

MENTAL FLOSS

ANIMALS

5 Rediscovered Species That Made Headlines In 2017

BY MARK MANCINI

JANUARY 1, 2018

We all thought they might be goners. Some of 2017's best feel-good stories involved the sudden, dramatic reappearances of ultra-rare animals. One long-lost salamander crawled past a park ranger. In Australia, a little marsupial made a huge splash. And a husband/wife team identified a moth species which hadn't been seen since the Gilded Age. Here are five thought-to-be-extinct species that were rediscovered in 2017.

1. ORIENTAL BLUE CLEARWING



MARTA SKOWRON VOLPONI

Sometimes, the best defense is a great disguise. The oriental blue clearwing is a Malaysian moth that resembles a few of the bees and wasps in its native area. To pass itself off as a stinging insect, the creature's evolved a bee-like color pattern. It also makes an ominous buzzing noise while flying. The species first came to scientific light in 1887, when a dead specimen was collected and shipped off to the Natural History Museum in Vienna. For 130 years, no other specimens—living or deceased—were reported. As such, scientists had no way of knowing if the oriental blue clearwing had succumbed to extinction. But now, the mystery has been put to rest.

Marta Skowron Viloconi is a Polish entomologist ("insect expert") at the University of Gdansk. Between 2013 and 2017, she and her husband, Paolo, photographed a handful of live oriental blue clearwings in southern Malaysia. After a DNA test confirmed that they had, indeed, rediscovered this long-lost species, the Viloconis announced their big find to the world in a paper published on November 24, 2017.

2. VANZOLINI'S BALD-FACED SAKI



A rare, New World monkey, the Vanzolini's bald-faced saki monkey is exceptionally good at playing hide and seek. Scientists first identified the dark-haired species in 1936, then it fell off our collective radar. While some dead specimens turned up in 1956, no confirmed sightings of a live monkey were made until this past February.

Ten months ago, a team set out to find proof of the Vanzolini's bald-faced saki's continued existence. Included in the quest were seven primatologists, multiple guides, some photographers, and even a couple of drone operators. Using a two-story houseboat as their mobile base of operations, the crew traveled through the Amazon basin. Their efforts were rewarded with multiple saki encounters along the Juruá, Tarauacá, and Liberdade Rivers.

Unfortunately, the team was also reminded of the manmade challenges facing this species: There's an abundance of logging sites within the animal's current range and some local communities harvest monkey meat on a regular basis. As primatologist Laura Marsh, who headed the expedition, put it, "if no further controls on hunting and forest clearing are put into place... the saki's conservation status may become critical."

3. CREST-TAILED MULGARA



PUBLIC DOMAIN, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Like many Australian critters, crest-tailed mulgaras have suffered at the hands of invasive animals. The tiny, rodent-like marsupials are now at the mercy of cats, foxes, and other introduced species. Fossil evidence tells us that the mulgaras used to be a common sight Down Under, but those foreign mammals really drove their numbers down. Although a living population is at large in the state of South Australia, it was assumed that the creature must've long-since died out in neighboring New South Wales.

Happily, this isn't the case. On December 15, the University of New South Wales, Sydney sent out a press release confirming that—for the first time in recorded history—a crest-tailed mulgara had been found within state lines. Specifically, a lone female was caught in Sturt National Park by a research team affiliated with the school. After taking some measurements, the scientists set her free.

4. JACKSON'S CLIMBING SALAMANDER



CARLOS VASQUEZ ALMAZAN

During a 1975 expedition into the forests of Guatemala, herpetologists Paul Elias and Jeremy Jackson discovered three then-unknown salamander species. One of these, the Jackson's climbing salamander, was a vibrant yellow creature whose appearance earned it the nickname "golden wonder." Yet, eye-catching as it is, the animal has proven quite elusive. In fact, after Jackson and Elias identified the critter in '75, nobody would see one again for another 42 years. The situation looked especially hopeless in 2014, when Jackson and Elias themselves went on a follow-up trip through the same area. Though they carefully retraced the steps they'd taken decades earlier, not a single "golden wonder" was spotted this time.

Then along came a park ranger on a lunch break. In 2015, an international group known as Global Wildlife Conservation (GWC) helped establish the Finca San Isidro Amphibian Reserve in western Guatemala. Earlier this year, one of the rangers there—27-year old Ramos León-Tomás—was taking a break when he noticed an attractive yellow salamander. He photographed it and sent the pictures off to herpetologist Carlos Vasquez for identification. Sure enough, it was a Jackson's climbing salamander. According to CBS Miami, León-Tomás "hopes the historic find will bring added recognition and pay for the guards at the reserve."

5. TÁCHIRA ANTPITTA

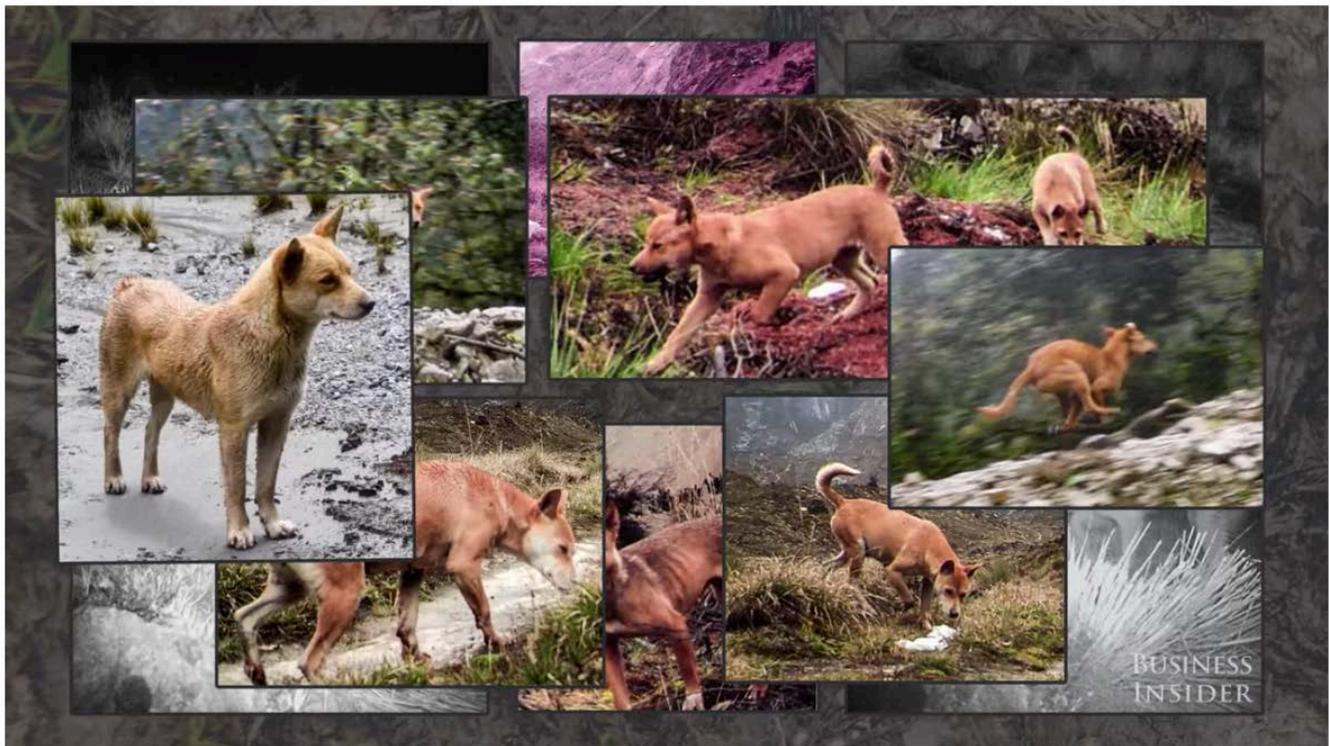


JHONATHAN MIRANDA

For the record, that's pronounced "TAH-chee-rah ant-pit-ah." It's a little brown songbird named after a state in Venezuela. In 1955 and 1956, ornithologists discovered this species near the country's Colombian border, and that's the last anyone saw of it for a long while. Because no other sightings or encounters were announced over the following six decades, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) labeled the Táchira antpitta "critically endangered."

This year, though, we learned about a 2016 expedition that verified that the species hasn't perished. The trip in question was orchestrated by an international conservation partnership called the Red Siskin Initiative. Led by biologist Jhonathan Miranda, the team set out to find living specimens of near-extinct birds in western Venezuela. On the first full day of their trip, the team hit the jackpot when they became the first people to identify a Táchira antpitta's distinctive cry since 1956. Later on, the explorers managed to photograph one of the birds. Altogether, they spotted two individuals and heard a total of four.

BONUS: THE NEW GUINEA HIGHLAND WILD DOG



A lot of controversy surrounds this animal. Scientists can't reach a consensus on how the New Guinea highland wild dog should be classified. Some say it's a valid canine species, others regard it as merely a dingo subspecies, and still others write off the creature as a primitive domestic dog breed.

In any event, the pooch is world famous for its weird, high-pitched howl. The first western scientist to learn of its existence was English zoologist Charles Walter Di Vis, who came across one on Mount Scratchley in Papua New Guinea back in 1897. A handful of these dogs were exported in the 1950s and today, captive-bred specimens can be found in zoos from Neumünster, Germany to Kansas City, Missouri.

But what happened to their wild counterparts? One free-roaming individual was photographed on New Guinea's Star Mountains in 1989. However, no other verified encounters with these dogs in their natural habitat were made until September 2016, when researchers used camera traps to snag 140 photographs of a wild group of at least 15 canines. The participating adventurers also documented paw prints and gathered fecal material. News of their findings was broken in a March 24, 2017 press release from the New Guinea Highland Wild Dog Foundation, a nonprofit activist group.