

## Researchers on the hunt for adorable rodent thought extinct for 113 years

*The Santa Marta Toro, assumed for a century to be long gone, is now the subject of a new investigation.*



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August 10, 2016, 8:31 a.m.



Santa Marta Toro, or red-crested tree rat, is an extraordinarily rare species. (Photo: Lizzie Noble)

Imagine you're a scientist and you're hanging out in this beautiful little ecotourism lodge called the El Dorado Nature Reserve in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in Colombia, one of the most biologically diverse locations in the world. You look over and see a medium-bodied rodent, of a sort of reddish color, curled up on the patio's banister. And you realize you're looking at an animal that has been seen only twice before by scientists, and that was well over a century ago.

This is what happened to a group of biologists on May 4, 2011, when a juvenile Santa Marta Toro, also called the [red-crested tree rat](#), decided that a wooden railing at the lodge was a nice place to relax for a couple hours.

According to the researchers who [wrote the paper](#) on the rediscovery, "This species was previously known only from the holotype

collected in 1898 and another specimen with an uncertain collection date, both found in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. This account represents the first known documented encounter of a live individual of the species in the wild and addresses its conservation needs."

Their patio-side sighting [made news](#) around the world, but efforts to find individuals of the species using camera traps and Sherman traps have so far ended without success.

But that all might change. Conservation biologist Nikki Roach has launched another effort to search for this small, adorable and frustratingly elusive rodent and with luck and a good deal of indefatigable determination, learn something about its life. Her work is in conjunction with ProAves, Rainforest Trust, and Global Wildlife Conservation.

Roach [notes](#), "We will be searching for the toro conducting nocturnal spotlight surveys throughout the El Dorado reserve and surrounding sites. We will also attempt camera trapping again. We hope to talk with local farmers and indigenous groups about the Toro and gain insight into the region using local ecological knowledge."

Local ecological knowledge is key when looking for particular species, because it utilizes what people living and working in the area already know to target where to look. The downside to this approach is that there's a good deal of sorting through rumor and false sightings. Even with this challenge, Roach's work has already drummed up a few leads and she has used the information to set camera traps.

"While we have not found the toro yet, I remain hopeful. I have met Colombians who have seen the toro, and for a species that remained hidden for more than 100 years, I take this as a good sign," [says](#) Roach.

You can follow Roach's adventures searching for the Toro on [her blog](#), and root for her and her team in spotting more of these adorable red rodents in the wild.