

# World's first video footage of Borneo's rare and elusive 'vampire squirrel'

October 22 2015

---

Dr Heiko Wittmer, a specialist in conservation and restoration ecology, has been collaborating with Dr Andrew Marshall from the University of Michigan to investigate species interactions across different habitats in Borneo's Gunung Palung National Park, West Kalimantan, Indonesia.

In June, Dr Wittmer and Dr Marshall installed 35 motion-activated cameras in the park and within a month were "astonished" to discover video footage of the tufted ground squirrel (*Rheithrosciurus macrotis*), which is only found in the rainforests of Borneo.

It is the first time anyone has ever obtained video footage of the squirrel.

The tufted ground squirrel has been dubbed the 'vampire squirrel' after the discovery of deer and chicken carcasses where only the heart and liver had been eaten. Some local Dayak have attributed the attacks to the squirrel, which is one of the few species able to open the hardest of nuts with their teeth.

Dr Wittmer says the legend is unlikely to be true. "I seriously doubt it, we don't have any carnivorous squirrels".

He says the squirrels are more interesting from a scientific perspective for their bushy tails. The squirrel is said to have the bushiest tail of all mammals, with one report estimating the tail to be 130 percent the mass of the rest of the squirrel's body.

Dr Wittmer says the bushy tail has several potential biological functions. "It can likely use the tail to distract and avoid predators, but the [tail](#) may also play a role in communication."

The [video footage](#) shows the [squirrel](#) foraging under a tree. While this does not confirm or deny the vampire theories, Dr Wittmer says it is a reminder of how little we know about many of the rainforest's species.

"These forests are continually being destroyed to make way for [palm oil plantations](#), and this highlights the possibility that we may be losing species that we don't even know about."

The researchers have captured other rare species on film such as clouded leopards, bearded pigs and diminutive mouse-deer that on average have a shoulder height of just 35cm.

Dr Wittmer says the project provides unique data as the cameras operate without human assistance, and so allow researchers to observe animals' behaviour in an undisturbed environment.

"There's also a valuable side objective. We know we have an issue with poaching in the area. With camera footage as evidence, we can start to evaluate if poaching is contributing to the decline of certain [species](#)," he says.

Provided by Victoria University

Citation: World's first video footage of Borneo's rare and elusive 'vampire squirrel' (2015, October 22) retrieved 20 March 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-10-world-video-footage-borneo-rare.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private
---

study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.