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Scientists discover new species in Palawan

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Inquirer

Posted date: August 03, 2007

PUERTO PRINCESA CITY, Palawan -- Scientists on Thursday announced the discovery of a mountain shrew unknown to science and at least three new species of plants, which they found in the upper ranges of Mt. Mantalingahan in southern Palawan province.

Filipino mammal specialist Danny Balete said the mountain shrew had a soft and downy fur with long and almost sharp snout and small eyes.

Balete said the shrew was the second species of its kind found only in Palawan.

Leonard Co, one of the country's top botanists who led a five-week scientific expedition to Mt. Mantalingahan in June, described one of the plants as an orchid "having a beautiful set of white flowers with golden lip petals."

"The orchid belongs to the genus *Coelogyne* and was found in the stunted summit ridge vegetation at around 1,700 masl (meters above sea level) elevation. It is also in the heath-like summit vegetation where an undescribed terrestrial species of *Medinilla* was discovered," Co said.

He added botanists were confirming a possible new species of *Medinilla* from among the specimens collected during the expedition.

"The showy flowers of the *Medinilla* have always attracted the attention of botanical collectors, resulting in the relative rareness of new species being added to the genus in recent times. There are at least 80 species of *Medinillas* known to occur in the Philippines, of which 76 are endemic to the country," Co said.

Another record in Palawan is the discovery of a ground orchid belonging to the genus *Acanthephippium*.

This ground orchid was recorded at 800 meters above sea level and may represent the fourth species of the genus in the Philippines.

The scientists also found the rare soft-furred mountain rat -- the *Palawanomys furvus* which is known to exist only on Mt. Mantalingahan.

Dr. Lawrence Heaney, a biologist from the [Chicago Field Museum](#) and a longtime scientific researcher in the Philippines, said the animal "has not been seen since it was first discovered in 1962."

Heaney also noted the discovery of a tiny bird that was previously known to exist only in Borneo.

The bird *Erythrura prasina* is a very colorful pin-tail parrot finch that lives in the bamboo-dominated regions of Borneo and mainland Southeast Asia.

"Its presence on Palawan also coincided with the distribution of bamboos -- a dominant feature of the Mantalingahan vegetation at around 700 masl and higher," Heaney said.

The pouch bat caught at the same site was another poorly known species and one previously unrecorded in the Palawan group of islands.

"The pouch bat, *Saccolaimus saccolaimus*, is widespread in Asia, but I have seen them only once in the 26 years I have worked in the Philippines," Heaney added.

"Prior to this survey our knowledge of the Palawan terrestrial biodiversity was limited mainly to information about species in the lowlands. Little is known of what the mountains on this island hold beyond 1,300-meter elevation," Balete said.

Romeo Trono, country director of Conservation International Philippines which organized the expedition, said the findings confirmed the biological importance of Mt. Mantalingahan Range.

[Conservation International](#) is working with local government units and communities to have the area declared as a protected landscape.

"These noteworthy discoveries and rediscoveries on Mt. Mantalingahan will further strengthen the justification for our

recommendation to have this important center of endemism in Palawan declared as protected area," Trono said.

The expedition was joined by representatives from the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development Staff, South Palawan Planning Council, Western Philippines University, Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park, Katala Foundation, Municipality of Rizal, Barangay Ransang and indigenous peoples' groups.

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