

SEA MAMMALS

A CEYLON
PRESS TINY
GUIDE

A CHECKLIST
OF THE 21
SEA
MAMMALS
OF SRI
LANKA



1 THE BLUE WHALE

Measuring up to one hundred feet, there is nothing that still lives on our harried planet quite so large or inspiring as the Blue Whale. Although hunted to near extinction, their numbers fell from around 140,000 in 1926; a slow recovery is in progress, with numbers estimated at around 25,000. Remarkably, the blue whales found off Sri Lanka's beaches are permanent residents, their otherwise migratory inclinations negated by the sheer magnetic nutrient wealth of the country's waters, fed by runoff and monsoon rain and captured by an ocean shelf perfectly configured to maximise the availability and accessibility of food.

2 BRYDE'S WHALE

So elongated as to resemble a fifty-foot torpedo on testosterone, Bryde's Whale is considered widely distributed and is regularly, if infrequently, seen off Sri Lanka's shores.

3

THE FIN WHALE

At almost ninety feet in length, the Fin Whale (*Balaenoptera Physalus*) is only pipped to the post of longest living animal on earth by the Blue Whale. Migratory by nature, they are distributed right around the world except the Arctic, but sightings of them around Sri Lanka remain relatively rare.

4

THE FALSE KILLER WHALE

The False Killer Whale gets its unfortunate name from being easily confused with killer whales, a similarity that vexed Victorian marine biologists ever eager to pin them down. Found all around the world, they prefer tropical waters – and deep ones at that but remain a rare and prized sight for Sri Lankan whale watchers.

5

THE GINKGO TOOTH BEAKED WHALE

A mere sixteen feet in length, the Ginkgo-Tooth Beaked Whale is one of the most mysterious of whales, little studied, and rarely seen. It inhabits tropical and warm temperate waters in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and whilst there have been the odd sightings off Sri Lanka, seeing one is an event worthy of newspaper headlines.

6

CUVIER BEAKED WHALE

Cuvier's Beaked Whale is a relatively small beast in whale terms (around 20 feet in length) but holds the record for the deepest and longest dives, plunging to almost 3,000 metres for over 200 minutes. When not displaying such pressure-busting dexterity, it keeps to tropical or temperate seas of 1,000 feet in depth and is occasionally spotted in the deeper seas around Sri Lanka.

7 THE HUMPBACKED WHALE

The Hump-Backed Whale is one of the rare success stories in whale conservation. Once numbering around 5,000, today they are recorded to stand at an estimated 135,000.

Although rarely spotted off Sri Lanka's beaches, they are still sufficiently seen as to give hope to determined whale watchers.

8

THE KILLER WHALE

Despite being known as Killer Whales, they are actually a type of dolphin, albeit about thirty feet in length. They typically live for thirty years or so but often do not become sexually active until halfway through this period. They are strikingly intelligent, their brains weighing more than most other whales but the sperm whale.

9

THE LITTLE PICKED MINKE

The Little Picked Whale, the Minke Whale,,
is a solitary beast, and although an
infrequent visitor to Sri Lanka's seas, it is
common enough to have been regularly
sighted.

10 THE PYGMY SPERM WHALE

The Pygmy Sperm Whale has a solid, barrel-like body and notably fewer brain neurons than its cousins, making it intellectually more challenged than many other whales. They live for a little over 20 years and are shy, rarely spotted creatures, though they are occasionally seen off Sri Lanka's beaches.

11

THE SOUTHERN BOTTLENOSE WHALE

Spotting a Southern Bottlenose Whale off Sri Lanka's coast is rare. They live most typically in the Antarctic, but a few have been spotted near Sri Lanka, most likely lost. Measuring just over 20 feet, they can be mistaken for giant dolphins with their tubelike snout and bulbous head.

12

THE SPERM WHALE

Massive, migratory, with the largest brain of any living creature, and able to live up to seventy years, commercial whalers hunted the Sperm Whale for hundreds of years, its numbers pushed to the point of extreme vulnerability. They have since started to recover – slowly. They are among the most sighted whales off Sri Lanka's shores, drawn by warm, plentiful seas to gather and mate, forming superpods of sometimes a hundred beasts in March and April.

13

THE COMMON BOTTLENOSE DOLPHIN

Gunboat grey, with a single blowhole, a dorsal fin, and a length of up to 13 feet, the Common Bottlenose Dolphin has a brain larger than that of humans. They are also very sociable, usually living in pods of around 15 animals – though when the party mood takes them, the pod can dramatically expand to around 1000. They talk to one another with signature whistles. They can be seen off beaches as far apart as Trincomalee, Kalpitiya and Mirissa.

14

THE COMMON DOLPHIN

Widely distributed and happily plentiful in number, the Common Dolphin is a most sociable creature, living in packs of a dozen or so – but ones that have been known to come together with others to number 10,000 for short periods of time. Measuring up to eight feet in length, they display a beautiful two-tone colouration: slate grey upper sides and white undersides. They can be seen off up and down the Sri Lankan coastline from Trincomalee to Point Dondra, and Kalpitiya around to Mirissa.

15

FRASER'S DOLPHIN

Fraser's Dolphin is most typically found in the Americas but is so frequent a visitor to Asian oceans as to be a strong contender to spot around Sri Lanka. They are tiny (about 3 feet in length) and stocky, with the uncertain accolade of having the smallest genitalia of any dolphin.

16 THE INDIAN OCEAN HUMPBACK DOLPHIN

The Indian Ocean Humpback Dolphin is an endangered species - so spotting one is special. Infant mortality rates are especially high as they are unduly sensitive to environmental pollution, habitat changes and noise.

17

THE LITTLE INDIAN PORPOISE

Whilst Sri Lanka delights in making space in its oceans for seven types of dolphins, only one porpoise is seen here (and that very rarely) – the Little Indian Porpoise. Shy, and, when not caught up in fishing nets or polluted out of existence, they can live to around 30 years.

18 THE PANTROPICAL SPOTTED DOLPHIN

Slender, elegant, playful, acrobatic, the Pantropical Spotted Dolphin have seen their numbers falling dramatically over the past decade. Found off many beaches in Sri Lanka, their fondness for tuna has the depressing side result of ensuring that fishermen kill many, tragic by-products of the race to keep the sushi bars of the world running smoothly.

19 RISSE'S DOLPHIN

Risso's Dolphin hugs the coastline of most of the world's continents, and of course, the island of Sri Lanka. Measuring thirteen feet in length, connoisseurs of squid and seaweed, they are usually found in pods of a dozen or more.

20 THE SPINNER DOLPHIN

The Spinner Dolphin comes in at the smaller end of the dolphin spectrum – around seven feet in length and can be found in gladdening numbers wherever there is tropical or subtropical water. They are especially plentiful to see in Kalpitiya – but are also commonly sighted in such other locations as the beaches off Trincomalee and Mirissa.

21

THE COMMON DUGONG

Also known as the sea cow, the Dugong lives with bovine contentment, grazing on sea grass meadows in shallow bays, mangroves, the waters of inshore islands and inter-reef waters. Widespread legal protection has not stopped them from being hunted, whilst habitat pollution and degradation have also decimated their numbers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, and writer. He was born Cornish, in Colombo and raised with few concessions to modernity, raised in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. 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 possible.

He worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as a board director for sales, art, and marketing; at HarperCollins India; Hachette's consumer learning division; and launched Oxford University Press's first online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls and bottom lines diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka to rescue a spice plantation 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 more accessible. The Press' books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at sriolankapodcast.com.

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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, and its healthy menus fuse 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.

As a reader of this book, you naturally qualify for special treatment should your holiday ever bring you to Sri Lanka and The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel.

Drop the general manager a note to let him know how you came across us and to make arrangements that best suit you: GeneralManager@flametreeestate.com.