

A CEYLON
PRESS TINY
GUIDE

A CHECKLIST
OF THE 8
DEER,
DONKEYS &
PONIES OF
SRI LANKA

DEER, PONIES & DONKEYS



1

THE CEYLON SPOTTED DEER

The Sri Lankan Axis Deer is an increasing vulnerable species, its preferred habitats - lowland forests, and shrub lands –shrinking, and with it the grasses, leaves, and fruit it lives on. Their numbers are now counted in just several thousands. They live in herds of up to one hundred, and are seen by leopards, bears, crocodile, jackals, and hungry villagers, as living supermarkets of fresh meat. Standing up to a hundred centimetres high, their delicately white spotted fawn coats present them as everything a perfect deer ought to be, as is appropriate for an animal that is part of the island's select few endemic mammals.

2

THE HOG DEER

Seventy centimetres tall, with short legs, a predilection to whistle, fine antlers and dark brown fur, the Indian Hog Deer looks nothing like a pig but gains that interspecies appellation for its tendency to rush through the forest, head down. Stretching right across the grass lands of Sri Lanka and South and Southeast Asia, it is now classified as extremely vulnerable, its small herds shrinking in the face of habitat loss.

3

THE BARKING DEER

Carefree, with a propensity to eat almost anything, the Barking Deer is a cuddly irritant in jungle and on low hill estates, its numbers flourishing both here and across South and Southeast Asia. It grows to around sixty centimetres in height and is covered in reddish brown fur and, for males, throws in a modest set of antlers. Shy, solitary, rarely seen in numbers more than two, it gets its name for the dog-barking sound it makes when alarmed. It is a modest, if reliable breeder, with pregnancies lasting six months after which one or, occasionally, two pups are born.

4

THE SRI LANKAN SPOTTED CHEVROTAIN

Barely twelve inches high, the Mouse Deer lives scattered in the forests of South & Southeast Asia. It is tiny, gorgeous, even-toed and, unless you are a plant, entirely harmless— although popular superstition adds the caveat that a man who gets scratched by the hind foot of one will develop leprosy.

This has yet to be verified by scientists. Meantime, the miniscule creature has got on with life. In Sri Lanka, the species has become so evolved as to present scientists with the opportunity to award it full endemic status as the Sri Lankan Spotted Chevrotain.

5

THE SAMBAR DEER

Across Sri Lanka and India, the Sambar Deer claims gold as the largest and most impressive of all deer species although within Sri Lanka, the species has evolved still further and teeters on the edge of being declared endemic – as the Sri Lankan Sambar. It can be seen in herds on Horton Plains – but it is classified as extremely venerable. Typically one and half metres high (sometimes more), their herds consist of females with their fawns, which they usually produce yearly. The males prefer to live alone - except when the mating urge overcomes them. Fossil records from tens of thousands of years earlier, show the existence of a now extinct ancestor, the Muva Sinhaleya, a species of Sambur smaller in size than the one alive today.

6

THE PONIES OF MANNAR

Strung out to the west of Jaffna in the Palk Strait is the tiny coral island of Delft, bared fifty square mile and home to less than five thousand people. And five hundred wild ponies- the Mannar Pony to be exact. Dotted with Baobab trees, archaeological marvels from ancient to colonial times, and abundant wildlife, Delft has become the last refuge for the Sri Lankan Wild Pony, the direct descendant of the ponies exported to the island by the Portuguese and Dutch from Europe and their colonies in the East, to provide basic transportation. Left behind at Independence, and superseded by cars and lorries, they have carved out a fringe existence on the hot dry island, fighting off as best they can dehydration and occasional starvation.

7

SRI LANKAN DONKEYS

Sri Lanka's diminishing herds of feral donkeys are found mostly in Mannar, Talaimannar and Puttalam, descendants of equine immigrants that entered the great port of Maathottam near Mannar - once the shipping gateway to the ancient Anuradhapura Kingdom. Arab traders were probably most responsible for importing the beasts to carry their cargos inland. The species that lives here is said to be a direct decedent of the Nubian African Wild Ass, now extinct in its native Ethiopia and Sudan. Extinction also faces it in Sri Lanka, its habitat every diminishing. There are said to be under 3,000 still alive, through a wonderful charity, Bridging Lanka, has stepped in to try and nurse them back to happier times.

8

THE GAUR

Once common throughout South and Southeast Asia, the Gaur, or Indian bison, is moving inexorably towards extinction, 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. The Ceylon Gaur is a distinct sub species that used to be found in Sri Lanka but was last spotted by British adventurers in 1681 in the menagerie of King Rajasinghe II of Kandy.

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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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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 AUTHOR

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

He was born in Colombo and raised, with few concessions to modernity, in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. Cornish, he gained his 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.

Having worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as board director for various otherwise homeless departments including sales, art and marketing; and HarperCollins India, he ran Hachette's consumer learning division. Prior to this, he launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls, bottom lines, and divas 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 hospitality teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers.

It also helps fund The Ceylon Press, set up to make Sri Lanka's rich and complicated story, a mystery to many, and a secret to most, more accessible. The Press' books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at theceylonpress.com. The Press also publishes Poetry from the Jungle, a podcast that recasts the orthodox view of the world's best poets and poems.

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."

Centered on a 25-acre organic spice and timber plantation, The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel has been renovated and furnished with art & antiques; its healthy menus fusing street food with fine dining.

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.

Today its restored plantations grow cardamom, turmeric, ginger, cloves, pepper, cocoa; rubber, coffee, vanilla; cinnamon, coconuts - and scores of trees from ebony to sapu – best enjoyed from the vantage point of the hotel's infinity pool. Visit www.flametreeestate.com.

It also houses and funds The Ceylon Press whose books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at theceylonpress.com.

A GIFT FOR READERS

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GeneralManager@flametreeestate.com