

Brilliant blue tarantula among potentially new species discovered in Guyana

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- *In the forests of the Potaro plateau of Guyana, scientists have discovered a bright blue tarantula that is likely new to science.*
- *The discovery was part of a larger biodiversity assessment survey of the Kaieteur Plateau and Upper Potaro area of Guyana, within the Pakaraima Mountains range.*
- *Overall, the team uncovered more than 30 species that are potentially new to science, and found several species that are known only from the Kaieteur Plateau-Upper Potaro region and nowhere else.*

While walking through the forests of Guyana's Potaro Plateau one night in 2014, herpetologist Andrew Snyder noticed a flash of bright cobalt blue peeking out of hole in a rotting tree stump. When Snyder took a closer look, he noticed that his flashlight had illuminated a small tarantula's blue legs. The tree stump had numerous small holes, and nearly every hole housed a similar blue tarantula.

"I have spent years conducting surveys in Guyana ... and I immediately knew that this one was unlike any species I have encountered before," Snyder wrote recently. "Prior to this, I had only ever encountered individual tarantulas, either outside of a burrow like with the Goliath Bird-eaters, walking through the leaf-litter, or clinging to the sides of trees."

While the blue tarantula is yet to be formally described, it is most likely new to science, Snyder added.



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Forests and rivers of the Kaieteur. Photo by Andrew Snyder.

The tarantula is not the only potentially new species to be discovered on the Potaro Plateau during the 2014 survey. Snyder was part of a larger Biodiversity Assessment Team (BAT) that had gone to the Kaieteur Plateau and Upper Potaro area of Guyana, within the Pakaraima Mountains range, to survey the region's largely undocumented plant and animal diversity. The team consisted of Guyanese and international scientists, Guyanese students and local Patamona Amerindian community members.

Overall, the BAT uncovered more than 30 species that are likely new to science, according to a report published last week by WWF Guianas, The University of Guyana, the Protected Areas Commission and Global Wildlife Conservation.

These include three plants, six species of fish, a frog, and a few dragonflies and beetles. Many species the team recorded, such as the Kaieteur golden rocket frog (*Anomaloglossus beebei*) and the Groete Creek carrying frog (*Stefania evansi*), are known only from the Potaro plateau and nowhere else. The region is also home to several charismatic species such as the jaguar (*Panthera onca*), Guianan cock of the rock (*Rupicola rupicola*), and the white-lipped peccary (*Tayassu pecari*).

"This rapid inventory was able to provide an important glimpse into this special area and habitats," Snyder wrote, "though more work is necessary to shed light on all of the region's secrets."



The species-rich region, however, is threatened by ongoing gold and diamond mining. "Today, mining continues in the Upper Potaro region, and even within the Park [Kaieteur National Park] and its buffer zone," the authors write in the report.

The effects of gold mining are not limited to clearing of land. Mining, especially for gold, has increased turbidity levels of the Potaro river, the authors add, while the mercury used to separate gold from other materials also ends up in the river, contaminating it.

"Deforestation and water pollution, which result from mining activities occurring upstream, threaten both the safe freshwater resources of the local communities, as well as habitats and biodiversity- both outside and within the park," the report warns.



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Local communities heavily rely on healthy rivers and forests of the Kaieteur and Upper Potaro area in Guyana for their wellbeing. Photo by Andrew Snyder.



This undescribed tarantula was found as part of a biodiversity survey in the Potaro plateau of Guyana. Photo by Andrew Snyder.

Article published by Shreya Dasgupta