



A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE
GUIDE

THE MONGOOSES OF SRI LANKA

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FOR FLORIN

GUARDIAN OF GOODNESS

"We're not alone!"

ASTERIX THE GAUL

1
IN THE
BEGINNING

Looking at animals from a purely Kandyan perspective (Kandy being the heart of Sri Lanka), in the beginning, they were not early life forms, sponges, or even aardvarks – but mongooses.

For it was, according to the best of legends, mongooses who were responsible for Kandy being built where it was. The city's earliest history is an impossible mosaic of hearsay, myth, the odd inscription, and later recollections. First founded as an offshoot of the Kurunegala kingdom sometime after 1357, it lapsed into impenetrable obscurity until Vikramabāhu, a rebellious cousin of the Kotte kings, remade it as his petite capital.

But by the time his grandson, Karalliyadde Baṇḍāra, came to take over in 1551, the wafer-thin royal line had all. Still, it petered out in a poorly judged wave of conversions to Catholicism and acquiescence to the invading Portuguese. It took the rise of a patriotic nobleman noted for his machoness, Vimaladharmasuriya, to relaunch the kingdom in 1592 with sufficient vigour as to ensure it lasted as an independent state for 223 years.

The king, casting around for the best spot on which to rebuild his capital, has his attention down to the threshing ground that overlooked a large paddy field – now the Sea of Milk or Kandy Lake. The threshing ground, his astrologers advised him, was lucky. Safe even - for it was frequented by a white mongoose, a beast that, as everyone knew, was more effective in keeping a house free of rats, mice, snakes, and scorpions than any cat.

And so, all around what is today known as the Maha Maluva, the city grew, as serpentine in shape and arrangement as any of the snakes hunted by the king's favoured mongooses.

2

THE COMMON
- OR NOT SO
COMMON -
GREY

In fact, the particular mongoose the king was drawn to was more grey than white – being the Common Ceylon Grey Mongoose, or, given its non-endemic status, the Indian Grey Mongoose, as it is also known. It is the smallest of the 7 mongoose species or subspecies found on the island.

The creature was, wrote Rudyard Kipling in 1894, “rather like a little cat in his fur and his tail, but quite like a weasel in his head and habits. His eyes and the end of his restless nose were pink; he could scratch himself anywhere he pleased, with any leg, front or back, that he chose to use; he could fluff up his tail till it looked like a bottle-brush, and his war-cry, as he scuttled through the long grass, was: ‘Rikk-tikk-tikki-tikki-tchk!’

Kipling’s famous mongoose demonstrated all the attributes of a perfect mongoose. For, despite being somewhat shy around people, it is fearless with snakes; its kill strategy focuses on tiring the snake by tempting it to make bites it easily avoids. Its thick, grizzled, iron-grey fur and neurotransmitter receptors leave it immune to snake venom. For anyone living up-country in Sri Lanka, it is a fine companion to have around.

Herpestes Edwardsii, as the beast is known more formally, is little more than 32 inches nose to tail. It lives right across the island, often in pairs, eating fruit, roots, and small animals.

It lives for around seven years, breeding twice yearly and producing up to four cubs, who pop out of eggs, like all mongoose babies. Its fur, stiffer than that of other mongooses, is more interesting than the word grey implies, as each hair is ringed with creamy white and black markings that make it even more so.

stationary beasts look as if they are running with blurred go-faster stripes streaking their whole body all the way down to a long bouffant tail.

There are, in fact, 5 subspecies of grey mongoose living in India and other parts of South Asia; and whilst *Herpestes Edwardsii* is the one most seen in Sri Lanka, a second variant, *Urva Edwardsii* Lanka, has been identified as sufficiently different as to merit its classification as a subspecies unique to the island.

Whilst its more Indian cousin lives almost anywhere, the Sri Lankan variant has a marked preference for habitats of 2000 meters or more. It avoids built-up areas in favour of jungle, shrublands and riverbanks. For a time, it also excited scientists for its superior olfactory capabilities – even to the point of being trialled to detect narcotics during police raids.

3

GOLDILOCKS
AND THE THREE
BEARS

Telling apart the different grey mongooses by looks is a challenge even committed mongoose scientists baulk at.

So imagine their consternation at having to tell apart the three variants of the Brown Mongoose, two of whom are only to be found on the island. Like Goldilocks with the Three Bears, they have their work cut out.

At around 30 to 34 inches nose to tail, the Ceylon Brown Mongoose (*Herpestes Fuscus Maccarthiae*), the only one common to both Sri Lanka and India, is marginally larger than either the Highland Ceylon Brown Mongoose (*Herpestes Fuscus Flavidents*) or the Western Ceylon Brown Mongoose (*Herpestes Fuscus Rubidior*).

But there, the more apparent differences end. All three species have dark brown fur, black legs, and long, black, enviably tufted tails. All three are sights of simple, breathtaking beauty. But seeing them is something of a challenge, for they are introverted beasts, with a marked preference for deeper cover, dark forests, and, like Greta Garbo, for being left alone.

4
THE
MONGOOSE
THAT GLOWS

Identification is much easier in the case of the island's next mongoose, the Ceylon Ruddy Mongoose (*Herpestes Smithi Zeylanicus*).

Its grey brown fur is decidedly reddish in tone, to the point of glowing, and comes with a tail that curves sharply upwards at its tasselled tip where the fur turns to a deep and even brown. Like all mongoose of any variety it feeds day and night on anything smaller than moves – and often on larger creatures too – like land monitors.

Its closest relative is found in India: *Herpestes Smithii* *Smithii*, named for the Victorian zoologist John Grey in 1837, with the Sri Lankan variant only being separated in 1852 by another zoologist, Oldfield Thomas.

Although happily widespread, it is pathologically shy, hiding out in forest and paddy and under normal circumstances has a rather short life.

That said, although it rarely lives more than seven or eight years, a Mr W. W. Phillips from Namunukula in Sri Lanka wrote to inform the Bombay Natural History Society (in those halcyon, fallible days when science was a passion shared equally with amateurs) that "the mongoose in question died on September 8, 1955, aged approximately 17 years and 8 months. It ate quite well right up to the last day and died peacefully during the night, apparently of old age and /or heart failure."

5

THE VERSACE
MONGOOSE

The last of the island's mongooses, the Striped-Necked Mongoose, is the Versace of the mongoose world, for it has been given an outfit by its Maker that sets it apart as one of the island's most striking and fetching mammals.

A dark grey head morphs to reddish brown and grey on its neck, before blooming into a heady, sturdy frame, and often measures over 35 inches nose to tail – it has a grizzled covering of bouffant fur that gets redder and longer the further down the body it goes.

A pink nose, black legs and a reddish tail that ends in a curved tuft of black hair make up the rest of this most alluring of beasts.

Widespread across Sri Lanka and southern India, it has sturdy frame and often measuring over 35 inches nose to tail – is the largest mongoose on the island. Its proclivity for calling forests its home can make sighting it a challenge, but it is a sight well worth the effort.

Although all mongooses are famous for their snake-killing instincts, they have a curiously moral side too, endearing and magnetic in a world besotted by luxury.

In amongst the byzantine reaches of tantric Buddhism, one particular semi-deified Buddhist luminary, Ratnasambhava, is to be seen holding – or perhaps squeezing a mongoose. The animal is preoccupied with vomiting up jewels of every kind in an attempt to capture the world's wealth and redistribute it for spiritual abundance.

For anyone seeking out that elusive fourth Michelin star or Diamond Himalaya Birkin handbag, this is a most comforting deed – that this most modest of animals should offer not just protection against cobras but also against cupidity.

As the hero of The Mighty Boosh put it: "Make sure you own a good bed and a good pair of shoes because if you're not in one, you're in the other."

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.