Beat: News

Snake species lost for 80 years found on remote Mexican island

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USPA News - A mysterious species of snake that was not seen for nearly 80 years and later scrapped from the scientific record after scientists were unable to find it has been re-discovered on a remote Mexican island in the Pacific Ocean, scientists said on Tuesday. The Clarion nightsnake, a nocturnal reptilian species, was first discovered by naturalist William Beebe in 1936 during his expedition to western Mexico.

Beebe had only found a single specimen and documented his findings in writings, but the species was able to elude scientists for decades during subsequent field studies, leading scientists to nullify the discovery. Inspired by the story, researcher Daniel Mulcahy of the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. began to study the sole specimen recovered by Beebe, but DNA tests were inconclusive to determine whether the snake represented a new species. He then decided to venture into the field using Beebe`s writings as a guide to find the lost nightsnake. In May 2013, a team led by Mulcahy and Juan Martínez-Gómez, an expert on the Revillagigedo Islands at the Institute of Ecology in Xalapa, embarked on their journey to retrace Beebe`s steps on Clarion Island, which is the second largest and most remote island of the Revillagigedo Islands, more than 700 kilometers (435 miles) off the Mexican mainland. After an intensive search, the team identified 11 snakes that matched Beebe`s description and conducted a series of DNA tests in the United States. As a result of those tests, the team was able to confirm the existence of the elusive Clarion nightsnake, which has now been recognized as being genetically distinct from other snakes. "The rediscovery of the Clarion nightsnake is an incredible story of how scientists rely on historical data and museum collections to solve modern-day mysteries about biodiversity in the world we live in," Mulcahy said. "Proper identification is the first step toward conserving this snake, and we plan to continue monitoring this species to learn more about the role it plays in the delicate Clarion Island ecosystem." >From what is now known, the Clarion nightsnake lives on black lava rock habitat near the waters of Sulphur Bay on Clarion Island and grows to be approximately 18 inches (45.7 centimeters) long. The snakes are brownish black in color and have a characteristic series of darker spots on their head and neck. The scientists said the snake`s secretive, nocturnal behavior and dark coloration played a key role as to why the snake had appeared to have vanished from the face of the Earth. Another factor was the nightsnake`s extremely remote home, which is only accessible by military escort and requires permits from Mexico`s natural resources and interior ministries, thereby significantly restricting the number of biologists who can access the area. The Clarion nightsnake is believed to have originally originated from the dispersal of an ancestor that traveled by sea from a river basin in the Mexican state of Sonora to Clarion. And while current populations of the species appear to be viable, the snake`s fragile ecosystem is threatened by invasive species such as feral cats on neighboring islands. These cats prey on lizards, which are likely a main food source for the Clarion nightsnake.

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