

Animal Holy Grail: Find Toro

Researchers are using cherry lollipops to try and lure the elusive mammal.

*Photo: The Toro (*Santamartamys rufodorsalis*). Credit: Lizzie Noble, Global Wildlife Conservation*

A fuzzy, reddish-hued [rodent](#) known as the Santa Marta Toro, or the Toro for short, is one of the most wanted animals alive.

The Toro (*Santamartamys rufodorsalis*) was thought to have been extinct for 113 years before one was spotted on the porch of a Colombian ecotourism lodge in 2011. Captivated by this animal holy grail, Nicolette Roach, an associate research scientist at [Global Wildlife Conservation](#) and a doctoral student at Texas A&M University, is leading a search this summer for the elusive rodent.

"I believe the Toro is likely both rare and shy, making it all the more difficult to find and study," Roach told Discovery News.

Since the lodge where the Toro was rediscovered -- the El Dorado Reserve -- is located in the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta in northeastern Colombia, Roach and her team are camped out there. The search happens both day and night for the Toro, which is thought to be a member of the Echimyidae family of spiny rats. It is one of the most poorly understood small [mammal](#) families.

"They are notoriously difficult to study due to their elusive nature and life history strategies -- some are completely arboreal, nocturnal, and solitary," Roach said, adding that anecdotal sightings of the Toro have happened when clearing the Colombian forest for coffee farming.

Instead of [coffee](#), the researchers are using cherry-flavored [lollipops](#) to lure their prize.

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"Nobody knows exactly what the Toro eats, but based on dentition, and discussion with other biologists at the reserve, (it) probably eats fruits and maybe invertebrates too," Roach said.

One of the biologists who initially rediscovered the shy rodent, Sam Waller, suggested that Roach use cherry lollipops as lure. Aside from the well-known sweet tooth of rodents, Roach explained, "Because we are not live trapping, it was easy to tie lollipops to trees and replace them when necessary."

Thus far, the lollipops have attracted the attention of sweets-loving [squirrels](#), but no Toro yet.

If the scientists do find one, they hope to collect some harmless samples like hair and saliva. Roach said that only three known specimens of this species exist in the American Museum of Natural History, so any information on it would be an immense help toward understanding its basic life history and ecology.

Paul Salaman, a scientist from the Rainforest Trust who confirmed the identity of the species, said, "The El Dorado Nature Reserve represents the ultimate Noah's Ark, protecting the last populations of many critically endangered

and endemic flora and fauna; a living treasure trove like no other on Earth."

Roach can attest to that. One of the sites that she visited was full of breeding *Atelopus laetissimus*, a critically endangered frog native to the area. She and her team also found a rare [margay](#) (*Leopardus wiedii*) sitting in a tree. They watched the small spotted wild cat for 20 minutes.

"It is one of the most beautiful animals I have seen," Roach said. "Prior to our sighting, it had never been officially recorded on the El Dorado reserve."

The team also has daily -- and often nightly -- encounters with what she calls "gorgeous" moths, insects and spiders from the region, including a [tarantula](#) (*Kankuono marquezii*) whose species was only just documented recently.

As the summer rolls on, so does the search for the Toro.

"While we have not found the Toro yet, I remain hopeful," Roach said. "Now that I have talked with local people and conducted preliminary surveys, I have a better understanding of the region and I plan to return next year with more equipment, as well as revised survey methods." SEE PHOTOS BELOW:

Santa Marta Toro



Researchers are now on the hunt for the elusive Santa Marta Toro (*Santamartamys rufodorsalis*), a fuzzy reddish-brown rodent that was thought to have been extinct for 113 years before it was rediscovered in the jungles of [Colombia](#) in 2011. Only a handful of images exist for the elusive Toro; this is the clearest one.

Photo: One of a handful of known photographs of the Santa Marta Toro (Santamartamys rufodorsalis). Credit: Lizzie Noble, Global Wildlife Conservation