

■ The aptly-named and rarely encountered Pygmy lizard *Cophotis ceylanica* is one of 14 agamid species endemic to Sri Lanka.

SRI LANKA'S PYGMY LIZARD **MIDGET DRAGON**

A RARE AND SEVERELY ENDANGERED
ENDEMIC AGAMID FULLY ADAPTED
TO SURVIVE IN THE COOL HIGHLANDS



Cophotis ceylanica can be easily identified by the irregular-shaped body scales and its unique, curled, prehensile tail.

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PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI

The Pygmy lizard *Cophotis ceylanica* - which we were lucky enough to observe during our trip to the Horton Plains with our friend **Mevan Piyasena** - is one of 14 agamid species endemic to Sri Lanka: it can be easily identified by the irregular-shaped body scales and its unique, curled, prehensile tail. Adults are dark brown, and males bear a distinctive white stripe from their snout to their shoulder, with white rings around their tail. This surprisingly slow-moving lizard is usually found on moss-covered tree trunks in montane regions of Sri Lanka, with its range

restricted to Horton Plains, Hakgala and the Knuckles Mountain range. Many experts suspect however that the Knuckles population is distinct from the populations found elsewhere in the country and may qualify as separate subspecies. Few studies of the pygmy lizard have taken place and little is therefore known of its biology, but more general information does exist on agamids as a family. Agamids are diurnal and visually-orientated, with their crests and other ornamentation thought to serve as important signals in establishing and maintaining territories

or in courtship: social interactions in this species are known to include head-bobbing in response to threat as well as aggressive encounters between males. Unlike the vast majority of agamids, the pygmy lizard does not lay eggs, but rather gives birth to live young after the eggs hatch within its body, a process known as ovoviviparity. This is thought to be an adaptation to the cold montane climate, where eggs may be exposed to chilling overnight. 4-5 live young are produced at a time, measuring 47-50mm, between May to August. Pygmy lizard populations suffered

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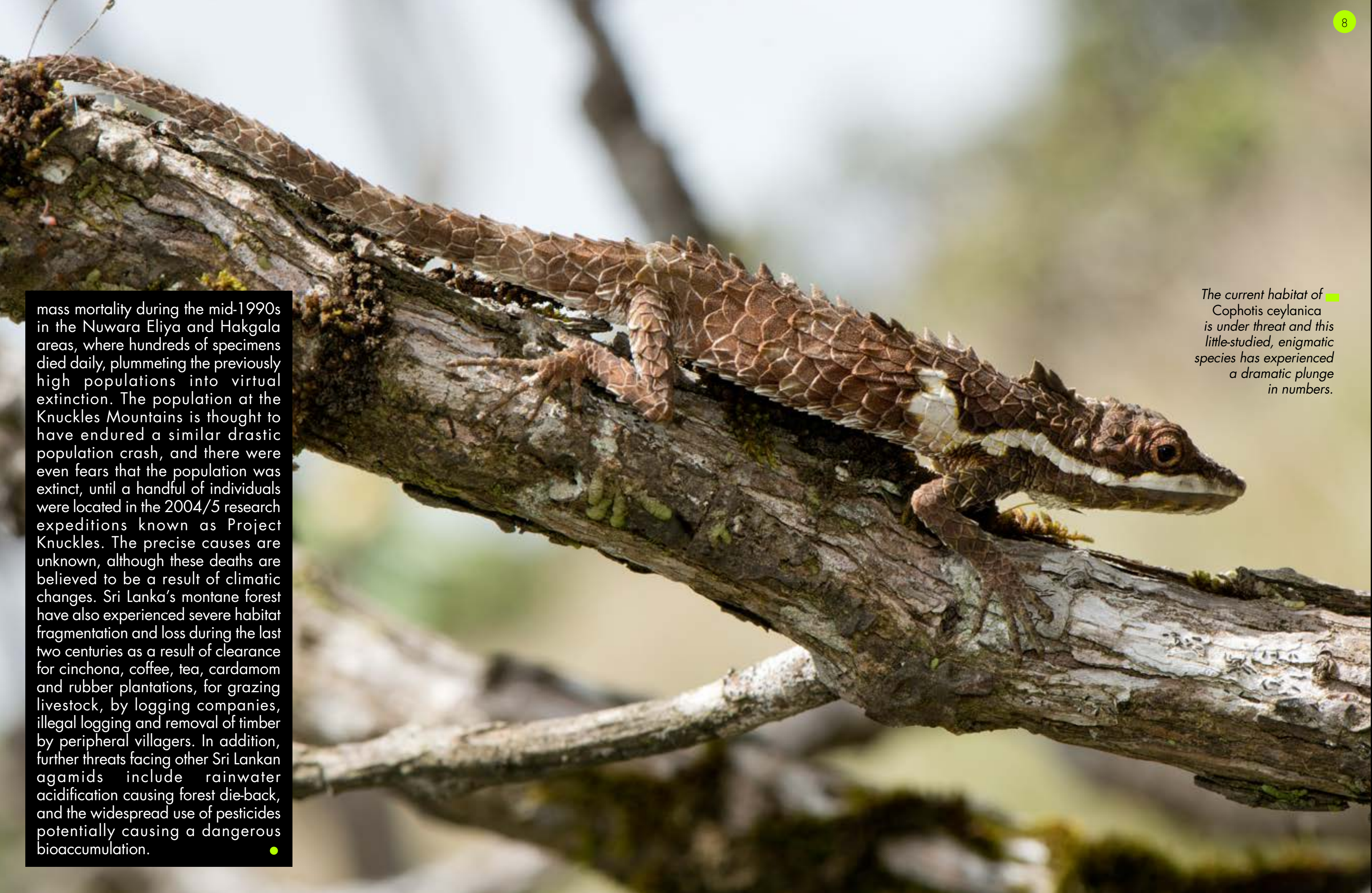


This slow-moving lizard is usually found on moss-covered tree trunks in montane regions of Sri Lanka, with its range restricted to Horton Plains (image at bottom right), Hakgala and the Knuckles Mountain range.



Detecting *Cophotis*
ceylanica
in the wild is not easy
due to the species'
highly effective
camouflage and its
habit of standing still.



A close-up photograph of a lizard, likely a species of agamid, perched on a thick, textured tree branch. The lizard has a brown and white patterned body with prominent scaly skin. It is facing right, and its head is slightly lowered. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green and brown, suggesting a forest environment.

mass mortality during the mid-1990s in the Nuwara Eliya and Hakgala areas, where hundreds of specimens died daily, plummeting the previously high populations into virtual extinction. The population at the Knuckles Mountains is thought to have endured a similar drastic population crash, and there were even fears that the population was extinct, until a handful of individuals were located in the 2004/5 research expeditions known as Project Knuckles. The precise causes are unknown, although these deaths are believed to be a result of climatic changes. Sri Lanka's montane forest have also experienced severe habitat fragmentation and loss during the last two centuries as a result of clearance for cinchona, coffee, tea, cardamom and rubber plantations, for grazing livestock, by logging companies, illegal logging and removal of timber by peripheral villagers. In addition, further threats facing other Sri Lankan agamids include rainwater acidification causing forest die-back, and the widespread use of pesticides potentially causing a dangerous bioaccumulation. ●

The current habitat of *Cophotis ceylanica* is under threat and this little-studied, enigmatic species has experienced a dramatic plunge in numbers.