



Lunching ranger discovers species lost for 40 years

In 1975 two conservationists discovered a gorgeous salamander in the rainforests of Guatemala. No one ever saw it again - and Jackson's climbing salamander was feared extinct - until last month when local forest guard, Ramos León-Tomás, sat down in the forest for lunch.

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The last time anyone saw Jackson's climbing salamander - I didn't yet exist. It was 1975: Margaret Thatcher took over leadership of the Tories, Saigon fell to Communist forces, the USSR was still a thing, and everyone was listening to Queen's Bohemian Rhapsody. And in Guatemala, reeling from over a decade of civil war, two American conservationists found a little treasure of black and gold: they named it Jackson's climbing salamander. Then it vanished as if it had never been.

Forty-two years later a lot has changed. The world is hotter than it has been in over 100,000 years and species are vanishing at rates that portend mass extinction. Yet, miracles can still happen.

Last month, Ramos León-Tomás, a 27-year-old guard from the Q'anjob'al Mayan community, was having lunch on the edges of the the Finca San Isidro Amphibian Reserve when he found what

dozens of previous surveys could not - a small juvenile salamander, black and gold.

León-Tomás took several pictures and sent them on to Carlos Vásquez Almazán, the amphibian coordinator with the Foundation for Ecodevelopment and Conservation (FUNDAECO).

“I took [deep breaths] for a couple of hours, until they managed to send me a photo through WhatsApp, because the region is remote and there is little good internet signal,” Vásquez said, who’d visited the reserve more than 30 times to look for the species. “It was definitely the sought-after and awaited Jackson’s climbing salamander.”

Earlier in the year, Vásquez had again visited the reserve in the Cuchumatanes Mountains and did a workshop for forest guards like Leon-Tomas on the missing salamander.

“I explained to them how important this species is and I left a poster there so they could see a picture of the Jackson’s climbing salamander every single day,” Vásquez said.



The rediscovered Jackson's climbing salamander. Photograph: Carlos Vásquez Almazán

Amazingly, the species was rediscovered just six months after Global Wildlife Conservation (GWC) launched a campaign announcing that it would be searching for 25 lost species in coming years. On that list: Jackson’s climbing salamander.

“The salamander grew to iconic status, its profile elevated by every unsuccessful expedition to find it,” explained Robin Moore, Communications Director at GWC. An expert on amphibians, Moore is well known for spearheading the Search for Lost Frogs in 2010. In 2014, he joined an unsuccessful expedition looking for Jackson’s climbing salamander.

“I got chills,” he said of seeing León-Tomás’ photos of the lost species for the first time. “In addition to being a phenomenal rediscovery of a beautiful and unique salamander, it marked the icing on a conservation success story.”

The success is all the more poignant because it was achieved by a humble, local forest guard. León-Tomás says he felt “very enthusiastic” when he saw the salamander. Describing himself as a “poor person with children,” he hopes the discovery will bring more support to the rangers of Finca San Isidro Amphibian Reserve.

So how did this tiny salamander avoid detection for so long? It turns out scientists might have been looking in the wrong places. León-Tomás found the single salamander - a juvenile - nearly

1,000 feet higher in altitude than researchers expected based on where the only other two individuals of the species were found in 1975.

Researchers theorise that climate change may have pushed the species upslope, a phenomenon that has been documented for many species worldwide who are moving higher to escape the heat - assuming they have a place to move to.



Jackson's climbing salamander. Photograph: Carlos Vásquez Almazán

Vásquez says it's "premature" to start theorising about how many Jackson's climbing salamanders may be left. What needs to happen now, according to him, are surveys to find more. Still given that only three individuals have ever been found in the last 42 years, it's likely the species is threatened with extinction. The biggest threat, according to Vásquez, is deforestation for coffee plantations, corn, and firewood. It's currently unknown if Jackson's climbing salamander has been hit by chytridiomycosis, an amphibian fungal disease that has caused the extinction of several amphibians in recent decades.

In the meantime, conservationists hope to expand the existing reserve to cover the higher elevations that may house this super-rare species. In January, a new expedition led by the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology of University of California at Berkeley will head to the park to look for more specimens.

Finca San Isidro Amphibian Reserve (also known as the Yal Unin Yul Witz Reserve) was founded in 2015 in part because conservationists hoped Jackson's climbing salamander would come back from the dead. Four other rare amphibians are found here: the long-limbed salamander, Finca Chiblac salamander, the black-eyed treefrog and Cuchumatan golden toad - only described by researchers in 2012.

GWC will not immediately replace Jackson's climbing salamander on their list of 25 Lost Species - though they will at some point down the road.

"We still have our work cut out on the planning for 24 further expeditions," Moore noted.

One down. Two dozen to go. Hopefully, more miracles await.