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Extinction Countdown

Stare into the Soulful Eyes of this Newly Discovered Dwarf Lemur Species

The Ankarana dwarf lemur weighs about as much as a banana and lives in a highly restricted habitat

By John R. Platt on January 19, 2017



Credit: "A New Species of Dwarf Lemur (*Cheirogaleidae: Cheirogaleus medius* Group) from the Ankarana and Andrafiarana-Andavakoera Massifs, Madagascar" by Cynthia L. Frasier et al, in *Primate Conservation*, 2016

A tiny lemur species with big, soulful eyes has been discovered in the forests of northern Madagascar.

As described in the journal *Primate Conservation*, the Ankarana or Sheth's dwarf lemur (*Cheirogaleus shethi*) weighs a little over 100 grams, has a body length of just 12 centimeters (plus a

tail of about 16 centimeters), and has tiny hands that probably wouldn't even wrap about a human finger.

Most importantly, it has DNA that sets it apart from other dwarf lemurs, a somewhat controversial group of species that are hard to study in the wild due to their arboreal, nocturnal natures and which are barely represented in museum samples. Previous papers actually have described this particular dwarf lemur, but this new paper details the first genetic tests that reveal it as a separate species.

This paper also suggests that other dwarf lemur species may remain to be discovered. "This research reminds us that there is unaccounted genetic diversity within this group and that more species may be described as we sample more locations in Madagascar," says Marina Blanco, a postdoctoral associate with the [Duke Lemur Center](#), who has studied dwarf lemurs and another group of small primates called mouse lemurs (she was not affiliated with the new paper).

Researchers have yet to determine population estimates for the Ankarana dwarf lemur, but they do know that its habitat exists in a very delicate balance. The species lives in isolated portions of a national park, a reserve, and a protected area, but those zones don't offer much actual protection. As the authors note, local "communities rely on forests for their daily needs, and the extraction of resources at this intensity negatively affects biodiversity" such as the dwarf lemur. In addition, the three observed population sites for the species are all disconnected and may lack the connectivity necessary to allow genetic flow between them.

This discovery is yet another reminder that the number of known lemur species keeps growing, even as the total number of all lemurs declines due to deforestation, hunting, climate change, the illegal pet trade and a variety of other threats. "It is a frightening combination of circumstances to be presented with," says Tara Clarke, co-director of the conservation organization [Lemur Love](#), who was not associated with the new paper. "My hope is that these new discoveries inspire, motivate and mobilize conservation action and funding to protect and preserve the island's remaining biodiversity."

That potential motivation can't come quickly enough. About 94 percent of all lemur species—which only exist on Madagascar—are now threatened and many are considered to be endangered or critically endangered, according to [Global Wildlife Conservation](#), one of the organizations which supported this

research. The new species was named after GWC's chairman, investor and philanthropist Brian Sheth, who has funded numerous research projects and the establishment of nature reserves in Madagascar.

Each discovery like this one puts us a little bit closer to reversing the trend, especially for the little-studied dwarf lemurs. "To know how, when and why dwarf lemurs occupied this region can help us understand not only their biogeographic history but also the potential for their long-term survival," says Blanco.

The views expressed are those of the author(s) and are not necessarily those of Scientific American.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)



John R. Platt

Twice a week, John Platt shines a light on endangered species from all over the globe, exploring not just why they are dying out but also what's being done to rescue them from oblivion.

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