

Scientist: World's smallest snake in Barbados

By DAVID McFADDEN, Associated Press Writer Sun Aug 3, 7:48 PM ET

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico - A U.S. scientist said Sunday he has discovered the globe's tiniest species of snake in the easternmost Caribbean island of Barbados, with full-grown adults typically stretching less than 4 inches (10 centimeters) long.

S. Blair Hedges, an evolutionary biologist at Penn State University whose research teams also have discovered the world's tiniest lizard in the Dominican Republic and the smallest frog in Cuba, said the snake was found slithering beneath a rock near a patch of Barbadian forest.

Hedges said the tiny-tittle-holding snake, which is so diminutive it can curl up on a U.S. quarter, is the smallest of the roughly 3,100 known snake species. It will be introduced to the scientific world in the journal "Zootaxa" on Monday.

"New and interesting species are still being discovered on Caribbean islands, despite the very small amount of natural forests remaining," said Hedges, who christened the miniature brown snake "Leptotyphlops carlae" after his herpetologist wife, Carla Ann Hass.

The Barbadian snake apparently eats termites and insect larvae, but nothing is yet known of its ecology and behavior. Genetic tests identified the snake as a new species, according to Hedges. It is not venomous.

Zoologist Roy McDiarmid, curator of amphibians and reptiles at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, said he has seen a specimen of the diminutive creature. He saw no reason to argue with the assertion that it is the world's smallest snake.

McDiarmid said the Barbados creature is a type of thread snake, also called worm snake, which are mostly found in the tropics. "We really know very little about these things," he said in a Sunday telephone interview from his Virginia home.

Finding the globe's tiniest snake demonstrates the remarkable diversity of the ecologically delicate Caribbean. It also illustrates a fundamental ecological principle: Since Darwin's days, scientists have noticed that islands often are home to both oversized and miniaturized beasts.

Hedges said the world's smallest bird species, the bee hummingbird, can be found in Cuba. The globe's second-smallest snake lives in Martinique. At the other end of the scale, one of the largest swallowtail butterflies lives in Jamaica.

Scientists say islands often host odd-sized creatures because they're usually inhabited by a less diverse set of species than continents. So island beasts and insects often grow or shrink to fill ecological roles that otherwise would be filled by entirely different species.



In this photo taken in 2006 and released on Sunday, Aug. 3, 2008, by U.S. scientist S. Blair Hedges, an evolutionary biologist at Penn State University, the globe's tiniest snake is shown curled up on a U.S. quarter. Hedges said Sunday he has discovered the globe's tiniest species of snake in the easternmost Caribbean island of Barbados, with full-grown adults typically less than four inches (10 centimeters) long. He named the diminutive snake 'Leptotyphlops carlae' after his herpetologist wife, Carla Ann Hass. (AP Photo/Penn State University, S. Blair Hedges)



When size matters

Date August 08, 2008
by BRYAN WALKER

A CREATURE less than four inches (ten centimetres) long has given Barbados a whole lot of global mileage over the past week.

But while American scientist and herpetologist Professor S. Blair Hedges announced to the world on Monday he had "discovered" earth's tiniest snake - as thin as a spaghetti noodle - in the eastern part of the island, Barbadians were saying it was no discovery at all.

Hedges' revelation, first published in the journal *Zootaxa* on Monday and then picked up by numerous media networks and websites worldwide, stated the reptile, which lives in forested areas and feeds primarily on the larvae of ants and termites, was the only one of its kind, out of more than 3 000 snake species.

He has named the "discovered" species *Leptotyphlops carlae* - after his herpetologist wife Carla Ann Hass.

Hedges, who has been credited with discovering the world's smallest frog and co-discovery of the smallest lizard on an island off the coast of the Dominican Republic in 2001, said he made the find in June 2006 on a four-day visit.

"Because of the area of research, I kind of know how to look for these things," he told the WEEKEND NATION in a telephone interview from his office at Penn State University in Pennsylvania.

He added that accompanied by his wife, he drove to St Joseph and St John and after some searching, found one snake "under a rock".

"We drove around the island but found no more. Then on the last day we found one [more]."

The scientist said he returned home with the preserved specimens, after getting all the relevant permits from the then Ministry of Energy and the Environment.

This was confirmed by officials in that ministry on Wednesday.

Hedges added it took two years, including DNA testing and comparison with snakes from other islands, before his work could be published.

The professor said the snake was so rare, there were only five specimens collected in museums around the world.

However, Damon Corrie, the man who led the hunt two years ago for a number of large, non-poisonous snakes thought to be loose on the island, said this was no "discovery" at all.

Corrie, founder/president of the Caribbean Herpetological Society, told the WEEKEND NATION: "For him to claim that he 'discovered' this is like Columbus all over again. He might be the first person to scientifically examine and describe it, but he is certainly not the first person to discover it.

"I remember seeing in an old copy of the Guinness Book Of World Records that the smallest snake in the world was found in Barbados. So the fact that we had the smallest snake is not a 'new discovery' at all."

Corrie, who has been a herpetologist for more than two decades, added that "at best, perhaps he has examined a specimen of a previously unknown to science species; but one that has been

Barbadians slam discovery, naming of tiny snake

Aug 8, 9:24 PM (ET)
By DANICA COTO

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP) - A small snake has sparked a big debate in Barbados. Residents of the wealthy Caribbean nation have been heating up blogs and clogging radio airwaves to vent their anger at a U.S. scientist, who earlier this week announced his "discovery" of the world's smallest snake and named it "*Leptotyphlops carlae*," after his wife Carla.

"If he needs to blow his own trumpet ... well, fine," said 43-year-old Barbadian Charles Atkins. "But my mother, who was a simple housewife, she showed me the snake when I was a child."

One writer to the Barbados Free Press blog took an even tougher tone, questioning how someone could "discover" a snake long known to locals, who called it the thread snake.

"How dare this man come in here and name a snake after his wife?" said the writer who identified themselves as Margaret Knight.

The man she refers to is Penn State University evolutionary biologist S. Blair Hedges, whose research teams also have discovered the world's tiniest lizard in the Dominican Republic and the smallest frog in Cuba.

Hedges recently became the first to describe the snake - which is so small it can curl up on a U.S. quarter - when he published his observations and genetic test results in the journal "*Zootaxa*." Full-grown adults typically are less than 4 inches long.

Hedges told The Associated Press on Friday that he understands Barbadians' angry reactions, but under established scientific practice, the first person to do a full description of a species is said to have discovered it and gives it a scientific name.

He said most newly "discovered" species are already well known to locals, and the term refers to the work done in a laboratory to establish a genetic profile. In the study, he reported that two specimens he analyzed were found in 1889 and 1963.

"There are no false claims here, believe me," Hedges said.

Damon Corrie, president of the Caribbean Herpetological Society, acknowledged that Hedges is the first to scientifically examine and describe the snake, but the so-called discovery makes locals seem ignorant.

"It gives the impression that people here ... depend on people from abroad to come and show us things in our own backyard," Corrie said.

Karl Watson, a historian and ornithologist at the University of the West Indies in Barbados, said it's common for people to get excited over very tiny or very large animals.

"Probably people have overreacted. ... It's nationalism going a bit awry," Watson said.

Hedges agreed: "I think they're carrying it a bit too far."

"Snakes are really apolitical," he said.

Snake 'Discovery' of the specimen that was examined by Professor Hedges was by a local Barbadian.

Sent to local, regional & International media on Date: Saturday, August 9, 2008, 1:38 PM

Dear Editor,

Now that I see the date of June 2006 admitted to by Professor Blair Hedges in the Nation Newspaper (8-08-2008) as being the time period when he obtained the specimen - I can confirm with you that the snake I told you I found under a rock in St. Joseph and called Blair Hedges over to see and pick up - was the very same snake he claimed that "he found under a rock in St. Joseph" - which his genetic testing has proven to be a new species.

Why he could not be honest enough to say that I found it and called him over to retrieve it (I did not want to move it in case he wanted to photograph it before it was disturbed) - is beyond me.

Even if he did not to mention me by name - he could have at least admitted 'a Barbadian' found the live specimen for him, the scientific proof that it was actually a new species is a credit no one can take from him. June 2006 (He admitted in the Nation that it was June 2006 that he was in Barbados and obtained the specimen) was the last month I owned the Pet Shop in Payne's Plaza, upper Collymore Rock in St. Michael Barbados; and the Professor and his wife hired me for that day for US\$100.00 to take them around the island to try to find the Barbados thread snake (*Leptotyphlops bilineata*) - which I found for him in St. Joseph - and the Leaf Toed Gecko (*Phyllodactylus pulcher*) - which we did not find in St. Phillip.

As it turns out what we all thought was *Leptotyphlops bilineata* was actually proven to be another (Internationally scientifically unknown but locally known) new species after Professor Hedges scientifically examined it.

So if he wants to name it after his wife science allows the person who firsts scientifically examines & describes a species - the privilege of naming it. But since it is unique to Barbados - *Leptotyphlops barbadensis* would have been my choice of name - and the one I will personally be using whenever I refer to this supremely 'Barbadian' species.

Sincerely,

Damon Gerard Corrie
Founder/President
Caribbean Herpetological Society