



THE DOXY REPUBLIC

THE MONKEYS & LORISES OF LANKA

A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE
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Published By The Ceylon Press 2025

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THIS BOOK IS PUBLISHED BY

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

www.theceylonpress.com

FOR SUE
NEMO SAL TAT SOBRIUS

"No, candidly, Mr. Merton, we don't go into Society, because we do not care for it; and what with the expense of cabs here and cabs there, and white gloves and white ties, etc., it doesn't seem worth the money."

THE DIARY OF A NOBODY GEORGE GROSSMITH



1
SHANGRI-LA

The Doxy, or Biting Fairy, is a small fairy-like magical beast, not unlike a monkey or a loris. And nearly seven million of them leap about Sri Lanka's trees, the vast majority of them Toque Macaques.

To these can be added a handful of lorises, their ancient and more wet-nosed primate relatives. These much overlooked mammals of beguiling rarity and beauty, have talent for invisibility that outsteps even that of Tolkien's Frodo when wearing The Ring.

With over a third of the country still covered by some form of forest and over 800 trees and shrubs to choose from, the island is a tree hugger's Shangri-la; and on first sight it would seem quite logical to assume that Sri Lanka was overrun with monkeys of many species.

But in fact, the reverse is true. Quality trumps quantity. Just three variants are found on the island - The Hanuman Langur; The Purple-Faced Langur; and The Toque Macaque.



2
THE
HANUMAN
LANGUR

The Hanuman langur, also called the Tufted Gray langur - is one of three *Semnopithecus priam* variants, all of which are found in India; but only *Semnopithecus priam thersites* lives in Sri Lanka.

Various theories – conflicting, convoluted and largely unprovable – have been put forward to account for why the Sri Lankan sub species, *thersites*, is different to those found in India, though the differences would tax the deductive powers of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Even so, patriotic toxicologists are pressing the case for the Sri Lankan variant to be declared a separate endemic species in its own right.

As the debate on this rumbles on, the langur in question gets on with its life blamelessly – and relatively unthreatened by the millstones of modern life. It was named rather eccentrically for *Thersites*, a bow-legged antihero from Homer's Trojan Wars, who was later promoted by Plato as a man best fit for the afterlife. This was a doubtful honour to bestow one of Sri Lanka's elite mammals.

Up to sixty inches long head to tail with a weight that can hit close to fifteen kilos, its black face is framed in a wispy white beard that runs from forehead to chin.

It is a light grey in colour, and lives as readily in dry forests as urban areas – showing a strong preference for antique cultural sites if their dwellings in such places as Polonnaruwa, Dambulla, Anuradhapura, and Sigiriya are anything to go by.

Once settled, they tend to stay put, having little of the gypsy tendency within them. Eagerly vegetarian, they live in troops of up to 50 members, the larger ones being curiously non-sexist - with leadership shared between a male-female pair.

Langur monkeys comes with all the complexities of a relatively capacious family – and they live in groups within which strict social hierarchies are observed. Quite how many species belong to the Langur family is a modestly debated subject amongst mammalian taxonomists, but at the last count there were eight. Or seven, depending, stretching from the Himalayas to Sri Lanka.

3

THE PURPLE-
FACED LANGUR

The Hanuman langur shares the closest of all possible evolutionary relationships with the island's second monkey species, the purple-faced langur – so much so in fact that they have even been known to mate. This is the rarer of the island's two langur species, its endemic status free of any debate or argument.

It lives largely in dense forest but is now threatened by habitat loss that has noticeably eroded its numbers. Vegetarian, with a tendency to opt for leaves ahead of other foods, it is shy and slightly smaller than Hanuman langur but easy to tell apart for its darker colouring, the black brown fur of its body contrasting with the mop of wispy white fur that surrounds its face and sits atop its head.

Despite, or perhaps because of being one step away from being critically endangered, the purple-faced langur has settled into its different island environments like a hand in a glove and evolved into a variety of subspecies.

The Southern lowland wet zone purple-faced langur stands out for its more varied markings – a black upper torso and lavish white whiskers. Occasionally all-white versions are spotted.

The Western purple-faced langur - also confusingly named the north lowland wet zone purple-faced langur is the smallest of the lot, its fur a dark greyish brown.

The Dryzone purple-faced langur is, in contrast, the biggest version - with arresting white cheeks and an exceptionally long tail.

The Montane purple-faced langur, sometimes called the Bear Monkey comes with extra shaggy fur, all the better to keep it warm on the higher mountains on

on which it prefers to live.

Excited taxologists from Jaffna have also called for the recognition of a fifth sub species - *vetulus harti*. Although there are no reliable recorded sightings of it as a living mammal, its pelts have been found around Jaffna and Vavuniya – strikingly yellow gold.

4

THE TOQUE
MACAQUE

The island's third monkey species – the Toque Macaques is to be found almost everywhere, living its best life, undeterred by much of what growing urbanization can throw at it. Their appearance is one of the most remarkable things about them. With white undersides, golden brown fur on their backs and a car crash of an almost orange coiffure, they look as if they have got lost in a cheap tanning salon or a Trump rally. Pink faces peer out below recherché hairstyles, giving substance to their name - "toque," the brimless cap that is their bob.

They can weigh up to twelve pounds with a head to tail length of almost a metre. Whilst they have been known to live for thirty five years, most die within five, victims to infant mortality or fights within troops for dominance.

They are accomplished scavengers, their vegetarian fancies best sated on fruit. Their capacious cheek pouches are specially adapted to allow them to store food for consuming later, a technical refinement that helps them steal, store, and run with their pilfered bounty.

As dexterous leaping through trees as capering across the ground, or even swimming, they move in self-protective groups and sleep huddled together, every night in a different place like chastened celebrities or terrorists.

They are easy to spot for they are active during daylight hours, appearing in groups of 20 members led by an alpha male, with half the group comprised of infants or juveniles. Young adult males wisely leave the group on attaining maturity, for fear or otherwise being chased out. But they also have a reputation for being very matey with other species – the family dog, for

example. And they talk to one another. Naturalists have recorded over thirty different sounds, each conveying a very specific meaning.

Common though they are, it has not prevented them from evolving into three separate endemic variants, their differences indistinct to all but mothers and fond scientists best able to decipher the marginal differences presented in the patterns and colours on their heads.

The Pale-Fronted or Dusky Toque Macaque sticks to the wet zones in the southwest. The Common Toque Macaque favour the dry zone areas of the north and east. The Highland Toque Macaque favours the hilly centre of the island.

5

THE LORIS

Whilst only the most luckless traveller would fail to spot at least a couple of Sri Lanka's various monkeys, only the most fortunate would see any of its lorises. And that a long long after they might have spotted you.

Constructed with small bodies, and lean, outsized limbs, their round heads bear a set of disproportionately immense panda eyes set within circles of black fur that give them the look of learned, albeit eccentric, professors of philosophy, peering at you through Tortoiseshell spectacles, like happy Gollums.

It is no surprise therefore to learn that they have large brains for so tiny an animal. Their ears are almost invisible, but should they grasp you with their fingers or toes, you would immediately feel the resolute strength that comes from a creature that lives almost entirely on tree branches. Placing one hand before another, they move along boughs with great deliberation, and often upside down- but unlike monkeys, neither leap nor jump.

How they communicate with one remains one of many scientific mysteries that surround the species, but they are known to be inordinately social, wrestling for the sheer fun of it and sleeping together in tightly packed groups within tree branches, specially built tree nests, or tree holes. And whilst they particularly like to eat insects – especially ants – they are also eager consumers of eggs, berries, leaves, buds, and unlucky lizards.

They live for around 15 to 18 years. And they live an upside down life, sleeping by day, and out and about by night. This makes them almost impossible to see, a task made all the harder given their diminutive size, extreme shyness, rapidly diminishing numbers, and preference for calling home the tops of trees.

Yet amongst Sri Lankans, sighting one is something of a mixed blessing. In island folklore the loris has a cry that can call devils to a house, so it is often regarded with a certain amount of dread. To wake up and find one staring at you is considered to be one of the worst possible omens; should it then reach out and touch you, your body will respond by becoming skin and bones.

Of the world's eleven loris sub species firmly agreed upon and recorded, two are based in Sri Lanka, one grey, one red.

6

THE GREY
SLENDER LORIS

The grey slender loris (*Loris lydekkerianus*) is something of a mater, being, it is thought, even more promiscuous than other loris species. Males eagerly beseech and badger the females for a pot of love making, several to one, twice yearly in April and December - though the female restricts herself to one birth period a year - often of twins. Despite their sexual enthusiasm, they are noted for having one of the lowest reproduction rates of small mammals - no great help for a species that hovers between near threatened and endangered on the Red List.

Survival rates are not much helped either by their reputation for being cute pets, useful ingredients in love potions, and core components in village medicine to alleviate eye infections - and, bizarrely, leprosy. But then again, why not: great discoveries are never made by modest expectations.

Yet by far the gravest threat they face is habitat loss. Being committed tree dwellers, the fragmentation of forests, and ranges impacts upon them with unrelenting fury. The colour of grey lorises varies greatly - from grey to reddish grey, often with a dark strip that runs from head to tail, the darker fur around their eyes giving them their Sophia Loren gaze.

Thus far, thus simple. But not for long for the species have evolved with dizzying complexity. Although the grey loris has made its home in both India and Sri Lanka, it has, at the Sri Lankan end, been busy evolving into two sub species.

The first of these, the Northern Ceylonese slender loris, *Loris lydekkerianus nordicus*, lives in the dry northern and eastern forest regions of the island. A slow moving midget, its body measures barely 200 mm, and weighs little more than 250 grams.

With a logic explicable only to other and, quite possibly, mad scientists, the Highland slender loris, *Loris lydekkerianus grandis*, despite having “grandis” in its name, weighs in at much less – barely 100 grams. It can be distinguished by its shorter ears, its face – more like a love heart than that of the Northern Ceylonese slender loris – and hair that, at its very root, is more black than white. It keeps, as its name implies, to the highland areas of Sri Lanka.

7

THE RED
SLENDER LORIS

The second main loris species – the red loris, more commonly known as the Ceylon Red Slender Loris (or *Loris tardigradus*), has no family connections in India being rooted firmly, only, and entirely in Sri Lanka alone. Rare through it is, it too has nevertheless been busy evolving itself into three distinct varieties.

The first of these, *Loris tardigradus tardigradus*, keeps itself to the wet, lowland forests in southwest Sri Lanka.

It weighs in at up to 172 grams and a body that extends to little more than 17 centimetres. It has dense reddish brown fur and the classic slender hands and legs of all its species, an evolutionary peculiarity that enables it to climb easily through treetops to gather the fruits, berries, leaves on which it feasts.

By day they sleep in leaf covered tree holes, a habit that must help account for their relatively long life span (15-18 years). Its mothers are not to be crossed and have the intriguing habit of coating their offspring in allergenic saliva, a toxin that repels most predators.

Loris tardigradus grandis is found in slightly hilly areas – up to about 1000 meters. As its Latin names implies, this loris sub species is larger than most other lorises.

It can also be singled out in other ways too - its limbs are more heavily furred and, according to its less charitable observers, it presents a less delicate appearance than that of its cousins. It can weigh up to 227 grams and has been known to extend 256 mm from head to body.

Beyond this dwells the rarest of the three - *Loris tardigradus nycticeboides*, the mountain loris, noticeable for its shorter limbs and thicker fur and almost only seen in the high cloud forests of Horton Plains.

. It is known locally as kada papa or "baby of the forest". There, in 1937, a certain Mr. A. C. Tutein-Nolthenius, who had spent twenty years looking for the species, discovered a mother with two offspring. They were to die in captivity. The last recorded sighting was in 2002, also on Horton Plains when a researcher got but a glimpse of a secretive pair.

Arguments still rage over the possibility of a further subspecies – the *Loris Tardigradus Nordicus*. Discovered as far back as 1932 in the Knuckles Range, subsequent reports emerged of it appearing in such different areas as Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Kurunegala, Puttalam, Trincomalee and Matale. It is said to have a very distinctive facial stripe, a greyish coat of thin fur and can weigh in at 293 grams. Scientists are divided as to whether this possible variant belongs best to the red or grey loris family.

Three monkeys, two lorises and a not-to-be-sniffed-at assortment of species variation within most of the creatures in no way really demonstrates the daily delight of seeing any one of them on our daily commute to office or temple.

Almost anywhere, even in the most sophisticated parts of Colombo, where the beautiful people dine, divorce and dance, monkeys will be seen – though for lorises, you need to be good, smart, and lucky. Even so, the failure to spot one after a hard night's trekking, is reward enough, reminding you with wise and mindful care, that nature is not here for our benefit, not should it be as on-call as an all-night drive-through MacDonalds.

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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.