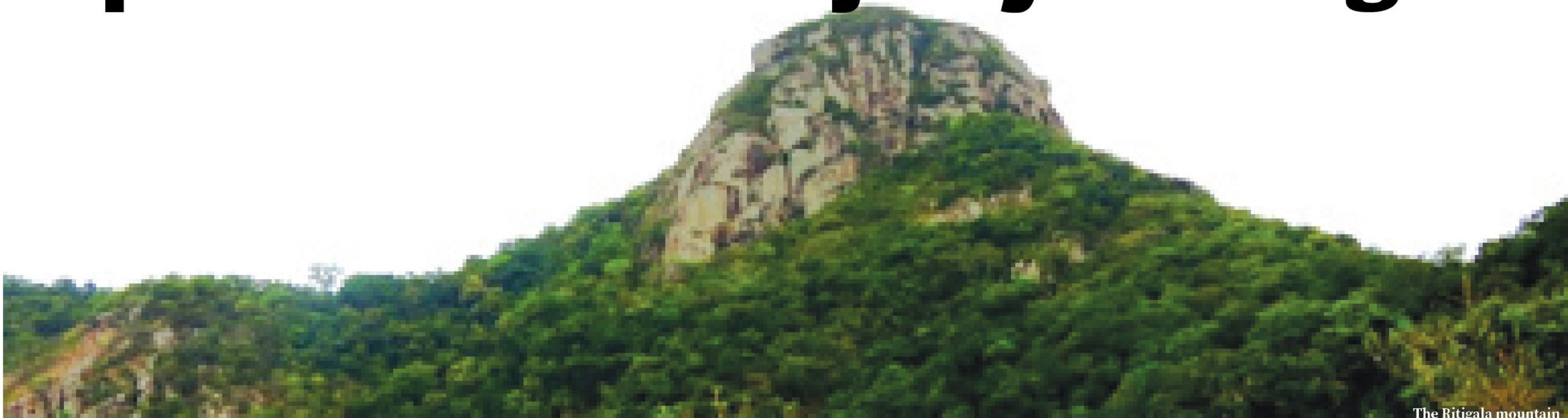


Splendour and majesty of Ritigala



The Ritigala mountain

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The Ritigala mountain which encompasses a distinctive and rare nature reserve covering 1,528 hectares (3,780 acres) is located at Kekirawa in the Anuradhapura district. The Ritigala mountain which is 6.5 km in length is not alone, but consists of seven peaks such as Kodigalakanda, Unakanda, Na Uli-pathkanda, Aushadakanda, Amarpathi Kanda, Andiya Kanda and Palathurukanda, of which Ritigala is the highest.

At 2,513 feet above the sea level and 2,000 feet above the surrounding plains, Ritigala is the highest mountain in Northern Sri Lanka. According to historians, the name Ritigala is derived from the ancient name Aritta Pabbata as indicated in chronicles such as the Mahavamsa. Ritigala rises above other mountains in the North central plains: Mihintale, Dambulla and Sigiriya. Ritigala was vested in the custody of the Wildlife Conservation and the Forest Departments on November 7, 1941 in Government gazette notification No 8809.

Monastery complex

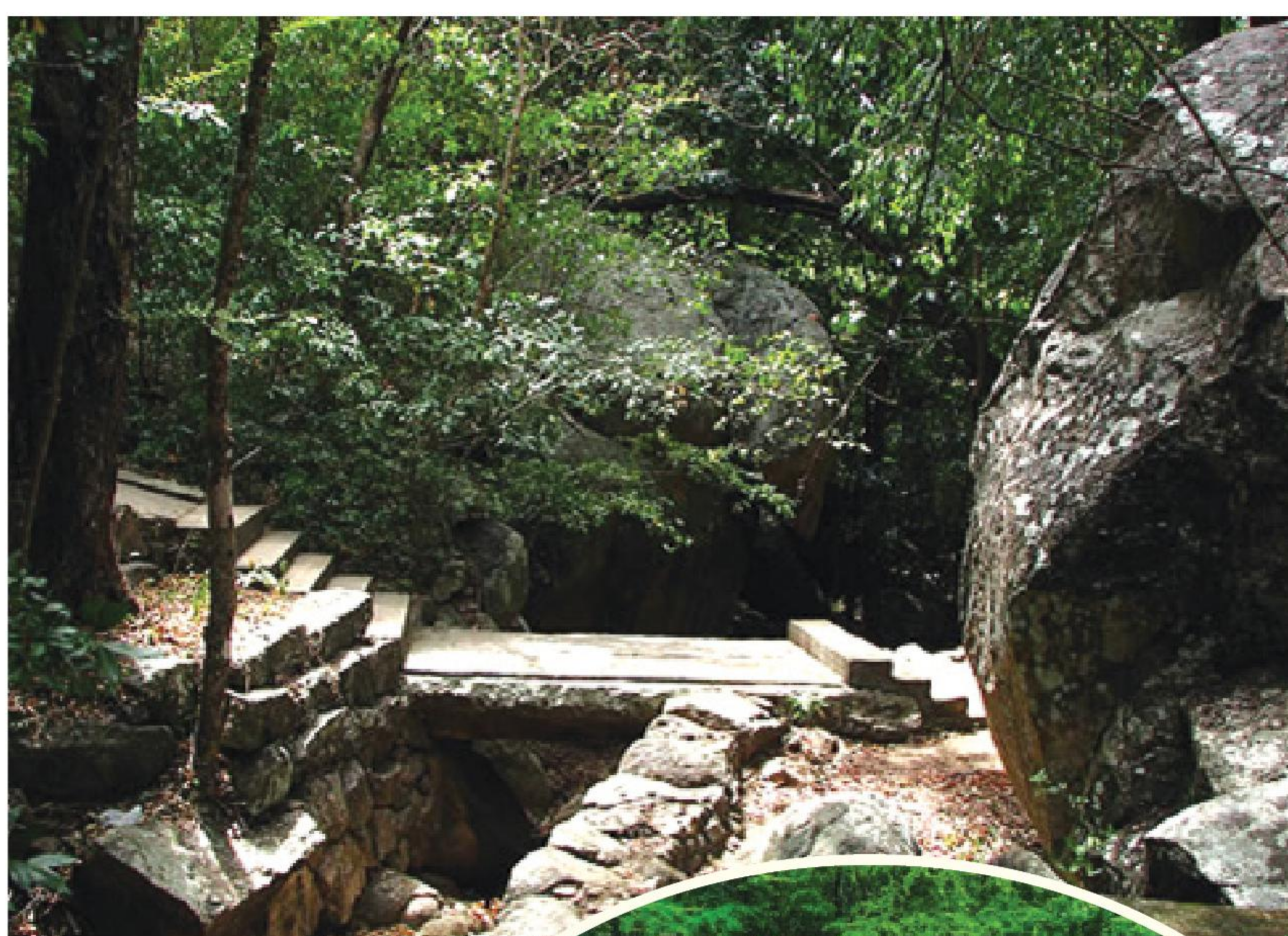
There is historical evidence that in the past there had been a monastery complex in Ritigala, which was destroyed during the invasion of Cholas in the eleventh century and consequently covered by the thick jungle. Ritigala, which was in obscure, resurfaced in the public domain parallel to the expeditionary journey of James Mark Tale, a British archaeological explorer in Ritigala in 1872 and a report appeared in an Asian publication written by surveyor J.B.M. Richwood.

This revelation paved the way for H.C.P. Bell, a world renowned archaeologist to conduct a full scale archaeological exploration in Ritigala. He published many papers on Ritigala inter alia the Ritigala Kanda paper XXXVII annual report, Archaeological survey of Ceylon and plans and plates for annual report - 1893 and Ancient ruins in Ritigala based on his exploration, excavation and studies.

R. L. Brohier, the historian in his book "Ancient irrigation works in Ceylon" published in 1933 said that the irrigational and water drainage system formed in Ritigala was comparable to the various irrigational and hydraulic mechanisms discovered in Sri Lanka. Under these circumstances, Archaeological Commissioner Raja de Silva was entrusted with the task of preserving Ritigala which had been a home to an ancient Buddhist monastery dating back to the first century BC.

Often overlooked by tourists, Ritigala is one of only three Strict Natural Reserves (SNR) in Sri Lanka, making it a protected area dedicated to the survival of threatened species. In SNRs such as Ritigala, there is minimal human disturbance. Access to higher altitudes is reserved for scientific purposes and requires special permission from the Department of Wildlife Conservation. Built by King Sena I in the 9th century AD, Ritigala's monastic ruins came to light in 1893, when Ceylon's first Archaeological Commissioner, H.C.P. Bell, made an extensive research in the area. Prior to Bell's expedition, Ritigala remained untouched since the 11th century, when the monastery was abandoned due to invasions from the Chola Kingdom.

Entering the ruins, the Archaeologi-



The urinal stone, the only decorated ruin found in the forest monastery



The stone walkway

cal Department Office is located close to the bund of the Banda Pokuna, a man-made reservoir that measures a circumference of 1,200 feet, and was likely used as a bathing pond for visitors entering the monastery. Greenery fills the reservoir today, which is lined with large stone steps and once held an estimated two million gallons of water.

A path on the Southern bank of the Banda Pokuna, which is believed to have been built by King Pandukabhaya (437-367 BC), crosses a stream and leads to the monastery's entrance along a stone walkway. To the right of the first pair of double platforms is the site of the monastery's ayurvedic hospital. Remnants of tools still remain, along with large stone-cut baths where persons would be immersed in ayurvedic oil. One of the most striking features of the ancient hospital, however, is the urinal stone, which seems to be the only decorated ruin found in forest monasteries.

Mahavamsa

The Mahavamsa recounts the fact that Prince Pandukabhaya took refuge at Ritigala, where he hid from his eight uncles for seven years in the 4th century BC. Pandukabhaya amassed an Army with the help of the resident Yakkas, slew his uncles, and marched on to establish the royal city of Anuradhapura. In the 1st century BC, King Dutugemunu camped at Ritigala before defeating the Chola king, Elara. In the 7th century AD, King Jettathissa sought refuge at Ritigala before ascending the throne in Anuradhapura. Stories of battles fought at Ritigala have also found their way to folklore. One story recounts a duel between two giants, a warrior called Jayasena from Ritigala and another giant named Gotaimbara, who is likely to have been one of King Dutugemunu's 18 giant warriors.

The ruins of Ritigala monastery are on the Eastern side of the mountain at the foot of the gorge which separates the main peak from the Northern ridge of the range. The ruins cover an area of 24



The remnants of the Ritigala ancient hospital

BUILT BY KING SENA I IN THE 9TH CENTURY AD, RITIGALA'S MONASTIC RUINS CAME TO LIGHT IN 1893, WHEN CEYLON'S FIRST ARCHAEOLOGICAL COMMISSIONER, H.C.P. BELL, MADE AN EXTENSIVE RESEARCH IN THE AREA. PRIOR TO BELL'S EXPEDITION, RITIGALA REMAINED UNTOUCHED SINCE THE 11TH CENTURY, WHEN THE MONASTERY WAS ABANDONED DUE TO INVASIONS FROM THE CHOLA KINGDOM

hectares (59 acres). The monastery precinct begins at the office of the on-site branch of the Department of Archeology close to the foot of the reservoir named Banda Pokuna.

The edge of the reservoir gets a clockwise direction to arrive at the other bank, and cross the bed of the stream feeding the reservoir. The steps here onwards lead up to a beautifully constructed pavement, a stone path 1.5 metres wide

that leads upwards through the forest, linking the major buildings of the monastery. The stone cut path is laid with interlocking four-sided slabs of hewn stone. Three large circular platforms at intervals along the pavement allow for the people to rest.

There are stone double-platform structures, Padhanaghara, which are characteristic of Ritigala and other forest monasteries such as Arankele, Vehirabandigala and the Western monasteries in Anuradhapura. Spread over an area of about 120 acres are about 50 double platforms.

Buddhist architectural heritage

Archaeological debris and remnants of the Buddhist architectural heritage are scattered in a 90-acre landscape which is under the control of the Archaeological Department. As described in chronicles, King Jettathissa in the 3rd century BC, Prince Pandukabhaya and King Dutugemunu had chosen Ritigala forest for rehearsing fighting strategies against their rivals and enemies.

The main reason for the local and

foreign archaeologists and historians to focus their special attention towards Ritigala has been its unique and invaluable archaeological importance. It is referred to in Mahawamsa that Arhath Aritta Thera, the first bhikkhu in the country stayed in the Ritigala forest in the company of 500 bhikkhus. There are remnants of monasteries, shrines and temples and other monuments donated to the Maha Sangha by the ancient kings, showcasing the Buddhist cultural splendour prevailed in the past. During excavations, 74 rock caves with water channels engraved in them (Kataram), 152 stone inscriptions, ruins of 140 ancient buildings including debris of an ancient hospital have been unearthed.

During the Southwest monsoon when the foot of the country is gripped in drought, the crests of Ritigala are covered in mist. The wettest and driest months are October and November and from June to September. The Na Ela, Deva Ela and Malwathu Oya originate from within the Ritigala reserve. A 2008 Biodiversity Baseline Survey presented a proposal to establish the Yan Oya National Park on Ritigala. The proposed park would serve as one of the two corridors for elephant migration between the Kaudulla National Park and the Kahalle Pallekele sanctuary near the Hurulu forest reserve.

Some of the other mammals are the Sloth Bear (*Melursus ursinus*), threatened Leopard (*Panthers pardus kotiya*), endangered Elephant (*Elephant maximus maximus*), Grey Squirrel (*Loris lydekkerianus*), Grey Langur (*Semnopithecus priam*), Jackal (*Canis aureus*), Rusty-spotted Cat (*Prionailurus rubiginosus*), Fishing Cat (*Prionailurus viverrinus*), Striped-necked Mongoose (*Herpestes vitticollis*), Barking Deer (*Muntiacus muntjak*), Spotted Deer (*Axis axis ceylonensis*), Sambar (*Cervus unicolor*), Wild Boar (*Sus scrofa*), Porcupine (*Hystrix indica*), Pangolin (*Mains crassicaudata*) and several species of Bats.

More than 100 species of birds are known to frequent Ritigala, including

the endemic Spot-winged Thrush (*Zosterops lateralis*), Sri Lanka Jungle Fowl (*Gallus lafayettii*) and Sri Lanka Spurrow (*Galloperdix bicalcarata*), The Great Raquet-tailed Drongo (*Dicrus paradiseus ceylonicus*), Grey Hornbill (*Ocyrocerosingalensis*), Malabar Pied Hornbill (*Anthracoceros coronatus*), Blue Faced Malkoha (*Phaenicophaeus viridirostris*), Rufous Woodpecker (*Celeus brachyurus*), Rufous-bellied hawk-eagle (*Hieraetus pennatus*) and Mountain hawk-eagle (*Spizaetus nipalensis*). The Ritigala day gecko is special as it is found only in Ritigala. The reptiles are varied, including geckos, lizards, tortoises and skinks. The snakes that are commonly seen include the python (*Python molurus*), rat snake (*Ptyas mucosus*), Forsten's cat snake (*Boiga forsteni*), Russell's viper (*Viperarusselli*), endemic green pit viper (*Trimeresurus trigonecephalus*), green vine snake (*Ahaetullanusuta*) and brown vine snake (*Ahaetulla pulverulenta*). Some 50 species of butterflies, 20 species of fish and 16 species of snails have also been recorded in Ritigala.

Legends

Legends abound on Ritigala. Medicinal herbs are believed to be found near the crest of the mountain. A herb called "Saneve" in the area is believed to have the power of conferring long life and curing all human pain. According to legends, all vegetation on Ritigala is protected by Yakkas, the guardian spirits of the mountain.

According to popular belief, non-human Lord Hanuman travelled over Ritigala, and by accident, dropped a chunk off a mountain of the Himalaya range he was carrying from India to Lanka for its medicinal herbs.

Lord Hanuman had visited Sri Lanka on a previous occasion. That was when he was sent by Lord Rama in search of his consort Sita. It was King Ravana, who seized Sita from Parnasali in India, the holy hut of Lord Rama and brought her to Asok Vana, a park at Sita Eliyainon a Dundumonara (an air chariot) without touching her. Having found the location where Sita was held, Hanuman made use of the Ritigala mountain as a launching pad to take a leap across to South India. Ritigala is the highest place between the central plains of Sri Lanka and the coast of Southern India.

Ritigala is home to five plant communities, such as dry mixed evergreen forest, disturbed dry mixed evergreen forest, short-stature forest, rock outcrop plant communities and scrub cover. British national Henry Richman has, for the first time, made the world aware of the botanical value in Ritigala mountain which has got 337 varieties of trees out of which 57 are endemic to Sri Lanka. Some of the herbs found in the region are Iraraja, Sndarajawanaraja, Naga MeruAla, Wellangiriya, Bim Kohomba, Pata Makula and Rundhanthi.

The Ritigala mountain is surrounded by 15 boundary villages such as Alagollewa, Muriyakadawala, Sandapagama, Utthupitiya, Senadiriyaagama, Galapitigala, Moragoda, Keeriyagaswewa, Heenukkiriyawa and Ganewalpole, Alapalawewa, Bamunugama, Monarawana Ulpatha, Ganewalpole, Divulwewa, Kaluebe and Thoruwewa, with a population of 10,000.

Recent surveys and studies in the mountain range have revealed illegal felling and unwarranted excavations by treasure hunters.