

Camera-shy deer caught for first time

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A little-known species of deer called a large-antlered muntjac has been photographed for the first time in the wild, according to a survey team from the Nam Theun 2 Watershed Management and Protection Authority (WMPA) and the Wildlife Conservation Society.

The deer, previously known only from specimens collected by hunters and a few fleeting glimpses by biologists, stands approximately 25-30 inches tall (65-80 cm) and weighs up to 110 pounds (50 kilograms). Its namesake antlers are significantly larger than other muntjac species found in Indochina.

The photographs were taken using “camera traps” set in Laos’ Nakai Nam Theun National Protected Area (NNT NPA), in the Annamite Mountains. This densely forested mountain chain straddles the Laos-Vietnam border and is considered one of the world's biodiversity ‘hotspots.’ The cameras were set by staff of the WMPA, a new institution established by the Lao government to manage the more than 1,500 square miles of (4,000 square kilometer) protected area, using revenues from the nearby Nam Theun 2 hydroelectric dam, currently under construction. The protected area forms most of the dam's watershed, and is the largest protected area in Laos or Vietnam. The camera traps were set and monitored by teams (including local villagers) trained by the Wildlife Conservation Society, which has been contracted by the WMPA to help establish a biodiversity monitoring program to evaluate the effectiveness of its conservation efforts.

Mr. Sangthong Southammakoth, Executive Director of the WMPA, said

“We are very excited about these photos. They show the global significance of the Nakai-Nam Theun National Protected Area, and reinforce the importance of our work.”

Along with several photographs of large-antlered muntjacs was a single photograph of the Annamite striped rabbit, one of the world's rarest and least-known members of the rabbit/hare family. Both species are found only in the Annamites. The large-antlered muntjac was discovered in the early 1990s, when researchers in Laos and Vietnam simultaneously noted its distinctive antlers in the homes of local hunters. Researchers first discovered the rabbit in a fresh food market in Laos, in a small town near Nakai-Nam Theun, by a biologist working for WCS, Robert Timmins (Timmins was also involved in the discovery of the muntjac). The rabbit was subsequently photographed a few times in Vietnam, but this is the first wild photograph from Laos.

“This region is extraordinary for its distinctive wildlife,” said Dr. Arlyne Johnson, co-director of the WCS Lao Program, “We are delighted to be working with the WMPA to ensure a future for not only the large-antlered muntjac and Annamite striped rabbit, but the many other rare species that call this globally important region their home.”

Despite previous camera-trapping efforts in the large-antlered muntjac's presumed range in Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, no previous wild photographs of the animal are known. Yet the effort in Nakai-Nam Theun yielded more than ten photographs of the species from several localities. The results indicate that Nakai-Nam Theun is a global stronghold for this threatened animal.

Nakai-Nam Theun is home to several other endangered animals, such as the extremely rare saola – an antelope-like animal, also discovered in the 1990s and known only from the Annamites – plus tigers, Asian elephants, and what is considered one of the world's most beautiful

monkeys, the red-shanked douc. Recent surveys identified what are thought to be more new species of animals and plants, but this awaits verification.

One of the WMPA's responsibilities is enforcement against poaching of wildlife, with patrol teams (again, incorporating local residents) trained in part by the Wildlife Conservation Society. Three days after the rabbit was photographed, the same camera in the same place photographed two hunters carrying guns, equipped for night-time poaching. "Hunting in Laos is a long standing tradition," said Mr. Sangthong, "but people must respect the laws that our government has put in place to protect the county's valuable wildlife." The WMPA is investigating the case.

Source: Wildlife Conservation Society

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