THE BATTING ORDER

FROM XS TO 4XL

A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE
TO THE BATS OF SRI LANKA

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FOR MATTHEW

THE NIGHT KING

"How did it get so late so soon?"

DR. SEUSS

ORDERED DISORDER

Cryptology, fractals, even Einstein's Theory of Relatively – they all pale into bashful insignificance when compared to bat taxology. Between the kingdom within which a bat might exist, to the species to which it is classed as belonging, there are at least 8 levels of mind-numbing grouping that bat scientists, or chiropterologists as they prefer to be called, pin their descriptions to.

Unwilling to rest there, many then spend entire careers reordering the species, family and even the genus of these miniature mammals. The more daring go much further and bestow new sub species divisions with all the generosity of a pools winner.

The net result is that this most tiny of all mammals has had - and continues to endure - more names changes than even the hapless city of Plovdiv in Bulgaria.

This blameless city of some 350,000 souls, famous for its icon painting, has endured 11 name changes so far. Somewhat co-incidentally it is also renowned for its bats, housing over 20 different spcies and hosting regular Bat Nights to introduce its avian mammals to its two-legged ones.

Short of dusting the animals with poisonous radioactive dust and equipping them with miniature Kalashnikov, there is little else science can really do to make them more unapproachable. Which is a terrible shame because bats – like lichen, coral, or bees - are among the world's best indicator species, those ones that tell you quite how healthy or not the environment really is.

Chiropterologists aside, we ought to pay attention to what is going on in the bat world for if what have bats have to say is anything to go by, then we are in

trouble. All around the world bats are in decline. Facing a tsunami of pollution, habitat loss, climate change, and aggressive new farming techniques, bat numbers in every country of the world have plummeted and the continued future existence of almost one third of their species is threatened.

It is ironic that in the face of such a burgeoning catastrophe, the number of identifiably different bat spcies continues to grow – it is now up to over 1500.

The counting of bat species in Sri Lanka is an art still much in the making, but all the signs are that the overall decline of numbers non withstanding, the country bats way above its weight. Though owning barely 1% of the world total land mass, Sri Lankan houses well over 2% of the recognised bat species across the world.

Scientists are of course minded to disagree with one another at most times; indeed, put just one Chiropterologist in a room by himself and you will foster dissent. This is especially true when it comes to nailing down the number of bat species that exist here.

It was thought to be 28. Then 29. Several new bats were discovered. Older bats were reclassified. Today the number appears to be 37, though like adolescents with mood swings, this can change in an instant and often does.

But whatever family, genius, species, or sub species they belong to, they all share certain bat-like sureties. They all fly, for example. Bats are of course the only mammals able to truly fly, angels excepted and are famous for roosting upside down from their feet, viewing the world like happy drunks, a propensity make worse by their extremely poor vision.

They all enjoy ultrasonic sound and with this gift of super charged hearing, they navigate the world with expert dexterity. Most live in large colonies and are much given to hibernation, a habit that accounts for their exceptionally long lifespan – with one bat recorded to have lived 41 years. Less happily, many are enthusiastic harbingers of diseases, especially those best able to leap from animal to human.

XS
THE EXTRA SMALL BATS

Sri Lanka’s bats can best be divided to eight broad categories, the first of which are the extremely small bats, the ones so extraordinary petit that their bodies barely measure 2 to 3 centimetres.

There are 3 bats in the XS range, the smallest being the Indian Pygmy Pipistrelle Bat, whose Latin name (mimus mimus) is all the guidance you really need to know quite how tiny it is. Next up in size is the Painted Bat, sometimes known as the butterfly bat.

Small though it is, the creature is also dazzlingly beautiful with thick bright orange fur all over, its wings decorated with black pyramids inset on orange lines like stained glass windows.

Decidedly less glamorous is the rust brown Pungent Pipistrelle, common in SE Asia but rarely found in Sri Lanka. The more exacting scientists have long ago declaring its few sightings here to have been avoidable mistakes.

The third XS bat, Hardwicke's Forest Bat, is one of those wretched beasts whose existence has been especially tortured by name changes and reclassifications. The most recent occurrence was in 2018 when it was dragged out of one species and reallocated to an another under the name The Malpas Bat.

Unlike most other bats, Hardwicke's Forest Bat is something of a loner. It was named after the East India Company soldier, Major-General Thomas Hardwicke, a man as much noted for his love of natural history as for his determination to defeat Tipu Sultan in battles across India. Like many East India men, Hardwicke he had a complicated domestic life, leaving behind five illegitimate children and two other daughters born to his Indian mistress.

S

BATS OF SMALL SIZE

Eight bats populate Sri Lanka's Small Bat category, their sizes averaging around 4 centimetres with upper ranges for some of up to 6 centimetres.

The Indian Pipistrelle stands out, despite its size, for its rampant fertility. Most bats give birth once a year – usually to a single pup. The Indian Pipistrelle however opts to do this three times a year.

Dull orange with a worrying tendency to beige, the Fulvus Roundleaf Bat follows bat reproductive norms more exactly, breeding in November, to produce a single pup who will take well over a year to gain sexual maturity.

Little is known about the third XS bat, the Sri Lankan Leaf-Nosed Bat as it was only identified as a new endemic species in 2025, its existence until then having been clumsily muddled up with other cousins and near cousins. It tell-tale giveaways were its extra board nose, unusual ear shape, and the marginally different set to the bone structure of its tiny head.

The same sorry fate was to befall the Dekhan Leaf-Nosed Bat which, until 2025, has been horribly confused with several other species to which it only had a nodding acquaintanceship. It is regarded as critically endangered and most scientists believe that it doesn't actually exist in Sri Lanka at all. Most that is, but not quite all.

Such rarity does not haunt Schneider's Leaf-nosed Bat wo lives in colonies with around 1000 mates in caves across Sri Lanka.

The Rufous Horseshoe Bat, beautifully orange though it is, remains one to be avoided, being responsible for the 2002–2004 SARS outbreak. Van Hasselt's Mouse-

Eared Bat was named for the great biologist Johan Conrad van Hasselt, whose wretched reputation was such that almost everyone who joined him for expeditions into the unknown died or returned with a terminal illness, himself included.

His little bat is unusual for its fondness for living near water, alone. More social is Cantor's Leaf-Nosed Bat, named for a Danish zoologist more famous for having nailed the taxological complexities of Siamese fighting fish.

M

BATS OF MEDIUM SIZE

Four baths fill the medium size bat category, though medium means little more than between 5 to five and a half centimetres body length at most.

Of the four, the stand-out star is the Sri Lankan Woolly Bat, first described in 1932 and one of just a very few endemic bats on the island. This was a big year for the world, bats included. The First Tarzan film came out in America whilst in Germany Adolf Hiter swapped his Austrian nationality for a more useful German one.

None of this was ever likely to trouble the little Woolly Bat hanging out in his preferred mountain habitat, roosting in the curled fronts of banana leaves.

His celebrity is such that he has even manged to withstand the wave of excitement caused in 2022 when a new medium sized endemic bat was declared here - Phillip's Long-Fingered Bat, which, until more eagled-eyed observers got to work was long thought to be a run-of-the-mill Eastern Bent-Winged Bat.

Long fingered too is the penultimate of the medium sized bats - Schreiber's Long-Fingered Bat. It is of course notable for its extremely long fingers which give rise to unusually broad wings and a shape, when spotted hanging, like that of an outside Christmas decoration, albeit grey unlike the Ceylon Bi-Coloured Leaf-Nosed Bat which is blamelessly ordinary in every respect.

L
THE LARGE BATS

An average body size of 6 centimetres may not seem large to most people but for bats, it is exactly the sort of size that is getting on for awesome. The 8 bats in this category all average around 6 centimetres in body length but some can grow much further – up to eight and a half centimetres.

The Indian Pygmy Bat can be more easily spotted than most due to its erratic flight, its slow and fluttering movements resembling a small biplane about to crash. Little if anything really distinguishes

The Lesser Yellow Bat; it is not even especially yellow. The Egyptian Free-Tailed Bat is marginally easier to distinguish on account of its large forward-pointing ears.

Tickell's Bat, long thought to be extinct in Sri Lanka, was very recently rediscovered, though so little is really known about it that is offers jaded biologists something of a blank canvas for their PhDs.

The delightfully named Wrinkle-Lipped Free-Tailed Bat is much more of a celebrity, its flight pattern elegant and sure, and its unmissable upper lip engraved with long deep wrinkles suggestive of boundless wisdom.

Famous too, though in a rather darker way is the Greater False Vampire Bat. Its extremely large ears immediately calls it out from other bats, but it is its eager carnivorous feeding habits that especially characterize it. It has a highly developed hunting strategy that enables it to capture not just the insects most bats exist on but also other bats, small birds, rodents, and fish.

Of the large bats, the Black-Beared Tomb Bat is easily the most sociable, living in tribes, or towns might be a better word, of up to 4,000.

XL
THE EXTRA LARGE BATS

Just three bats populate the XL space, coming in at around 7 centiormers in body length - though at least one of them has been known to grow to an astronomical 3 centimetres.

The Lesser Woolly Horseshoe Bat stands out – not just because the female is larger than the males; but they also frequently give birth to twins.

Such implicit gender politics is inverted with the Lesser Dog-Faced Fruit Bat, a bat which really does look like a diminutive dog – albeit one where the males are apt to form harems, attended on by multiple doting females.

The last of the XL bats is the mournfully named Long-Winged Tomb Bat. It is a proud territory marker, with a very prominent glandular sac in which it stores its scent, a rare cologne of saliva and urine, which is kept for such special occasions as marking territory or courtship.

2XL

THE DOUBLE XL BATS

Of the six bats that occupy the double XL space, all keep to around 8 centimetres through the Short-Nosed Fruit Bat has bene known to add an extra 3 centimetres on this. Its preferred home is not a cave but rather a self-build dwelling made from weaving vines together or meshing palms fronds into walls.

This home making fixation is one it shares with the Round-Eared Tube-Nosed Bat . The Ceylon Great Horse-Shoe Bat is altogether more traditional, preferring caves - though in the most detached of ways as it prefers to live by itself or, at best, in pairs.

A cave dweller too is the Large Leaf-Nosed Bat which, for reasons that defeat even inventive pharmacists, is a celebrated ingredient in several local medicines.

This does not seem to have much troubled its existence as it is classified as of least concern by environmentalists – unlike the beautiful dark and fast flying Pouch-Bearing Sheath-Tailed Bat, which is now critically endangered.

Extinction is not on the cards anytime soon for the last of the doble XL bats, the Greater Asiatic Yellow Bat, perhaps in part because of the females unusual ability to store sperm for delayed ovulation.

3XL

THE TRIPLE XL BATS

Four bats, ranging from 9 to 14 centimetres in body length hold, out in the triple XL category.

The first of them, the deliciously named and coloured Chocolate Bat was considered extinct on the island until it was rediscovered after an 87-year gap.

Kelaart's Pipistrelle, unremarkable in many ways, stands out due the size of the bone in its penis. This bone, missing in humans, is something enjoyed by all male bats but the 8 mm length of Kelaarts penis bone is something to marvel at.

A more modest piece of anatomy marks the appearance of the Ceylon False Vampire Bat. It has uncommonly large ears, beautifully marked with lines, as are its gossamer wings, the yellow veins standing out when they are spread wide.

A troubled identity haunts the Ceylon Fruit Bat, with many scientists, arguing over quite where it appears in the pecking order or sub species, wishing to rename it Leschenault's Rousette.

=

4XL

THE MEGA BAT

One bat and one bat only holds out in the 4XL category – the Common Flying Fox.

At 15 to 25 centimetres it really is the T.Rex of the island's bat world, with a wingspan of 1 ½ metres and a weight of 1.6 kilos.

Nocturnal, fruit eating and curiously infecund, they are an unmistakable part of any skyline especially around city parks where they gather at dusk to hang off trees in infamous colonies. Although unlikely to turn suddenly into airborne artillery, they are best kept at a distance, harbouring as they do such a wealth of diseases as to make biological warfare warriors tremble with dread.

Robert Howerd, the dark fantasy poet recalled bats
"Whirling, wheeling into westward,
Fled they in their phantom flight;
Was it but a wing-beat music
Murmured through the star-gemmed night?
Or the singing of a ghost clan
Whispering of forgotten might?"

And sadly he may well prove to be right, with bats continuing the existential retreat into oblivion. Unless, that is, that learn from the success of the Common Flying Fox who stand out too as the go-to standard for all the island's bats, being remarkably successfully in their ability to take on and flourish in a world so altered by humans.

Think on this next time you see one in parks around Colombo or famously in the banyan, fig, and tamarind trees of the Peradeniya Botanical Gardens near Kandy getting ready at dusk to go out hunting.

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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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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.

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A GIFT FOR READERS

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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@flametreeestate.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.