

Evidence suggests rare deer lived 50 years beyond 'extinction'

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Researchers analyzed the condition of Schomburgk's deer antlers in the 1991 photo. Credit: Gary Galbreath/Northwestern University

A rare deer species that lived in central Thailand might have come back from the dead—without the help from sci-fi-like genetic engineering.

Schomburgk's [deer](#) (*Rucervus schomburgki*) was added to the extinction list in 1938. But new evidence, gleaned from antlers obtained in late 1990 or early 1991, shows that it survived for at least an additional half century and might still be around today.

The research was published last week (Aug. 30) in the *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society*. Gary Galbreath, professor of biological sciences at Northwestern University's Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences, was involved in the work.

After the wild population died out from overhunting in 1932, the last known Schomburgk's deer died in captivity six years later. Or so we thought. A trucker in Laos found a set of antlers, seemingly in fresh condition, in the early 1990s. He then gave the antlers to a shop in the northern Laos province of Phongsali.

In February 1991, United Nations agronomist Laurent Chazée photographed the antlers. Galbreath and his collaborator G.B. Schroering recently analyzed the antlers' physical condition in those photos. Based on the widely spreading, basket-shaped, hyper-branched structure of the antlers, the team determined the antlers belonged to a Schomburgk's deer. (Other Asian deer's antlers do not have the same signature basket shape.)

Galbreath also confirmed that the antlers were fresh when photographed in 1991. The antlers—spotted with dark red to reddish-brown dried blood—had been excised from the deer's head. The color of the blood and condition of the exposed [bone marrow](#) offered clues into the antlers' age.

"The relative antiquity of the [antler](#) specimens can be assessed by the materials, such as dried marrow, still adhering to them," said Galbreath, an expert in Asian wildlife. "Even the blood was still reddish; it would

become black with increased age. In the tropics, the antlers would not continue to look this way even within a matter of months."

Before they were listed as "extinct," the deer were well documented in Thailand. Galbreath believes a small population probably also lived in a [remote area](#) in central Laos, where they just might still be living today.

More information: *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society*, DOI: [10.17087/jbnhs/2019/v116/142873](https://doi.org/10.17087/jbnhs/2019/v116/142873)

Provided by Northwestern University

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