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# LORIS

JOURNAL OF THE WILDLIFE AND NATURE PROTECTION SOCIETY OF SRI LANKA

VOLUME 29. ISSUE 3



# UNVEILING THE LIVING TREASURES OF SRI LANKA

## A report on the new species discoveries during the year 2020

By Devaka K. Weerakoon<sup>1,2</sup> & Amila P. Sumanapala<sup>1,3</sup>

**E**ven though Sri Lanka is a small island its biodiversity is significantly important both on a regional and global scale. Sri Lanka and the Western Ghats of India are listed as one of the 36 biodiversity hotspots of the world<sup>1</sup>. However, only a fraction of Sri Lanka's biodiversity is known to science today. For instance, higher plants and vertebrates are the only groups that have been studied in sufficient detail to date. Lower plants and invertebrates remain largely unexplored except for a few selected groups such as butterflies, dragonflies, land snails, and algae. Even the vertebrates and for that matter higher plants are not completely listed. During the last two decades alone a large number of new species have been described. One of the biggest drawbacks encountered today in conserving the biodiversity of Sri Lanka is the lack of knowledge about what we actually have. During the last four decades an increasing number of scientific discoveries have managed to gradually unveil the biodiversity in Sri Lanka. Creating awareness about these new discoveries is key to supporting ongoing conservation efforts. Therefore this report is compiled to create awareness among the conservation community

about these new species which have been discovered by many dedicated scientists, to inspire passionate young scientists and to stimulate new research studies. We also hope that this information will underscore the urgent need to safeguard the ecological integrity of ecosystems, their species, and the immeasurable value of the ecological goods and services received from biodiversity. The compilers also hope that this report will help build greater appreciation among the general public, decision makers and conservationists in general of the importance of Sri Lanka's biodiversity and the need for us to protect and nurture it for future generations.

### Methodology

This report was compiled using the information reported in peer reviewed journals that were published in 2020 which described new species of plants and animals in Sri Lanka. This report will also provide an update on major taxonomic revisions as well as changes in the distribution status of Sri Lankan species. At the end of this report an updated set of statistics pertaining to Sri Lanka's biodiversity is presented. It was based on updating data available up to December 2019 with the new discoveries reported in 2020.

### Species new to Sri Lanka

During the year 2020, 37 new species were recorded in Sri Lanka including 12 species of vertebrates, 24 species of invertebrates and one species of orchid.

The vertebrates recorded include, three species of fish *Devario memorialis* (Aranayake Devario from Aranayake)<sup>2</sup> (Figure 1), *Laubuka hema* ( from Nilgala)<sup>37</sup> and *Rasbora adisi* (from Kotagama)<sup>3</sup>, four species of snakes [*Rhinophis mendisi* (Mendis's shieldtail from Balangoda)<sup>4</sup>, *Rhinophis gunasekarai* (Gunasekara's shieldtail from Knuckles)<sup>5</sup>, *Dryocalamus chithrasekarai* (Chithrasekara's bridle snake from Peak Wilderness)<sup>6</sup> and *Dendrelaphis wickrorum* (Wickramasinghe's bronze-back from Pundalu Oya)<sup>7</sup>]; three species of skinks [*Lankascincus merrill* (Merrill's Lanka-skink from Rakwana hills)<sup>8</sup>, *Lankascincus sameerai* (Sameera's Lanka-skink from Morningside)<sup>9</sup>, *Eutropis resetarii* (Resetar's Skink from Agarapatana)<sup>10</sup>]; one species of lizard *Ceratophora ukuwelai* (Ukuwela's rough-horn lizard (Figure 2) from Salgala)<sup>11</sup>; one species of gecko *Cnemaspis manoa* (Mano's day-gecko from Pilikuttuwa)<sup>12</sup>.

The invertebrates recorded include, one species of jellyfish (*Carybdea wayamba*)<sup>13</sup>; one species of grasshopper (*Cladonotus bhaskari* from Sinharaja)<sup>14</sup>;



Figure 1: Aranayake Devario (Pic by: Hiranya Sudasinghe).



Figure 2: Ukuwela's rough-horn lizard. (Pic by: Sanjaya Bandara).

one species of scorpion (*Srilankametrus pococki* from Ritigala)<sup>15</sup>; one species of mayfly (*Indoganodes tschertoprudi* from Marathenna)<sup>16</sup>; two species of stalk-eyed flies (*Teleopsis neglecta* from Pundaluoya and *Teleopsis sorora* from Udawattakale)<sup>17</sup>; four species of water mites [*Piona srilankana*, *Neumania edytae*, *Krendowskia (Krendowskiella) srilankana*, *Mideopsis ewelinae*]<sup>18</sup>; five species of beetles [(*Clidicus minilankanus* from Salgala)<sup>19</sup>, (*Neoserica dharmapriyai* from Aranayake, *Selaserica athukoralai* and *Maladera galdaththana* from the Knuckles Range, *Maladera cervicornis* from Alic Land Estate, Kegalle)<sup>20</sup>]; two species of Pholcid spiders (*Wanniyala badulla* and *Wanniyala batatota*)<sup>21</sup>; seven new species of jumping spiders (*Habrocestum liptoni*, *Stenaelurillus ilesai* and *Tamigalesus fabus*)<sup>22</sup>, (*Synagelides hortonensis*, *Synagelides lakmalii*, *Synagelides rosalingae* and *Synagelides orlando*) where the genus *Synagelides* was recorded for the first time in Sri Lanka<sup>23</sup>.

A single species of orchid, *Gastrodia gunatillekeorum* (Figure 4) was recorded from Sinharaja<sup>24</sup>.

Among the new species described invertebrates outnumber vertebrates which is a healthy development as local taxonomists place a greater emphasis on



Figure 4: Orchid species *Gastrodia gunatillekeorum*. (Pic by: Imaduwa Priyadarshana).

describing vertebrates. This could be ascribed to lack of expertise and lack of access to museums that play an important role in taxonomic work as evidenced by the description of the stalk-eyed fly *Teleopsis neglecta* (Figure 3) based on a specimen that was presumably collected over a century ago in 1890 and is housed in the Natural History Museum in London. It highlights the importance of properly curated collections for taxonomic work. This species however, is commonly found in the Sinharaja World Heritage Forest Reserve.

The distribution of the type localities of the newly described species indicate that a majority of the discoveries have been made from the wet zone, especially from the montane zone of the country. Only a couple of invertebrate discoveries have been made from material collected from the dry zone and only one new species has been described from the marine ecosystems of the country (Figure 5) which once a gain shows lack of attention to marine species compared to terrestrial species.

In addition to these, several species assumed to be new to science were also reported in 2020 including several elasmobranch species<sup>25</sup> and a Plover. Further taxonomic work and upcoming publications will establish their taxonomic position in the future.

### Species recorded for the first time in Sri Lanka

During the year 2020, many new records for Sri Lanka have been documented including five species of birds [European honey buzzard *Pernis apivorus*<sup>26</sup> red-backed shrike *Lanius collurio*, black-browed reed-warbler *Acrocephalus bistrigiceps*, red-naped ibis *Pseudibis papillosa*, northern wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* (Figure 6)<sup>27,28</sup>], two species of ants (*Liponera longitarsus*<sup>29</sup> and *Tetraoponera modesta*<sup>30</sup>), three species of elasmobranch fish (*Maculabatis arabica*, *Acroteriobatus variegatus*, and *Centroscymnus owstonii*<sup>25</sup>), three species of jellyfish<sup>13</sup>



Figure 3: Stalk-eyed fly. (Pic by: Amila Sumanapala).

and five species of aquatic mites<sup>18</sup>. The records of the sleeper shark *Centroscymnus owstonii*, also represents the first record of the family Somniosidae in Sri Lanka<sup>25</sup>.

The new species records of flora reported in 2020 include one species of seagrass (*Halophila major*)<sup>31</sup> and six species of liverworts [*Lejeunea sordida*, *Leptolejeunea subdentata*, *Spruceanthus polymorphus*, *Frullania udarii*, *Heteroscyphus turgidus* and *Fuscocephaloziopsis lunulifolia*<sup>32</sup>]. Further, the genus *Fuscocephaloziopsis* is recorded for the first time in Sri Lanka. The addition of these six new records increases the total number of leafy liverwort species in Sri Lanka from 290 to 296 and the number of genera from 62 to 63. A species of fungus named *Helvella crispa*, was also reported from the country for the first time in the year 2020<sup>33</sup>.

### Changes in distribution status

Several taxonomic studies conducted locally and regionally have led to changes in the distribution status of several species of Sri Lankan taxa. The work on vine snakes of the genus *Ahaetulla* in India has indicated that the two Sri Lankan representatives of the genus

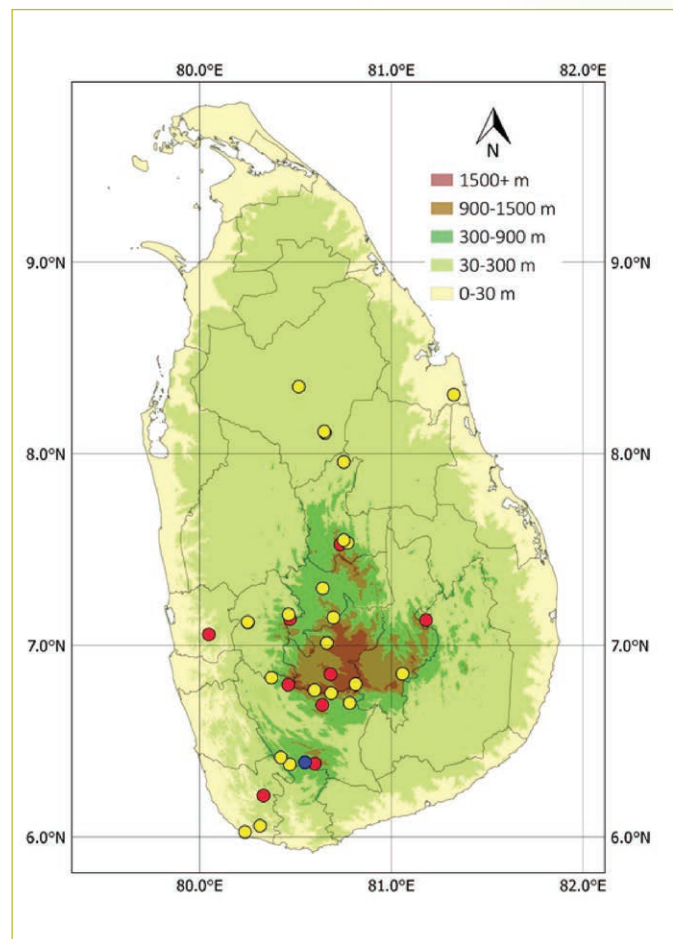


Figure 5: Distribution of type localities of new species discoveries made in 2020 from Sri Lanka. (Red: vertebrates, yellow: invertebrates, blue: plants).

(green vine snake *A. nasuta* and brown vine snake *A. pulverulenta*) are endemic species to Sri Lanka<sup>34</sup>. Further, *Channa gachua* (brown snakehead) which was previously considered a native species to Sri Lanka, has been declared an endemic species<sup>35</sup>. Also, *Systemus sarana* is no longer considered an endemic species as it is present in both Sri Lanka and India<sup>36</sup>. The Boulenger's bronzeback (*Dendrelaphis bifrenalis*), previously considered to have been distributed in all climatic zones of Sri Lanka, is now considered a species which is restricted to the dry and intermediate zones<sup>7</sup>.

### Major changes in nomenclature

The taxonomic work published in the year 2020 resolved several long-standing taxonomic discrepancies in Sri Lankan biodiversity. Several major taxonomic revisions were reported for the ichthyofauna. Sudasinghe *et al.* (2020) revised the taxonomy of Sri Lanka's giant danios (*Devario*) and concluded that *D. annnatalie* and *D. udeni* are synonyms of *D. micronema*<sup>2</sup>. It was also established that *Systemus spilurus* and *S. timbiri*, once considered distinct endemic species, are synonyms of *S. sarana* and only represent two clades of the latter<sup>36</sup>. The revision of Sri Lankan *Laubuka* showed that *L. ruhuna* and *L. insularis* previously considered distinct species, to be synonyms of *L. varuna* and *L. lankensis*<sup>37</sup>. The Sri Lankan snakehead previously identified as *Channa gachua* was recognized as an endemic species, *Channa kelaarti*<sup>35</sup>. *Dawkinsia singhala*, previously considered an endemic species, has been declared a synonym of *Dawkinsia filamentosa*, which is also present in India<sup>38</sup>. The exotic sailfin catfishes in the genus *Pterygoplichthys*, earlier thought to represent two different species (*P. pardalis* and *P. disjunctus*), have been declared a single reproducing entity which can be recognized either as *P. pardalis* or an

aquarium hybrid between *P. pardalis* and *P. disjunctus*<sup>39</sup>. The recent taxonomic work on genus *Dendrelaphis* established that the recently described species Sinharaja bronzeback (*Dendrelaphis sinharajensis*) is a synonym of *Dendrelaphis effrenis*<sup>7</sup>.

### Invasive alien species recorded for the first time in Sri Lanka

The list of ants in Sri Lanka was updated in 2020 during which 18 non-native species of ants were identified even though it has not been clearly established whether these species are invasive in Sri Lanka. However, the authors have stressed the need for close monitoring of these species to establish whether they display invasiveness as some of these species have been considered invasive in other regions of the world<sup>29</sup>.

### Updated biodiversity inventory for Sri Lanka

The most recent update on the biodiversity of Sri Lanka was carried out during the preparation of the 6th National Report of the Convention on Biological Diversity which resulted in the compilation of the biodiversity profile<sup>40</sup> of Sri Lanka. This report provided an updated list of species up to the end of December 2018. However, updating the biodiversity inventory should be a continuous process as evidenced by the discovery of 54 new species from Sri Lanka in 2019<sup>41, 42</sup>. This included 26 spiders, (14 cellar spiders, seven jumping spiders, four crab spiders and a tarantula), one scorpion species, five mites and ticks, 14 reptiles (13 day geckos belonging to genus *Cnemaspis* and one species of snake), one species of shrub frog, one species of orchid and six species of lichens. The table below (Table 1) provides the updated statistics on selected taxa of biodiversity of Sri Lanka up to December 2020 including the new discoveries that were reported in 2020.



Figure 6: Northern wheatear. (Pic by: Ruvinda de Mel).

Table 1: Updated statistics on biodiversity of Sri Lanka up to December 2020

Taxa	6th NR		2019		2020	
	Species	Endemics	Species	Endemics	Species	Endemics
Terrestrial mammals*	106	19	106	19	106	19
Marine mammals	29	0	29	0	29	0
Birds	510	33			515	34
Reptiles*	220	135	234	149	243	158
Amphibians	119	106	120	107	120	107
Freshwater fish*	128	61	126	61	124	58
Brackishwater and marine fish	1384	0	1387	0	1387	0
Butterflies*	248	31	248	31	248	31
Odonata	130	58	130	58	130	58
Land snails*	253	205	253	205	253	205
Spiders	563	275	589	301	599	311
Scorpions*	19	14	20	15	21	16
Millipedes	103	82	103	82	103	82
Freshwater crabs	51	50	51	50	51	50
Marine crabs	369	0	369	0	369	0
Termites*	72	18	72	18	72	18
Ants*	229	33	229	33	301**	68**
Bees	159	22	159	22	159	22
Thrips	103	0	103	0	103	0
Mayflies			51	41	52	42
Echinoids	76	1	76	1	76	1
Flowering plants	3116	901	3118	903	3120	904
Mosses			575		575	
Pteridophytes and lycophytes	390+	47	390+	47	390+	47
Leafy liverworts			290		296	

\* Includes exotic species as well

\*\* Dias et al. 2020 reports 341 species and 82 endemics taking both species and subspecies into account. Current table has only considered the number of species.

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