

The Island's Fascinating World Of Snakes



Zara's Hump-nosed Viper (*Hypnale zara*/Zara's Mukalan Thelissa), coiled hidden amongst leaf litter waiting in ambush for its prey

Snakes were one of the revered groups of animals in Sri Lanka like nowhere else in the world. The 'Naga' (Snake) people were one of the four powerful tribes in Sri Lanka who ruled the Northern and Western parts of the Island during the sixth Century BC to third Century BC. They were snake worshippers. King Buddhadasa, the only known royal physician, surgeon and veteran was known to have treated a sick Cobra which dates back to 340-368 AD. Ruins of the ancient cities speak of the harmony between snakes and the people of Sri Lanka. Amongst them guard-stones with a cobra-king, provided protection to the premises, seven hooded cobras carved on stones were to protect the water of the 'Wewa' (huge tanks of water constructed by ancient Kings). With changing times and over four centuries of colonialism by three nations, ancient traditions died off, and like the rest of the world snakes now have become one of the feared creatures even in Sri Lanka.

Words L J Mendis Wickramasinghe and Nethu Wickramasinghe

Photographs L J Mendis Wickramasinghe

Sri Lanka is home to a dazzling 102 species of snakes, with 50 of them found nowhere else in the world. Depending on the ability to kill prey and the contents in venom, snakes have been grouped into four. In Sri Lanka 21 are highly venomous (deadly), five species are moderately venomous (painful bite) and 12 species are mildly venomous (slightly painful bite, even less painful than a sting from an ant). The majority of the remaining 64 species are non venomous. Which means that the majority of snakes are harmless.

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Whatever feelings humans have towards these creatures, they have always fascinated us. Having no limbs and a cylindrical elongated scaly body, they have remarkable ways of getting around. From the most common sinusoidal wriggle used to move on land and to swim in water, both on the surface and beneath, they can also climb a tree by simply embracing its trunk. Some can even glide by flattening their bodies to catch the air beneath them. Snakes come in a diverse range of sizes and depending on their sizes, the prey they consume too vary from the smallest insect larvae consumed by the smallest blind snakes (like Typhlops) to large buffaloes consumed whole by large pythons. □ They are necessarily 100 percent carnivores, and eat their prey whole.

Only those belonging to the highly venomous group can cause a death in a human. 14 species inhabit the deep oceans surrounding the island. On a few deep sea diving occasions we have encountered these splendid black and yellow striped creatures, who hardly seemed to notice our presence. They are essentially non aggressive, and since they are found only in the deep waters they hardly interact with humans. Out of the remaining seven deadly poisonous snakes, two are Coral Snakes (*Calliophis melanurus* and *Calliophis haematoetron*) but because they are very small in size, as thin as the ink filled tube of a ball point pen, they are not capable of inflicting a bite on humans, and therefore are not harmful, although their venom contents are deadly.

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Another deadly venomous snake is the Ceylon Krait (*Bungarus ceylonicus*). A black and white striped beauty, it is nocturnal and aggressive at night. They are potentially non aggressive in nature, but may attack if provoked or threatened. These snakes will roll in to a ball with their heads well concealed when agitated, and remain so till things settle. A researcher on the field was once bitten by this snake, which appears to be the only report of a bite by this snake - this too, having happened when he tried to handle the snake after catching it.

Saw-scale Vipers (*Echis carinata*) are distributed in the dry and arid zones of the island. Although deadly venomous, because the snake is very small in size (30cm in length), the amount of venom excreted in a single bite is not sufficient to cause death in a human being. The remaining three species of deadly venomous snakes, the Indian Krait (*Bungarus caeruleus*), Indian Cobra (*Naja naja*), and Russell's Viper (*Daboia russelii*), cause the majority of human deaths in Sri Lanka due to their lethal bites.

When it comes to camouflage and mimicry snakes seem to have perfected the art like no other. □The vibrant colours they have are suited for various habitats they live in, deceiving both predator and prey and in turn are unique strategies. The beautiful earthy tinges and markings in a Hump-nosed Viper coiled hidden amongst leaf litter waiting in ambush for its prey, or a Green Vine Snake (*Ahaetulla nasuta/Ahaetulla*), or a Green Pit Viper (*Trimeresurus trigonocephalus/Pala Polonga*) coiled patiently waiting on a tree top amongst leaves are hard to spot unless you know when you see one. Another endemic beauty is the Sri Lankan Piped Snake (*Cylindrophis maculata/Depath Naya* or Two Headed Snake), with its underside all checkered, it seems to have the highest number of folktales surrounding it. These burrowing snakes will flatten their bodies to expand body size, and will coil with their heads well concealed when agitated while holding their tails up to trick their enemies into thinking it to be their heads. □This has led to the common myth that they posses two heads.

[The largest cobra we have ever encountered reached a magnificent 8' 7.5'', the snake was trapped inside a pit close to Udawalawa](#)

One will truly fall for the Ornate Flying Snake named 'Malsara' (Cupid), which is an amazing creature, as its name implies it can glide from one tree to another. With its red markings prominent on a contrasting black skin, non venomous and harmless, it tries its best to fool its predators into thinking it is dangerous.

Snakes mimic quite successfully even fooling humans. There have been incidents where the Russell's Viper has been mistaken for a Rock Python. Although Russell's Viper is deadly poisonous, the Indian Python is a non venomous constrictor of prey, but because they both look alike they are very likely to be misidentified.

Both the deadly poisonous Ceylon Krait and the Indian Krait have black and white cross bands along their lengths. Interestingly there are six harmless species who mimic these Kraits, which includes Wolf Snakes and Bridal Snakes. □At times they can only be differentiated on close examination.

The famous Hooded Snake or Cobras, can grow up to seven feet in length. The snake is noted for its prominent marking on its hood, and is found mainly close to human settlements. The largest Cobra we have ever encountered reached a magnificent 8' 7.5'', the snake was trapped inside a pit close to Udawalawa, and was rescued in time and released to the wild.

Sri Lanka undeniably is one of the unsurpassed locations to observe these elegant and graceful creatures that seem to have arrived from a world of their own!

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