

Outback snake fossil indicates lizard link

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Australian scientists say the fossil of a snake that lived 30 million years ago has provided yet another insight into reptilian evolution.

The extraordinarily well-preserved snake skull was found in the Australian outback near the mining town of Mount Isa, more than 1,000 miles northwest of Brisbane.

Scientists named the snake Yurlunggur, an aboriginal word for the mythological "Great Rainbow Snake" of the native Australians, the journal *Nature* reported. Yurlunggur, according to aboriginal legend, created Australia's lakes, rivers and water holes and was also a fertility goddess.

John Scanlon, a paleontologist, told *Nature* the skull should help clarify the origin and early evolution of snakes from lizards, an understanding that has eluded researchers because fossilized snake skeletons are extremely fragile and rare.

Scanlon told *The San Francisco Chronicle* the newly discovered skull helps provide "a useful fossil record of extinct primitive snakes, illustrating their transformation from lizards."

Peter Roopnarine, a paleontologist at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, told the newspaper Scanlon's report presents "a nice bridge between the well-known lizards of today and a group of very large snakes that went extinct a long time ago."

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