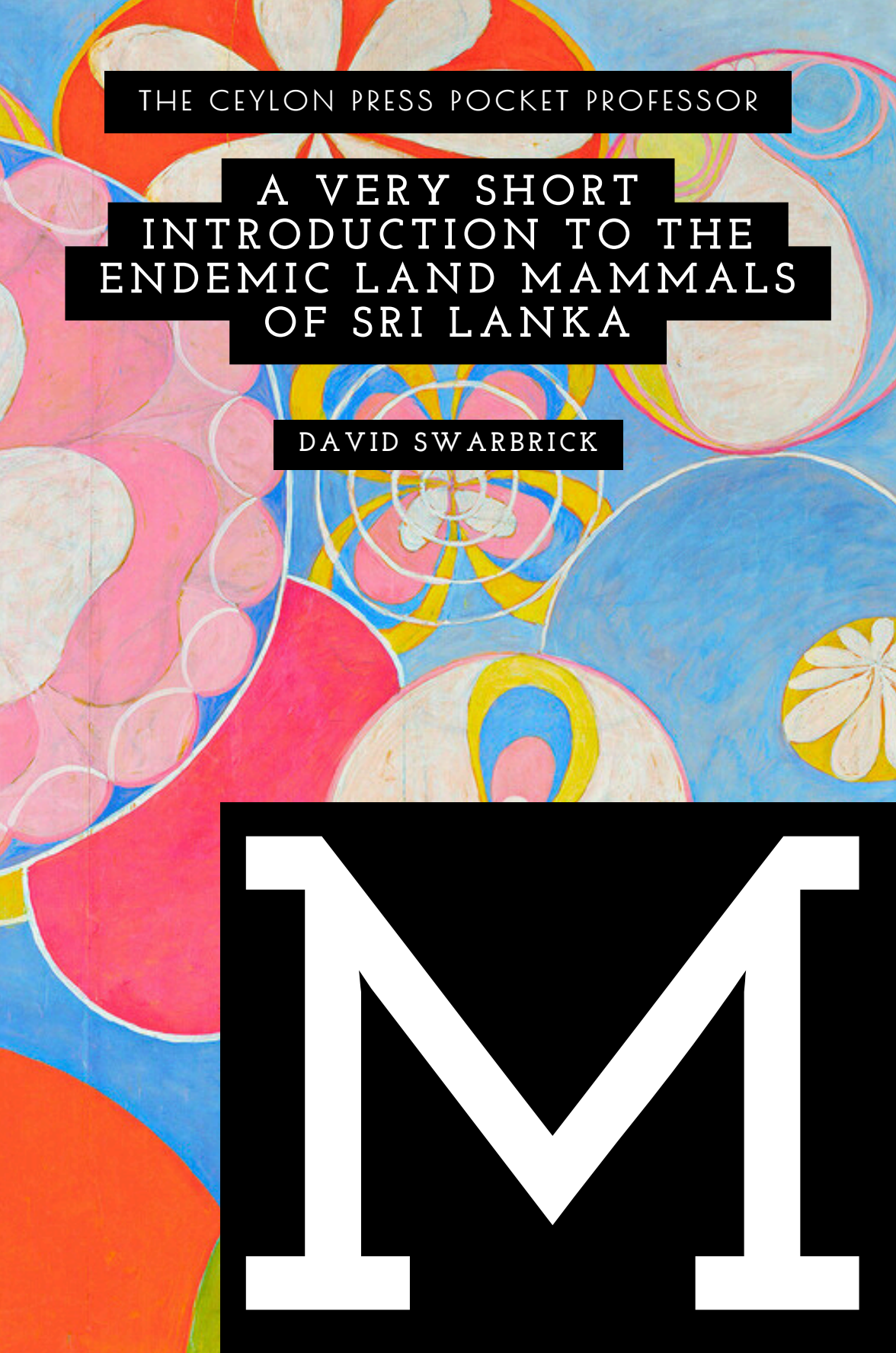




THE CEYLON PRESS POCKET PROFESSOR

A VERY SHORT
INTRODUCTION TO THE
ENDEMIC LAND MAMMALS
OF SRI LANKA

DAVID SWARBRICK

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DAVID SWARBRICK
& The Editors of The Ceylon Press



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FOR MICHA

KING OF ALL LAND
MAMMALS

1

THE
PROBLEMS
OF
ARITHMETIC

“Home, Sweet
Home,” that’s my
motto.”

THE DIARY OF A NOBODY
GEORGE GROSSMITH

Good parallels are not always obvious - and for Sri Lanka's endemic mammals the best one to hand is the notorious Forth Bridge, a cantilevered railway bridge across the Firth of Forth in Scotland. It was opened in 1890 by the then Prince of Wales himself – and workers have yet to stop having to paint it.

So to with Sri Lanka's endemic land mammals.

Just when you have finished counting them you have to start all over again. Somewhere, with deft hands and glowing fervour, there is always to be found a scientist who has craftily and credibly reclassified the endemic civet into three distinct sub species; or added in a shrew recently discovered to have one toe longer than the rest, or a bat readmitted to the hallowed list after a much disputed and injurious explosion.

Any number of endemic mammals from 19 to 40 is likely to be correct or totally wrong, depending on what the latest research papers have to say.

The list of beasts presented in this account is, therefore, more of a vox pop than a static photograph. It errs evangelistically on the side of generosity. Of the 125 different species of land mammals that roam the island, about one third are endemic, including rats, bats, civets, deer, mice, mongooses, leopards, monkeys, lorises, and squirrels. But by any calculation that is an extraordinarily high number

Collectively, they may lack the innate glamour of a white tiger, the brooding menace of a yak or the familial delight of a Highland Gorilla; but they exude instead a profound and pleasing subtlety, their apparent modest position in the Food Chain being as powerful an argument as any to cherish what is unique.

Unique – and threatened, for many, if not all, of the country's endemic mammals are threatened by a rising tide of habitat loss, pollution, and climate change. And this is where these mammals' lack of obvious glitz cuts against them. Who cares if a shrew vanishes, or a bat ceases to fly? Not enough people – yet.

Even so, for a country so gladly patriotic, these creatures, flashy or not, are ones to celebrate.

2

BATS

"He seems, after
all, a decent sort
of fellow."

THE DIARY OF A NOBODY
GEORGE GROSSMITH

Bat identification has become one of this island's more exciting pastimes. For decades, it was thought that the Sri Lankan Woolly Bat (Kerivoula Malpasi) was the country's only endemic bat.

This tiny creature, barely 50 mm from head to body, was first described by a tea planter, W.W.A. Phillips in 1932.

It is said to enjoy sleeping in curled-up banana fronds on hills between 500 and 1000 metres, though its sightings are so rare that it has not been properly assessed for a score on the IUCN list of endangered animals.

His celebrity was, however, rocked when in 2022 a new medium-sized endemic bat was declared here - Phillip's Long-Fingered Bat, which, until more eagle-eyed observers got to work, was long thought to be a run-of-the-mill Eastern Bent-Winged Bat.

Little is known about the Sri Lankan Leaf-Nosed Bat as it was only identified as a new endemic species in 2025, its existence until then having been clumsily muddled up with other cousins and near cousins. Its tell-tale giveaways were its extra-broad nose, unusual ear shape, and the marginally different set to the bone structure of its tiny head.

3

THE CEYLON
SPOTTED
AXIS DEER

"You must take me
as I am."

THE DIARY OF A NOBODY
GEORGE GROSSMITH

Troubled by the sheer lack of scientific information about the behaviour of the Ceylon Spotted Deer (*Axis Axis Ceylonensis*), the Department of Zoology at Sri Lanka's Eastern University conducted a detailed study of a particular population in Trincomalee. After months of observation, they concluded, reassuringly, that "their main activities were feeding and play."

Scientists are much divided on the subject of animal play, and tortured monographs have been written attempting to pin down the very concept of animal play. To some, it is merely an evolutionary byproduct; others claim it ensures animals teach one another about fairness and consequences. That the Sri Lankan Axis Deer should be minded to play at all is encouraging for it is an increasingly vulnerable species, its preferred habitats - lowland forests, and shrub lands - shrinking, and with it the grasses, leaves, and fruit it lives on.

Living in groups of 10 to 60 animals, their numbers are now counted in just a few thousand. They live in herds of up to one hundred, and are seen by leopards, bears, crocodiles, jackals, and hungry villagers as living supermarkets of fresh meat. Standing up to a hundred centimetres high, their delicately white spotted fawn coats present them as everything a perfect deer ought to be, as is appropriate for an animal that is part of the island's select few endemic mammals.

4

CHEVROTAINS

"Then what are
you making all
this fuss about it
for?"

THE DIARY OF A NOBODY
GEORGE GROSSMITH

Although known collectively as chevrotains or mouse deer, these tiny mammals are generic gypsies, the DNA actually nestling somewhere between that of a pig and that of a deer.

Solitary and little more than 1 to 4 kilos in weight and 18 inches in head-to-body length, they are the world's smallest hoofed mammals.

They live scattered in the forests of Sri Lanka, gorgeous-looking – although popular superstition adds the terrible caveat that a man who gets scratched by the hind foot of a mouse deer will develop leprosy. This has yet to be fully verified by scientists.

Scientists have, however, spent considerable time debating their endemic status and how they compare with their Indian cousin, the Indian chevrotain (*Moschiola indica*).

The nearest in looks is the Sri Lankan White-Spotted Chevrotain - *Moschiola meminna*. Its separate identity was only confirmed as recently as 2005.

White spots trail down its sides and back, and three white bands cross its rump. Although it can be seen right across the island and in good numbers, it is so secretive and nocturnal that actually spotting one is a challenge.

Its smaller and no less endemic cousin in Sri Lanka is the Yellow-Striped Chevrotain - *Moschiola kathygre*.

Its colouration is golden brown rather than whiteish brown. Several horizontal rows of yellow spots run along its flanks, with bolder stripes on its haunches. It sticks mostly to the wetter parts of southwestern Sri Lanka, preferably rainforest, plantations, and rice paddies.

The rarified world of mouse deer enthusiasts was rocked recently by reports of a possible third endemic version of the chevrotain from Horton Palins. It was found to be much larger than other chevrotains, and studies of its skull validated the status that it was a new chevrotain evolution. But blood tests and other research are still being conducted to properly determine whether this Mountain Mouse Deer, known as Meeminna in Sinhala, is a new endemic species.

5

CIVETS

"It only shows how
small the world is."

THE DIARY OF A NOBODY
GEORGE GROSSMITH

One of the island's two civets, the Asian Palm Civet or Toddy Cat, is found in both India and Sri Lanka, but it is the identification of the second palm civet that excites scientists most.

When life was simple, long ago, and when beige, like black or white, came in just one colour choice, it was thought that the island was home to just one endemic palm civet.

But scientists, zookeepers, and wildlife photographers like Dhammika Malsinghe, Dr Wolfgang Dittus, Dr Devka Weerakoon, and Channa Rajapaksha have in the past fifteen years worked hard to evaluate this assumption.

By careful observation, the checking of paw prints, the measurement of bodies and assessment of markings (beige or off-beige), they have instead come to the conclusion – now widely accepted in the scientific community – that the country actually plays host to three endemic civets: the Wet Zone Golden Palm Civet (*P. Aureus*); the Montane Golden Palm Civet (*P. montanus*); and the Dry-Zone Palm Civet (*P. stenocephalus*).

Yet the debate about these subspecies is ongoing, with some scientists now claiming that a fourth civet also merits separate recognition: the Sri Lankan Mountain Palm Civet (*Paradoxurus supp*), found only in Dickoya, a refinement that makes Darwin's Galápagos finches look almost modest.

But although each civet is zone-specific and different enough to be so classified, it would take much effort on behalf of armchair naturalists to ever tell them apart.

All three are golden beasts, more golden brown on their backs and lighter gold on their stomachs, though the Montane Golden Palm Civet is, to the trained eye, a little darker all round. From nose to tail, they measure 40 to 70 centimetres – like large cats - and weigh 3 to 10 pounds.

They are mild, secretive, forest-loving creatures, living their lives in trees and high hollows, solitary and very nocturnal, munching their way through fruit and small animals.

Occasionally, they can be more sociable: for four long months, one lived very comfortably in the space between my bedroom ceiling and the roof, a home from home where it raised its many excitable and noisy offspring.

Most curiously – and unexpectedly, their farts are widely known on the island to be so pleasant as to smell of the flower of the joy perfume tree – the Magnolia champaca, a scent immortalised in Jean Patou's famous perfume, 'Joy', an odour that outsold all others, excepting Chanel No. 5.

Civet Coffee, which can sell for \$1300 per kilo, has thankfully yet to make any appearance on

the island, associated as it has become with
cruel farmed civet practices.

The custom, in the past, was kinder, with
partially digested and fermented coffee berries
being collected from civet poo in the jungle and
sold to ridiculously wealthy Coffee Bubbas.

6

THE GREY
SLENDER
LORIS

"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 "

THE DIARY OF A NOBODY
GEORGE GROSSMITH

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 spot of lovemaking, 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.

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 subspecies. 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

HANUMAN'S LANGUR

“Without an
original there can
be no imitation.”

THE DIARY OF A NOBODY
GEORGE GROSSMITH

The Hanuman Langur, also called the Tufted Grey 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 subspecies, *Thersites*, is different to those found in India.

However, 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 after *Thersites*, a bow-legged antihero from Homer's Trojan Wars, whom Plato later promoted as the man best suited for the afterlife. This was a doubtful honour to bestow on 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 come with all the complexities of a relatively capacious family – and they live in groups within which strict social hierarchies are observed.

8

THE CEYLON
RUDDY
MONGOOSE

"I could not help
thinking what a
noble gentleman
Mr. Perkupp is."

THE DIARY OF A NOBODY
GEORGE GROSSMITH

The Ceylon Ruddy Mongoose (*Herpestes Smithi Zeylanicus*) is a mongoose that glows, not just by virtue of its colour but because of its marginal differences with its nearest Indian cousin, leaving it tethering on the favourable side of being declared endemic.

Its grey-brown fur is decidedly reddish in tone 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 mongooses of any variety, it feeds day and night on anything smaller than it 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 it 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."

9

THE LEOPARD

"I would not argue
with him any
further. You
cannot argue with
people like that."

THE DIARY OF A NOBODY
GEORGE GROSSMITH

Strictly speaking, the Ceylon Leopard is not endemic – but it almost is. It is without doubt the greatest endemic jewel in Sri Lanka's mammalian crown and the largest of the country's cat species. Unlike other leopards, notably the ones that inhabit India, it has no other rival predators, and this has inspired so great a degree of evolution that Sri Lanka's leopards are almost considered to be a distinct subspecies, only to be found on the island.

This lack of competition has probably helped account for their size - averaging six feet in length, head to tail, and weighing anything up to two hundred and twenty pounds, making it larger than other leopard species.

Solitary and with a life expectancy of around 15 years, it is also far less aggressive than others, and quite comfortable hunting through both day and night, rather than restricting itself to the usual nocturnal habits of its Indian counterpart.

It is beautifully attuned to hunting, an observer noting that "if the lion is the king of the jungle, then the leopard is the king of stealth," able to run seventy kilometres an hour and leap as far as six metres.

Despite habitats that stretch right across the island, it has a preference for the cooler highlands – places like Horton Plains, for example – and has developed thicker fur and fat layers to stay warm.

This fussiness has probably worked against it: the actual numbers of the Sri Lankan Leopard are falling fast and are currently estimated at just around 800. Conservation methods have failed to make any meaningful impact on their population, and there is little sense of urgency in government circles about the pressing need to do more to protect the future of this apex predator.

Habitat loss, as much as a disastrous history of human-animal interaction, is largely to blame for this decline. Still, if nothing is done soon about it, the Sri Lanka Tourist Board may have to turn to promoting monkeys. It is also differentiated from other leopards by its rosettes, which are closer-set and smaller than those of any other species.

And an errant gene in the leopard population provides the rarest of leopards, the Black Leopard, of whom there have been only a few firm sightings. One in every three hundred leopards born has the propensity to be black and so able to live up to Karl Lagerfeld's gimlet observation: "One is never over- or underdressed with a little black dress."

10

MICE

"Doesn't it seem
odd that Gowing's
always coming,
and Cummings'
always going?"

THE DIARY OF A NOBODY
GEORGE GROSSMITH

Of Sri Lanka's seven mouse species, nearly half are endemic.

The ultra-rare Sri Lankan Spiny Mouse heads these three native and patriotic rodents. It is now so endangered that it is found in only a few locations. A mere maximum of 18 centimetres in length, from nose to tail, its reddish-grey back and sides morph into white underparts, with huge, gorgeous, smooth, scooped-out ears that stand like parasols above large, dark eyes. It is a mouse to fall in love with.

The similarly and somewhat confusingly named Mayor's Spiny Mouse also inhabits the smaller end of the mouse spectrum and comes in two (still quite widespread) variants – *Mus Mayori Mayori*, which inhabits the hill country; and *Mus Mayori Pococki*, which prefers the low wetlands.

Telling them apart is almost impossible, and both are covered with reddish-grey fur and exhibit rather unsatisfactorily small ears. Seeing them is also a challenge, for they are both nocturnal creatures.

One of their more interesting (albeit worrying) points of mouse difference is their capacity to carry quite so many other creatures on them: from mites, ticks, and sucking lice to small scorpions.

The last of the endemic mice is the Ceylon Highland Long-tailed Tree Mouse.

Discovered in 1929 by the Dutch tea planter, Adriaan Nolthenius, it is an increasingly rare creature, little more than 21 centimetres in length, nose to tail. It is found in Sri Lanka's hill country, where it lives in trees, venturing out only by night. Like most mice, it has reddish-brown fur that occasionally grows darker, but compared to its many cousins, it presents somewhat disappointingly small ears.

11

THE
PURPLE
FACED
LANGUR

“Don’t worry—no
one will notice it
with your beard.
That is the only
advantage of
growing one that I
can see.”

THE DIARY OF A NOBODY
GEORGE GROSSMITH

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. But it is the Purple-faced Langur that 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 over other foods, it is shy and slightly smaller than Hanuman langur, but easy to tell apart by 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 which it prefers to live.

Excited taxologists from Jaffna have also called for the recognition of a fifth subspecies - *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.

12

RATS

“Isn’t it a pity we
don’t know
anybody?”

THE DIARY OF A NOBODY
GEORGE GROSSMITH

Two of the island's ten rat species are endemic.

Thirty centimetres in length, nose to tail, with steel grey fur and white undersides, the Ohiya Rat is named after a small village of barely 700 souls near Badulla. It lives quietly in forests and has gradually become ever scarcer in counts done by depressed biologists.

Its only other endemic cousin, the Nillu Rat, is no less endangered, and today is only found in restricted highland locations such as the Knuckles, Horton Plains, Nuwara Eliya, and Ohiya.

Little more than thirty-nine centimetres long nose to tail, its fur tends to be slightly redder than the typical grey of many of its relatives. Its name – Nillu, which means cease/settle/ stay/stand/stop - gives something of a clue about its willingness to get out and about.

13

THE RED
SLENDER
LORIS

"I am always in of
an evening."

THE DIARY OF A NOBODY
GEORGE GROSSMITH

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 solely and entirely in Sri Lanka.

Rare though it is, it 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 has 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, and 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 name implies, this loris subspecies 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

it's 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.

14

SHREWS

“He is a
marvellously
intellectual man
and says things
which from other
people would seem
quite alarming.”

THE DIARY OF A NOBODY
GEORGE GROSSMITH

Of the ten shrews found on the island, a staggering six are considered to be endemic. Lilliputian they may be in size, but for any species, this is a more than commendable achievement.

Modest and nocturnal, they rarely hit the headlines – yet this was what they did back on New Year's Day 1924, a very special year for Joseph Pearson, a young biologist who had come to Sri Lanka from Liverpool to assume the position of Director of the Colombo Museum. That morning, as the rest of Colombo's beau monde were nursing hangovers and trying to rid their heads of the tune of Auld Lang Syne, he discovered what would come to be called Pearson's Long-Clawed Shrew. At the time, it would have been a much more common sight than it is today, commonly found in forests and grasslands – habitats that are now so embattled as to render the endemic creature highly endangered. It is at the petite spectrum of island shrews, measuring just twelve centimetres nose to tail and sporting rather mundane grey-brown fur.

The headlines screamed once more in 2007 when an entirely new endemic species of Sri Lankan shrew was agreed upon: the Sinharaja White-Toothed Shrew. The result of extensive research carried out by a handful of remarkable scientists, it was discovered that what had been masquerading in Sinharaja as the Ceylon Long-tailed Shrew was actually a quite different shrew species, and one that had, till then, not.

been properly recognised or identified. A closer study of its bone structure, taken with the simple observation that it had a shorter tail, resulted in the formal recognition of this new endemic species. However, the resulting Sinharaja White-Toothed Shrew is so restricted in distribution as to be almost entirely invisible – and has been found in only two areas of the edge of the Sinharaja Forest.

The island's four other endemic shrews also amount to a shrew-spotter's holy grail, being both highly endangered and markedly restricted to just certain parts of the island.

At barely twenty centimetres long, nose to tail, with grey fur and a preference for subtropical or tropical forests, the Ceylon Jungle Shrew is determinedly nocturnal.

At little more than a centimetre nose to tail, the Ceylon Long-Tailed Shrew is so deeply threatened by habitat loss and logging that it has recently only been recorded in 5 highly fragmented areas in the Central and Sabaragamuwa provinces, despite its record of living as happily in the high mountain forests as much as the lowland ones.

Covered in predictably modest brown fur with hints of grey, there is little about its appearance to help mark out the treasured and rare life it still attempts to cleave to, so validating that adage: never judge a book (or shrew) by its cover.

Barely any larger is the Ceylon Highland Shrew. Highly endangered and restricted to the central highlands of the country, it presents itself with an unapologetic style, being rat-like and grey, its take-it-or-leave-it attitude of little help to environmental publicists eager to drum up the sympathy that any endangered animal merits.

The Ceylon Pigmy Shrew (*Suncus Etruscus Fellowes-Gordoni*) takes its characterisation to heart, being so tiny as to measure barely nine centimetres, nose to tail. But though minuscule, it is a much more handsome shrew than many of its relatives and sports fur that is nicely chocolate brown to dark grey.

As benefits so small a beast, it has a commendably long Latin moniker, much of it deriving from being named for Marjory née Fellowes-Gordon, the wife of the amateur Dutch naturalist who first recorded it. Highly endangered, it has been recorded as living in the low mountain rainforests of the Sabaragamuwa and Central Provinces, with a possible third sighting in the Western Province.

15

SQUIRRELS

"I am master of
this house—please
understand that."

THE DIARY OF A NOBODY
GEORGE GROSSMITH

Two of Sri Lanka's six squirrel species are endemic: the Dusky-Striped Squirrel and Layard's Palm Squirrel.

Way back in 1913, the year before the great war, the year Picasso first lit up the art world, the squirrel world was lit by its own bright spotlight: an agreement between biologists – carried out through the good offices of the Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society, to redefine what was thought to be the Indian Nilgiri striped squirrel, as a quite separate species unique to Sri Lanka - the Dusky Striped Squirrel.

To the casual observer, the differences would be hard to spot, but for Punchi Lena, as it is known in Sinhala, it meant recognition at long last.

Despite being the smallest of the island's squirrels, it is, at 60-70 grams, larger than its Nilgiri cousin and has longer, thicker stripes.

But it is rare, keeping to the wet zone rainforests of the southwest like Sinharaja, though the odd sighting has also been made on Horton Plains, and in Nuwara Eliya, and Kandy.

The island's only other endemic squirrel is Layard's Palm Squirrel - named for Edgar Leopold Layard, one of those legendary Victorian all-rounders, who took on a diplomatic career, the better to document the natural world, a passion he put down to lacking any siblings when growing up.

He spent ten years on the island, leaving behind a variety of animals named after him, including a parrot and the squirrel that still bears his name. It is sometimes known as the Flame Striped Jungle Squirrel for the beautiful markings that run along its back.

It is about thirty centimetres nose to tail, with black fur that fades to reddish brown on its stomach and can be seen all around the central highlands. By day they forage for fruit and nuts; by night they chatter from tree to tree, living, like swans, in pairs that bond for life. With their natural forest habitat eroded steadily, they are categorised as Vulnerable.

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THE
TOQUE
MACAQUE

“When he had
gone, I thought of
a splendid answer
I ought to have
given him.

However, I will
keep it for another
occasion.”

THE DIARY OF A NOBODY
GEORGE GROSSMITH

The island's other monkey species – the Toque Macaque - is to be found almost everywhere, living its best life, undeterred by much of what growing urbanisation 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 suited to 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 as 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 upon attaining maturity, for fear of being chased out otherwise. 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 favours the dry-zone areas of the north and east.

The Highland Toque Macaque favours the hilly centre of the island.

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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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.

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