

New species of giant lizard found in Philippines

April 6 2010



A *Varanus bitatawa*, pictured in 2009 in the Philippines. Scientists reported on the "spectacular" discovery a previously unknown species of fruit-eating lizard as big as a full-grown man. Astonished researchers found the secretive but brightly-coloured beast, a close cousin of the fearsome Komodo Dragons of Indonesia, in a hard-to-reach river valley of northern Luzon Island in the Philippines.

Biologists on Wednesday reported the spectacular discovery of a species of giant lizard, a reptile as long as a full-grown man is tall, and endowed with a double penis.

The secretive but brightly-coloured beast, a monitor lizard, is a close cousin of the [Komodo Dragon](#) of Indonesia.

But unlike the fearsome Dragon, it is not a carnivore, nor does it feast on rotting meat. Instead, it is entirely peaceable and tucks into fruit.

Dubbed *Varanus bitatawa*, the lizard measures two metres (6.5 feet) in

length, according to the account, published by Britain's Royal Society.

It was found in a river valley on northern Luzon Island in the Philippines, surviving loss of habitat and hunting by local people who use it for food.

How many of the lizards have survived is unclear.

The species is almost certainly critically endangered, and might well have disappeared entirely without ever being catalogued had a large male specimen not been rescued alive from a hunter last June.

Finding such a distinctive species in a heavily populated, highly deforested location "comes as an unprecedented surprise," note the authors, writing in the journal *Biology Letters*.

The only finds of comparable importance in recent decades are the Kipunji monkey, which inhabits a tiny range of forest in Tanzania, and the Saola, a forest-dwelling bovine found only in Vietnam and Laos.

V. bitatawa has unique markings and an unusual sexual anatomy, according to the study.

Its scaly body and legs are a blue-black mottled with pale yellow-green dots, while its tail is marked in alternating segments of black and green.

Males have a double penis, called hemipenes, also found in some snakes and other [lizards](#).

The two penises are often used in alternation, and sometimes contain spines or hooks that serve to anchor the male within the female during intercourse.

V. bitatawa has a relative in southern Luzon, V. olivaceus, but the species are separated by three river valleys and a gap of 150 kilometers (95 miles) and may never have met up.

One reason that the new lizard has gone undetected, the researchers speculate, is that it never leaves the forests of its native Sierra Madre mountains to traverse open spaces.

The discovery "adds to the recognition of the Philippines as a global conservation hotspot and a regional superpower of biodiversity," the authors conclude.

The giant lizard should become a "flagship species" for conservation efforts aimed at preserving the remaining forests of northern Luzon, which are rapidly disappearing under the pressure of expanding human population and deforestation.

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Citation: New species of giant lizard found in Philippines (2010, April 6) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-04-species-giant-lizard-philippines.html>

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