



A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE

SRI LANKA'S EXTINCT MAMMALS

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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 THE MOCKETTS

ALWAYS LATE, BUT ALWAYS THERE

"If you live to be a hundred, I hope I
live to be a hundred minus one day,
so that I never have to live a day
without you."

WINNIE THE POOH

1

NO GUESSING
GAME

The mind blanks at the glare,”

wrote Philip Larkin -

“Not in remorse
—The good not done, the love not given, time
Torn off unused — nor wretchedly because
An only life can take so long to climb
Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never;
But at the total emptiness for ever,
The sure extinction that we travel to
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
Not to be anywhere,
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.”

Larkin’s poem *Aubade* counts the cost of personal extension. But as Descartes might have concluded, with the benefit of hindsight, “If I don’t exist, then everything else probably can.”

For it is by being human that we are triggering the party to which no one desires an invitation, the Earth’s greatest extinction event.

We were not, of course, responsible for the earlier ones, but this is not a modest guessing game, and for anyone fond of models, there are scenarios that even Hollywood would balk at.

The first of these events, the Late Devonian extinction (383-359 million years ago), killed off about 75 per cent of all living species.

One hundred million years later came the worst of all — the Permian-Triassic extinction, or Great Dying. This despatched 96% of all marine animals and 3 out of every 4 land animals that had managed to flourish since the previous extinction.

After fifty-one million years of exhaustive recovery, the Triassic-Jurassic extinction swept down, exterminating 80% of all living species.

All three, it seems, were caused by the climate change sparked by volcanic eruptions and shifting plate tectonics.

The last and most famous mass extinction, the Cretaceous-Paleogene extinction, 66 million years ago, was the one that claimed the lives of the dinosaurs – and with them, 76% of all Earth's species. For this, a wandering asteroid was probably to blame.

The credit for the next one is one we as a race must step up to take, the winner of the Oscars from Hell. Already the stage is being set, the tables set for the Oscars ceremony, the red carpet laid out, the invitations being sent for the pre- and post-ceremony parties, the Governors Ball, the Vanity Fair Party, cocktails in the Diamond 25 Lounge.

Invitations have already reached many in Sri Lanka. Anteaters, jackets, bears, otters, fishing cats, civets, axis deer, lorises and Toque Macaque have already propped up their gold-embossed cards on their jungle mantelpieces, as have the Ceylon Highland Long-Tailed Tree and Spiny Mice, the tiny Serendib Scops Owl, the Nillu and Ohiya Rats, the Dusky Striped Squirrel and the Ceylon Highland, Pigmy and Long-Tailed Shrews. Even the Ceylon Tree Skink had received an invitation to this perdition party.

The big beasts are, of course, especially invited; and the island's elephants are the guests of honour. Before the British arrived, there were over 15,000 elephants in Sri Lanka – until, that is, big game hunting became fashionable. Its most notorious celebrity was a

government agent, Major Thomas Rogers, who managed to kill 1400 elephants in just 11 years.

“His whole house,” recalled one appalled guest in the 1840s, “was filled with ivory, for amongst the hosts of the slain more than sixty were tusked elephants... At each door of his veranda stood huge tusks, while in his dining room every corner was adorned with similar trophies...”

Mercifully killed at just 41 years, Rogers’ grave, still to be found beside the golf course in Nuwara Eliya, offered him little by way of eternal rest as it has been struck by lightning over 100 times, indicating one of the silver linings of climate change.

Today, the island lays claim to less than half that pre-colonial number of elephants, with the BBC recently reporting that nearly 500 are dying annually, half of them at the hands of humans.

The maths for continued survival looks a little better for the equally famous Sri Lankan leopard, now reduced to around 800 adults and desperately trying to recover from a 75% population decline during the 20th century.

All across the globe, the more modest number crunchers calculate that a million species of plants and animals are facing total oblivion.

This seems especially impossible to believe in the fecund space of this island, so full of life that it seems as if nothing can ever end. Yet it can. It does. It has.

From shore to shore lurk the traces of previous annihilations, their wrath like an imprint plotting a course as much forward as it does backwards.

2
THE FOSSIL
HUNTERS

Despite owing to Precambrian rocks of such antiquity, they were old when Gondwana was young and producing the clearest evidence across the whole of South Asia for the first Homo sapiens, planetology is still a science that has far more to yield.

Much of what little we know about the island's earliest history and its disappeared animals dates back to the remarkable work carried out between the 1930s and 1963 by P. E. P. Deraniyagala, Director of National Museums. Uncommonly hands-on for so senior a civil servant, he spent his life's work examining the alluvial strata better known for concealing gems around Ratnapura.

Within its sandy layers, he uncovered fossils, fragments, teeth, and bones dating right back to the Pleistocene, when Sri Lanka was still— just about — joined physically to the Indian landmass and when the melting ice sheets caused the creation of these alluvial beds.

His work, and that of his successors, including his son Siran, uncovered the existence of animals that pointed to an island very different to the one here today.

Not just animals — but people too. The discovery of what is now termed Balangoda Man reliably dated human existence on the island to 30,000 years ago, with further island evidence showing that “in Sri Lanka, prehistoric man has lived at least 125,000 years ago with the possibility of existence as far back as 500,000 years ago. Advanced ‘microlithic’ tool-making technology had already been developed in Sri Lanka 30,000 years ago, when Europe was still dreaming of this technology, which arose there only about 12,000 years ago.”

3

LOST CATS

Humans have, of course, flourished here since then – but not so some of the mammals that these palaeontologists also found. The most iconic of these was the Ceylon Lion. Now adorning the national flag, the Sri Lankan lion is thought to have become extinct in 37,000 BCE – about the same time as Balangoda Man walked his last steps.

Panthera Leo Sinhaleyus, as the subspecies is known, came to light in 1936 when P.E.P. Deraniyagala uncovered two fossilised teeth in Kuruwita, near Ratnapura. With the passion of a forensic detective, the archaeologist studied his modest clutch of teeth. One was so damaged as to be of little use in identifying the animal, but the other, a left molar, presented so distinctive a structure as to not just twin it with lions, but set it apart from all known species too.

From this single tooth, a lost subspecies was uncovered, its size indicating that the beast was a lion much larger than the present Indian lion.

Back in 37,000 BCE, Sri Lanka was a very different place from what it would become, an island of open grasslands, a habitat perfect for lions. But over time, as the monsoon rainforest fuelled the proliferation of trees, its habitat became ever more restricted and at some point, the creature just died out.

The lion was not the island's only vanquished cat, for scant but intriguing fossil records reveal the existence not just of the lion but also of the tiger (*Panthera tigris*).

These telling fossils amount to a left lower tooth found near Ratnapura in 1962 and a sub-fossil of a paw bone dated back 16,500 years, found near Kuruwita. Tigers appear to have arrived in India some 12,000 years ago.

ago and spread from there to Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan. But it seems that it was not this tiger subspecies that wandered across the then-existing land bridge from India to Sri Lanka – but another altogether, one native to central Asia, eastern and northern China, Japan, northern Siberia, Sumatra, and Java.

The destruction of the island's third greatest cat, the Ceylon Asiatic Cheetah, offers a clear warning to the existence of the island's other great and still just about surviving cat, the Leopard, whose numbers are plummeting.

A distinctly different version of the African Cheetah, the Asiatic Cheetah once roamed the world from Arabia and the Caspian to South Asia and Sri Lanka until around 10,000 years ago. Today, their numbers are so few that even the most myopically optimistic enthusiasts anticipate that they will soon cease to live in the wild at all.

4
MISSING
GIANTS

The palaeontologists also found the remarkable remains of not one but three other elephant species, all now extinct. The current and endangered Sri Lankan Elephant is considered a subspecies of *Elephas maximus sinhaleyus*, whose treasured fossils, unearthed in Kuruwita, indicate that it last lived 100,000 years ago.

Its similarity to the present-day elephant is likely to have made it all but impossible to tell them apart, the difference lying in such things as smaller molars and a wider spout. A scant dusting of other fossils reveals the existence of two further elephant subspecies - *Hysundricus* and *Namadicus Sinhaleyus* - that may have called Sri Lanka home before vanishing.

They weren't the only big beasts now no longer here. An antique species of hippopotamus also once lived in Sri Lanka - *Hippopotamus Hexaprotodon Sinhaleyus*.

Dating back between 800,00 to 100,000 years ago, the fossilised remains of its jawbone, showing the presence of a couple more teeth than exist in the current living hippopotamus (*Hippopotamus amphibius*), are all that is left to prove the once lively presence on Sri Lanka's rivers of this great land mammal, the largest after the elephant. It probably fell afoul of early climate change when rainfall became significantly lighter, putting pressure on its preferred habitat.

And at some time, similar or slightly thereafter, it vanished; the hippopotamus was paired with two subspecies of the now-extinct Rhinoceros - *Sinhaleyus* & *Kagavena*. Fossilised remains dating back 80,000 years, found near Ratnapura by Dr P.E.P. Deraniyagala, indicate their ghostly existence, their marginally different teeth being all that remains to tell them apart and distinguish them from the Indian Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros*).

Unicornis) that once roamed across Asia from Pakistan to China and is now confined to a few protected locations in Assam, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, and Nepal.

The last of the very large land mammals now wiped out is the Gaur. Once common throughout South and Southeast Asia, the Gaur, or Indian bison, lived as a distinct subspecies here - *Bibos Sinhaleyus* Deraniyagala.

It was last spotted by British adventurers in 1681 in the menagerie of King Rajasinghe II of Kandy. Its only surviving relative is now moving inexorably towards extinction in India, with just 21,000 mature specimens still living. Related to yaks and water buffalo, they are the largest of all wild cattle and are outranked in size by other land mammals only by elephants, rhinoceroses, and hippopotamuses.

5
VANISHED
MINORS

There is even evidence of the older relatives of four of the island's still-living smaller mammals.

Happily widespread and at home in most habitats, the Indian Crested Porcupine (*Hystrix Indica*) is found right across Sri Lanka and India. Nocturnal and usually hidden in the burrows that are their homes, they are eager consumers of bark, fruit, berries, vegetables and almost all plants in gardens and plantations. But fossilised records from thousands of years ago show that the present porcupine once had an ancestor similar, though smaller, to the one we find today - *Hystrix Sivalensis* Sinhaleyus.

This ancient prickly beast co-existed with an antediluvian version of today's wild boar. With its crested mane, sharp features, and a gratifyingly athletic build, the wild boar is both beautiful and social, travelling in night bands, and much given to wrestling – but fossil records from thousands of years ago show they were preceded by an endemic species some one third smaller - *Sus* Sinhaleyus.

Smaller, too, than its modern counterpart was Muva Sinhaleya, a species of Sambur deer smaller in size than the one alive today. Yet even today's variant is heading the way of his ancestors, for despite being the largest and most impressive of the several deer species on the island, it is now classed as Vulnerable by the IUCN Red List – just two stages away from being declared extinct in the wild altogether.

Even the island's current endemic rats, the rare Ohiya Rat and its equally endangered cousin, the Nillu Rat, can see, in the fossilised remains of *Tatera Sinhaleya*, the existential way forward for them as a species. This rat bade farewell to the island many thousands of years ago.

The legendary Eric Idle once sang that

.
If life seems jolly rotten
There's something you've forgotten
And that's to laugh and smile and dance and sing
When you're feeling in the dumps
Don't be silly chumps
Just purse your lips and whistle, that's the thing
And
Always look on the bright side of life
Always look on the right side of life.

For oblivion has its own upside, creating new
opportunities for previously marginalised species to
become dominant.

We won't be there to see it all, of course, but welcome
to the world of the octopus and bacteria, the two species
that several learned dons from Oxford are convinced are
set to take over after we have shuffled off our mortal
coil, once and for all.

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.