovery of what is now termed Balangoda Man reliably dated human existence on the island to 30,000 years ago, with further island evidence showing that “in Sri Lanka, prehistoric man has lived at least 125,000 years ago with the possibility of existence as far back as 500,000 years ago. Advanced 'microlithic' tool making technology had already been developed in Sri Lanka 30,000 years ago, when Europe was still dreaming of this technology which arose there only about 12,000 years ago.”

3

LOST CATS

Humans have of course flourished here since then – but not so some of the mammals that these palaeontologists also found. The most iconic of these was the Ceylon Lion. Now adorning the national flag, the Sri Lankan lion is thought to have become extinct in 37,000 BCE – about the same time as Balangoda Man walked his last steps.

*Panthera Leo Sinhaleyus*, as the sub species is known, came to light in 1936 when P.E.P. Deraniyagala, uncovered two fossilized teeth in Kuruwita, near Ratnapura. With the passion of a forensic detection, 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 lion was not the island's only vanquished cat for scant but intriguing fossil records reveal the existence not just of the lion – but also that of the Tiger too (*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.

The destruction of the island's third greatest cat, the Ceylon Asiatic Cheetah, offers a clear warning to the existence of the island's other great and still just about surviving cat, the Leopard, whose numbers are plummeting.

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 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.



4  
MISSING  
GIANTS

The palaeontologists also found the remarkable remains of not one but three other elephant species, all now extinct. The current and endangered Sri Lankan Elephant is considered to be a subspecies of *Elephas Maximus Sinhaleyus*, whose treasured fossils, unearthed in Kuruwita, indicates that it last lived 100,000 years ago.

Its similarity to the present-day elephant is likely to have made it all but impossible to tell them apart, the difference lying in such things as smaller molars and a wider spout. A scant dusting of other fossils reveal the existence of two further elephant sub species - *Hysundricus* and *Namadicus Sinhaleyus* - that may have called Sri Lanka home before vanishing.

They weren't the only big beasts now no longer here. An antique species of hippopotamus also once lived in Sri Lanka - *Hippopotamus Hexaprotodon Sinhaleyus*.

Dating back between 800,00 to 100,000 years ago, the fossilised remains of a its jawbone, showing the presence of a couple more teeth than exist in the current living hippopotamus (*Hippopotamus amphibius*), are all that is left to prove the once lively presence on Sri Lanka's rivers of this great land mammal, the largest after the elephant. It probably fell afoul of early climate change when rainfall become significantly less heavy, so putting pressure on their preferred habitat.

And at some time similar or slightly thereafter it vanished, the hippopotamus was paired with two subspecies of now extinct *Rhinoceros - Sinhaleyus & Kagavena*. Fossilized remains dating back 80,000 years found near Ratnapura by Dr. P.E.P. Deraniyagala indicate their ghostly existence, their marginally different teeth all that remains to tell them apart and to distinguish them from the Indian *Rhinoceros (Rhinoceros*

Unicornis) that once roamed Asia from Pakistan to China, and who now are confined to a few protected locations in Assam, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, and Nepal.

The last of the very large land mammals now wiped out is the Gaur. Once common throughout South and Southeast Asia, the Gaur, or Indian bison, lived as a distinct sub species here - *Bibos Sinhaleyus* Deraniyagala.

It was last spotted by British adventurers in 1681 in the menagerie of King Rajasinghe II of Kandy. Its only surviving relative is now moving inexorably towards extinction in India, 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.

5

VANISHED  
MINORS

There is even evidence of the older relatives of four of the island's still living smaller mammals.

Happily widespread, and at home in most habitats, the Indian Crested Porcupine (*Hystrix Indica*) is found right across Sri Lanka and India. Nocturnal, and usually hidden in the burrows that are their homes, they are eager consumers of bark, fruit, berries, vegetables and almost most plants in gardens and plantations. But fossilised records from thousands of years ago show that the present porcupine once had an ancestor similar though smaller to the one we find today - *Hystrix Sivalensis Sinhaleyus*.

This ancient prickly beast co-existed with an antediluvian version of today's wild boar. With its crested mane, sharp features, and a gratifyingly athletic build, the wild boar is both beautiful and social, travelling in night bands, and much given to wrestling – but fossil records from thousands of years ago show they were preceded by an endemic species some one third smaller - *Sus Sinhaleyus*.

Smaller too than its modern counterpart was *Muva Sinhaleyus*, a species of Sambur deer smaller in size than the one alive today. Yet even today's variant is heading the way of his ancestors, for despite being the largest and most impressive of the several deer species on the island it is now classed as Vulnerable by the IUCN Red List – just two stages away from being declared extinct in the wild altogether.

Even the island's current endemic rats, the rare Ohiya Rat and its equally endangered cousin, the Nillu Rat, can see in their past the existential way forward for them as a species in the fossilized remains of *Tatera Sinhaleyus*, a rat that bade farewell to the island many thousands of years ago.

The legendary Eric Idle once sang that

If life seems jolly rotten  
There's something you've forgotten  
And that's to laugh and smile and dance and sing  
When you're feeling in the dumps  
Don't be silly chumps  
Just purse your lips and whistle, that's the thing  
And  
Always look on the bright side of life  
Always look on the right side of life.

For oblivion has its own upside, creating as it does new opportunities for previously marginalized species to become dominant.

We won't be there to see it all of course, but welcome to the world of the octopus and bacteria, the two species that several learned dons from Oxford are convinced are set to take over after we have shuffled off our mortal coil, once and for all.

# 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

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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](http://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](mailto: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.