

Discovered

Scientists Confirm That Huge Lizard In Forested Mountains Of The Philippines Is A New Species

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In this April 2006 photo released by National Museum of the Philippines, a golden-spotted monitor lizard rests on a tree trunk in the Sierra Madre mountains, Philippines. Scientists said in Wednesday, April 7, 2010's Royal Society journal *Biology Letters* that they have discovered a 6.5-foot (2-meter) long golden-spotted monitor lizard, named *Varanus bitatawa*, in the forested mountains of the Philippines. (AP Photo/National Museum of the Philippines, Arvin C. Diesmos) (CBS)

(AP) Researchers have concluded that a giant, golden-spotted monitor lizard discovered in the forested mountains of the Philippines six years ago is a new species, according to a study released Wednesday.

The 6.5-foot (2-meter) - long lizard was first spotted in 2004 in the Sierra Madre mountains on the main island of Luzon when local researchers saw local Agta tribesmen carrying one of the dead reptiles.

But it took until last year to determine it was a new species. After capturing an adult, researchers from the University of Kansas and the National Museum of the Philippines obtained DNA samples that helped confirm the lizard was new to science.

The Northern Sierra Madre Forest Monitor Lizard or *Varanus bitatawa* feasts on fruits and snails rather than carcasses, unlike many monitors, including its larger relative, the Komodo dragon, according to American and Filipino researchers who wrote about the discovery in Wednesday's peer-reviewed Royal Society journal *Biology Letters*. It spends much of its time in the treetops and has unique claws that allow it to reach its favorite fruits.

"I knew as soon as I saw the animal that it was something special," Luke Welton, a graduate student at the University of Kansas and one of the co-authors of the study, said in a statement.

It is not that unusual to find a new species of tiny fish, frog or insect these days. But Welton and his colleagues said it was a "rare occurrence" to discover such a large vertebrate, particularly on an island hit by deforestation and nearby development. They compared their find to the 1993 discovery of the forest-dwelling Saola ox in Vietnam and a new monkey species discovered in the highlands of Tanzania in 2006.

"The discovery of such a large, charismatic, and strikingly distinct new species of vertebrate in the unexplored forests of the northern Philippines accentuates the degree to which the diversity of this global conservation hotspot is still poorly known," Mundita Lim, chief of the country's Department of Environment and Natural Resources Protected Areas and Wildlife Bureau, said in a statement.

Eric R. Pianka, a lizard expert at the University of Texas at Austin, said in an e-mail interview that it was an "incredible find."

"This is truly a spectacular discovery," Pianka said. "Worldwide, there are about 60-plus species of monitor lizards. In all probability, some as yet undescribed species will be found on various islands in Indonesia," he said.

The new lizard is related to two other fruit-eating monitors in the Philippines, all of which have seen their numbers drop significantly due habitat destruction, as well as hunting and trapping for the pet trade.

"We hope that by focusing on protection of this new monitor, conservation biologists and policy makers can work together to protect the remaining highly imperiled forests of northern Luzon," Rafe Brown, leader of the team that discovered the new species and curator of herpetology at the University of Kansas, said in a statement.