

THE CEYLON PRESS POCKET PROFESSOR

A VERY SHORT
INTRODUCTION TO THE
SKINKS OF SRI LANKA

DAVID SWARBRICK

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DAVID SWARBRICK
& The Editors of The Ceylon Press



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FOR FELICIA

A goddess of Shrinks
and a Shrink for Skinks

1

FALLEN ANGELS

“Errare Humanum
Est”

To err is human

ASTERIX AND THE
GOTHS

Big, bold, and marvellous though so much of what is immediately encountered in Sri Lanka, more marvellous even than all you might ever encounter here, is everything that at first sight looks most ordinary.

Running alongside its elephants (the biggest in Asia); its literature (Booker-winning); its literary (stratospheric); its politicians (megaphone-loving); its recorded history (2,500 years and counting); its leopards (larger than most); its spices (flawless), is a rare penchant for subtlety, the one virtue that – of course - dare not speak its name.

Such reticence is remarkable. Alarming, pleasing, it is also, as the Apostle Paul might have said, something that "passeth all understanding, an innate national delicacy wrenched from centuries of struggle, sympathy, fatalism – and plenty.

Wherever you look you are likely to find a trove of detectably undetectable meanings which, however good or grim, are always so engrossing as to ensure that you need never run the risk of living a life so unexamined as to be barely worth living at all.

And so it is with skinks. They are the most model of model metaphors for the country; symbols for a nuanced elusiveness that is much more inspiring than anything instantly evident. So small as to be ignored; so little studied as to be mysterious; so numerous as to be everywhere,

they live a life somewhere between heaven and hell, like semi-fallen angels, perfect for always being not what they seem. If that is, they are ever noticed at all. For Sri Lanka's skinks have a degree of subtleness that propels that immaterial attribute into the outer galaxy.

Like the Mermaid in far off Zennor, the island's skinks live in plain sight, far beneath the radar. Never has there been a more perfect creature to win lasting acclaim as the country's national animal as this - though the awarding of such an honour would of course destroy the very reason why skinks should be chosen to win it at all.

Despite owning to 1700 different species around the world, skinks are almost as obscure as sea potatoes.

More snake-like than lizards, but with legs that no snake owns, with the face of tiny dragons, the agility of squirrels, and the impish intelligence of chameleons, they live all around us, minuscule glittering version of Rudolph Valentino: sleek, elegant, nimble, and stylish. They can be seen in trees, rocks, grassland, buildings, jungle, scrub, coast. The very antithesis of McDonald's and every other soulless global brand, of the 31 skinks that call Sri Lanka home a colossal 85% are to be seen nowhere else but here.

But a word of warning – for the claim that the island is home to 31 different skink species is to court controversy. Modern science has done its

level best to make skink counting almost impossible, given the proclivity scientists have for reclassifying anything that ever once moved. Many claim that there are 34 skinks here; others far less. It all depends on which monograph or piece of field research can be said to have preceded all others. To make skink appreciation still more impenetrable, scientists have given these petite beasts the most wearisome of Latin names. It is as if some gargantuan global conspiracy born in the Ark itself has plotted to keep skinks out of sight and out of mind. This modest study of island skinks, elaborated here, seeks to repair some of the damage.

2

GRUNGE
SKINKS

“Beati pauperes
spiritu”

Blessed are the poor in
spirit

ASTERIX IN SPAIN

Certainly, some skinks do their uttermost best to present a rather grungy face to the world, eager to extend and protect their social isolation.

The Toeless Snake Skink is a great example of this.

Despite being well distributed across Sri Lanka, especially in the high forested parts of Kandy, its rather drab black-bronze countenance and complete absence of legs, ensures that is forever overlooked.

Taylor's Lanka Skink is no better.

Tiny – 43 mm in length and little more – endemic and commonplace in such areas as Sinharaja, the Knuckles, Gampola, and Hantana, it is dull bronze with the merest hint of a 5 o'clock shadow down the length of its body.

It was named in for an obscure Missouri zoologist, Edward Taylor, an honour it shares with nine other reptiles, eleven reptile sub species, eight amphibians and a milk snake once rumoured to suck cow's udders.

3

CATWALK
SKINKS

“Nunc est
bibendum”

Now is the time to drink

ASTERIX AND THE
CLASS ACT

Other island skinks though are more evidently in the catwalk category. The Common Dotted Garden Skink, happily, widespread right accords Sri Lanka and the Indian sub-continent - even into Vietnam, proves that being common is no deterrent to being quite simply stunning. With its carrot-coloured trail and golden bronze body it looks as if it has strolled out from the showrooms of Cartier, or Bulgari. Certainly, any celebrity empathic enough to adopt one as a pet would have little compunction in not also taking it as a Plus-One to one of the better launch parties to which they are invited. Its striking appearance makes it relatively easy to spot, as does its uncommon size - varying from a tiny 34mm to a titanic 148mm.

Beddome's Skink is another knockout. One of the nicer, albeit unintended, consequences of Richard Beddome setting off for Madras in 1848 to join the East India Company, was his discovery of many new species. He was to give his name to a bat, three lizards, a gecko, two skink, five snakes, a toad, four frogs, five plants, two slugs and a blind worm before retiring to Wandsworth over forty years after he had first made his dreamy adolescent way out east. His collections can still be seen in museums in London, Calcutta and Scotland, the legacy of an admirable naturalist hiding under the cover of an army officer. One of his skinks, Beddome's Skink, is still most easily to be found right across India and Sri Lanka, a modest 55mm in size and joyfully untroubled by the

excesses of the modern world. It has four legs and four toes attached to each one. With the Breton stripe French naval uniform popularized by Coco Chanel as its distinctive markings, it is placed well into the high fashion end of skinkdom.

And here it can keep company with Dussumier's Litter Skink. Named for a 19th century French zoologist, better known for his work on herrings, Jean-Jacques Dussumier's skink, sometimes called the Litter Skink is found not just in Sri Lanka but across southern India too where it lives in most forests habitats below 500 metres.

Somewhat solitary and unapologetically territorial, it is a thriving beast of no real conservation concern. About 50mm in length it comes with the most fashionable of appearances. A tapering dark black stripe edges the sides of its body which is otherwise a speckled bronze; and its tails fade from this into a brilliant tangerine.

Another proven pin-up is Haly's Tree Skink. First discovered in Sri Lanka back in 1887 by an intrepid zoological double act, Haly & Nevill, Haly's Tree Skink later became embroiled in impassioned taxological arguments ignited by sightings of what was thought to be endemic to the island, but in various parts of India. For decades, the argument went first one way, then the other: it was endemic. No, it wasn't. Currently, the consensus seems to be that it is – the Sri Lankan variant being sufficiently different to its Indian cousin as to be considered a

separate species. But the debate, rather like a grumpy politician in opposition, is bound to explode again, fed by thirsty new findings.

Bearing four feet and four toes on each limb, at a colossal 80mm, it hovers on the edge of conservation misery, being in the Near Threatened category. But it bears such striking horizontal dark brown stripes across its golden bronze back as to have won itself a place on one of Sri Lanka's stamps – and for just 125 rupees, you can post the beast anywhere across the island.

The Seashore Skink has yet to find its way onto a stamp, though it richly deserves one. Although mostly a sun-and-surf skink, living a reasonably unthreatened life along Sri Lanka's coasts and sand dunes, it has managed to find its way inland too – even into hills of 500 meters. Living as much in India as Sri Lanka it is not an endemic skink but nevertheless has lovely black and yellow markings on its sleek bronze body, and four fine little feet, each with four toes. It is at the smaller end of skink sizes, being little more than 50mm and was named in honour of a Frenchman, Gabriel Bibron, whose fondness for reptiles led to him also attaching his name to three poisonous snakes, a blind snake, three lizards, a turtle, and two geckos.

4

SKINKS OF CHARACTER

"Maiores longinquorum
reverentia"

Respect is greater from a
distance

ASTERIX IN
SWITZERLAND

Three particular skinks are notable for the eccentricity. Though smallish in size (around 52mm), the endemic Tammanna Skink has something of a reputation for cannibalism, eating young pretenders without much thought.

Preferring low country it is widespread throughout Sri Lanka and sits at the tame end of skink colouration - dull bronze with darker speckled sides.

Its name – Tammanna – means desire or wish in Sanskrit, though what this beast wants, apart from being left alone, is something science is still struggling with.

At the other end of the table manners spectrum is Burton's Nessia, sometimes called the Three-Toed Snake Skink. Quite why Edward Burton, an obscure 18th century army surgeon and Kentish magistrate who is never known to have left England should be given the honour of lending part of his name to this endemic skink is a mystery.

Cheerfully categorised as merely "Near Threatened," the best but one Conservation Category, it is found right across the wet zones of Sir Lanka wherever there is soft decaying organic matter: leaves, logs, forest. Two eggs a year are its normal reproductive limit. Some 60mm long, it is mostly a black-grey in colour, its stocky snake like body sporting 4 diminutive legs each with three toes. It has the unusual dining habit of vomiting out its food if caught – presumably to put off its trapper.

5

EPIC
SKINKS

"Sic transit gloria mundi"

Thus passes the glory of
the world

ASTERIX AND THE
MAGIC CARPET

Although most skinks are sizeistically challenged, a handful stand out because they buck the trend, the trend being a nose to snout length of around 50m. Seven skinks exceed this measure with grace. The Speckled Forest Skink is around 70 mm and comes with a small dictionary of alternative names including Bronze Mabuya, and Bronze Grass Skink. Shy but abundant right across south and southeast Asia, including Sri Lanka, this otherwise unremarkable beast is remarkable for its dazzling bronze body – so metal-like in fact that it looks as if it had just wandered out of a forge. In all other respects, it lives a conventional life, a real bread-and-butter skink that just gets on with living in the most drama free of ways, its focus most definitely on egg laying, producing up to 6 eggs a year – quite a feat within the skink world. It is as territorial as a latter-day Russian tsar, with a marked preference for forest or grassy habitats of 1000 meters or more.

Similar in size is the Sri Lanka Bronze Skink. Barely anywhere in Sri Lanka, the highest of the highlands expected, is off limits to the endemic skink. Its fecund egg laying habit (it puts down about half a dozen eggs a year) helps ensure that that it is more than able to weather whatever is thrown at it. Golden bronze with a dark side stripe along its length, it was named for a Hungarian twitcher, Gyula Madarász whose single visit to Sri Lanka in 1895 netted him 125 stuffed specimens to take home to Budapest. Later rumours that he married his daughter turned out to be wrong.

A little larger - at 78mm - is the Sri Lanka Supple Skink. Despite being accepted into the annals of Skinkdom by research scientists back in 1950, so little is known about this endemic skink that it could easily find work in deep cover espionage. It has four tiny legs and four rather stumpy toes and has been little seen outside the low-lying scrub of the northeast coasts of the island. Compared to this, Sarasins' Snake Skink is very large (up to 92mm) despite being almost entirely legless (its so-called back legs are mere buds). It is a bronze-coloured endemic skink and found right across most of the drier parts of Sri Lanka. It is named in honour of two Swiss zoologists whose only known journey beyond their mountain home was to an island in Indonesia, by passing Sri Lanka altogether.

Larger still - at 80 mm - is the Two-Toed Nessia, an endangered endemic skink fond of forests of 500 to 1200 meters, though it has also been spotted in coconut plantations. It is light brown in colour, and its tiny legs each sport two toes.

None however come close to the Many-Keeled Grass Skink, also known as the Golden Skink or the Keeled Indian Mabuya . Back in 2020 as the rest of the world began to settle down into the purdah of the COVID pandemic, something far more game changing interrupted the plaid chat rooms of Sri Lanka's skinks. The Many-Keeled Grass Skink were written out by die-hard nationalists as non-endemic as they kept popping up in India as often as Sri Lanka. However, on closer study - notably

of its ear hole size, chin shields, and snout disparities – researchers decided it was so sufficiently different as to be declared an new endemic species. *Eutropis carinata* one day but *Eutropis lankae* the next.

Subtly decorated in stripes on yellow, black, brown, and bronze, it is, at around 121mm, a titan amongst skinks and often to be seen sunbathing.

Its earlier conservation status as *Eutropis carinata* was listed as "Least Concern," but now, with its new global recognition, all bets are off, and a few dedicated scientists are busy with field studies to see what its new status ought to be.

Given how super productive it is in the egg laying department (it lays up to 20 eggs a year), and its willingness to live almost anywhere below 1000 meters, it is more than likely that it will be found to be widespread across the island.

But beating them all is the Eyed Skink. This beast lives in the warmer parts of Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and the Indian sub-continent – and, remarkably for so jet-setting a reptile, in Sri Lanka too, it now seems. A research monograph published in the January 2008 edition of the Russian Journal of Herpetology excitedly revealed that its range, hitherto outside the island, could now confidently be said to include Sri Lanka as well.

And not just here and there - for the beast was spotted in surveys right across the lowland forest areas of the island from north to south. Its proclivity to eat practically anything may help account for its enormous size (it is about a foot in length) and its untroubled life, earning for it the Conservation status of least concern.

6

IMPERILLED SKINKS

"Ad Augusta, per
angusta"

To greatness, through
difficulties

ASTERIX AND THE
GREAT DIVIDE

Despite many skinks being robustly able to thrive amidst the challenges of the modern world, many also live under an existential threat, the future of their particular DNA hanging horribly in the balance. The Four-Toed Snake Skink is one such example. Some 60 mm in length (largeish in skink terms) this endemic beast really does look like a golden-brown snake with tiny legs, each sporting four miniature toes. Despite laying up to two eggs a year it is critically endangered, its range restricted to hills in the Knuckles region that are 700 meters or more. As far as the IUCN Red List is concerned, there are only two worst places to reach: extinction in the wild and total extinction.

Deignan's Tree Skink is another critically endangered endemic skink. It can be best be found (if found at all) on trees across Sri Lanka's higher hills – anything above around 2,000 feet.

Dark olive bronze with a modest stripe, it has four well developed feet, each with four matching toes and was named, rather randomly, in honour of an American birdwatcher from Thailand. Equally critically endangered is Layard's Snake Skink. Legless, and endemic, little is known about this rare skink who inhabits the Central Province and the wetter parts of the country's coastline. Even its tiny size is mildly disputed. It is named after Edgar Layard, an amateur zoologist who worked in the Ceylon Customs office in the mid-19th century and

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whose natural history collections, when sent back to England, weighed 9 tons.

Smith's Snake Skink is known from a very few sightings in hillier parts of the central province and around the Knuckles mountains, an endemic skink so obscure as to leave the IUCN Red List little option but keep blank its conservation status, though it is known to lay up to 4 eggs a year. A reddish bronze, its hind feet are mere buds with and its forelegs entirely absent.

Deraniyagala's Snake Skink is known to science from a single specimen collected on hillock by the beach north of Trincomalee. This endemic skink is about as rare as ever rare gets: so rare in fact that the IUCN Red List doesn't even try to attempt to give it a conservation status at all.

Bronze coloured and wholly limbless, almost nothing but its size (62mm) is known about it. It is named after the great Sri Lankan zoologist Paul Deraniyagala, whose 1955 discovery of Balangoda Man - perfectly preserved Mesolithic skeleton remains – gave the country a picture of its first fully recorded human.

So little is known about the Shark-Headed Snake Skink that the IUCN refrains from even attempting to offer a suggestion as to how threatened it is from a conversation perspective. It is endemic and known to inhabit the dry lands in the northwest of the island including Wilpattu. It lacks any limbs but has a head mildly similar to that of a benign shark. Its 60mm long body is reddish to dark bronze in

colour. No less data deficient is Flower's Skink, which also goes by such names as Taylor's Striped Mabuya and Taylor's skink. It was named for Major Stanley Smyth Flower a Victorian army officer, and zoologist who made it his business to study most areas of wildlife from Egypt to Siam and was regarded by Rudyard Kipling as "one of the most interesting men I have ever met".

The skink that bears his name comes from around Trincomalee and is endemic to Sri Lanka. But despite its taxonomy being more or less nailed down in 1950, so little is still known about it that scientists cannot tell quite how rare it is or if their estimate of around 50mm for body size is really accurate. A burnished bronze all over with a long dark streak along its side, it is holding out its many secrets in plain sight; and in a world ever more shorn of real mysteries, this is perhaps a comfort of sorts.

7

HEADLINE GRABBING SKINKS

”Vanitas
vanitatum et
omnia vanitas”

Vanity of vanities, and
all is vanity

ASTERIX THE GAUL

Several skinks have burnt across Skinkdom like firecrackers, their discovery proving that extinction may have a silver link of sorts. A ground-breaking study of skinks published in 2007 revealed that hiding under the skink taxonomy of *Sphenomorphus* was not just a new genus (*Lankascincus*) - but also three other skinks hiding in plain sight within this new genus. One of these was the golden red-bronze Greer's Lanka Skink.

At barely 42 mm, it was documented as living in Sri Lanka's south-western lowland and is both rare and endemic. Having waited quite so long for global recognition, it now awaits new field research to see if its real distribution is so challenged as to be the sort of skink Andy Warhol had in mind when he spoke of "Fifteen minutes of fame."

For Sri Lanka's skinks, 2007 was not unlike 1492 for Christopher Columbus and the discovery of the Americas. Many new skink species were unveiled at that year – including the endemic Adam's Peak Lanka Skink.

Bronze in colour with a dark brown streak along its 58mm body, it has four legs each with four tiny toes. As such a recherché arriviste on the island's skink scene, scientists are busy trying to find out more about it, though it is probable that it is unlikely to be found beyond of the slopes of the sacred mountain on which it currently dwells.

And in the same year, Munindradasa's Lanka Skink came to light. It is long the sorrowful fate of most of Sri Lanka's skinks to get named after some bearded and remote 19th century scientist who never visited Sri Lanka. But in this regard

Munindradasa's Lanka Skink has enjoyed a happier outcome. It is named in honour of Dr.

Amith Munindradasa, a Sri Lankan engineer with a side interest in nanotechnology and a determination to turn carbon into diamonds.

One of Munindradasa's most endearing habits was to adopt lesser loved wild creatures - scorpions, centipedes, bats, and snakes. So

skinks, with their troubled reputation, somewhere between a chameleon and a snake, would most naturally have fallen into his caring orbit. Not seen outside Adam's Peak, this endemic skink is an exceptionally rare, albeit tiny (40mm) and visually unexceptional with dull bronze skin, four feet and four matching toes.

Ten years later two more skinks hit the headlines. Sameera's Lanka Skink exploded across the quiet corners of the skink world when a monograph, "A New Species Of Lankascincus Greer, 1991 (Reptilia: Scincidae) With An

Overview Of The L. Gansi Group," was published. Sameera's retiring little beast had been identified during a national lizard survey conducted by the Wildlife Heritage Trust who spotted it nestling in fallen leaves in the

Matara's Morningside Rakwana Hills. It was named in honour of Dr. Sameera Karunaratna, an intrepid discoverer of several new gecko and lizard species. A burnished

bronze, with flecks of grey and yellow, scientists have so far got little further than describing its minuscule 35 mm size; and confirming its endemic status. It remains firmly at the mysterious end of skink scrutiny. And discovered in the same year was Gans's Three-Toed Snake Skink - often encountered in the lower and damper parts of Sri Lanka. An endemic skink, it is blessed with four legs each of which sport three toes.

For many years it suffered acute Dissociative Identity Disorder, being confused with *Nessia burtonii*, which also has three toes – the confusion only finally sorted out by scientists in 2017. But then, rather like a library book left on the wrong shelf, it was wrongly mixed up with *Lankascincus gansi*, which turned out to be an identical skink that has been allocated to an entirely separate genus, so calling into question whether quite how many different skinks really do inhabit the island.

Chaos and taxological turmoil also enveloped the Catenated Lanka Skink - one of those unfortunate skinks that has been moved from genus to genus until eventually arriving with, one hopes, some degree of closure, if not giddiness, at the *Lankascincus* genus. An endemic skink, it rarely exceeds 58.5 mm. Despite laying little more than one egg a year, the beast enjoys the "Least Concern" category in the Red List of Threatened Species. It keeps largely to its preferred habitat limits: the forests and wet zones of southwestern Sri Lanka.

Troubled too was the Common Supple Skink. Also known as Peter's Tree Skink, this diminutive skink (it is little more than 40mm), is one of several skinks to have suffered from multiple identity syndrome, having been allocated to first one scientific family (Sphenomorphidae *Megalopus*) - and then another (*Lankascincus fallax*). Once thought to be critically endangered by the IUCN Red List assessment, it has since had its status revised and, common as its name implies, is considered to be widespread, if rather elusive, right across the island. Reddish bronze in colour, it and four agreeably developed legs each with four toes.

Next time you pass an elephant, or tuck into a fragrant pepper and cinnamon curry, look around you first. There will be skinks to see; Sri Lanka to comprehend - and the entire meaning of life to joyfully reassess.

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.

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