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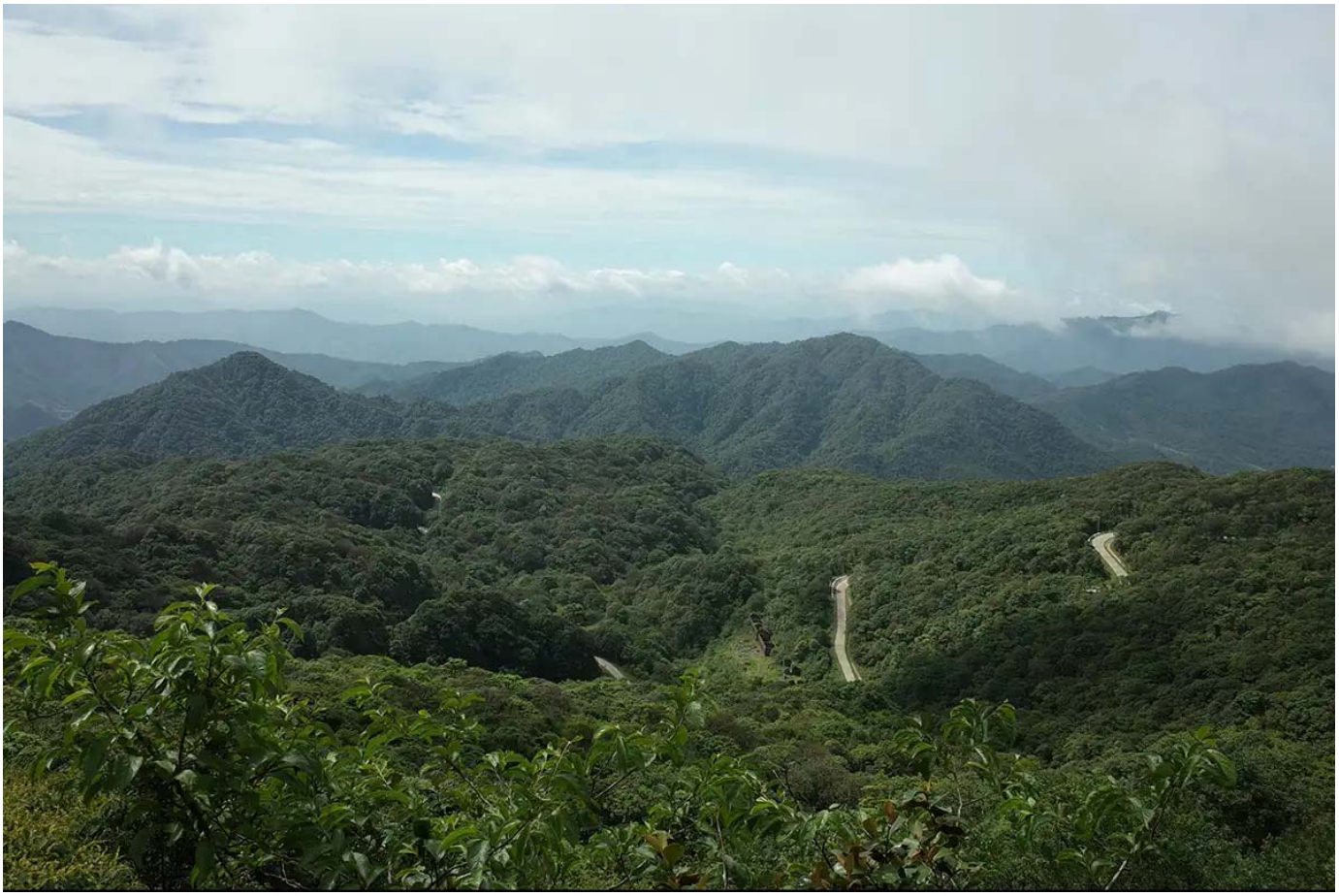
Endangered relative of the hedgehog may be thriving in Vietnam



The Hainan gymure may be common here
Alexei V. Abramov

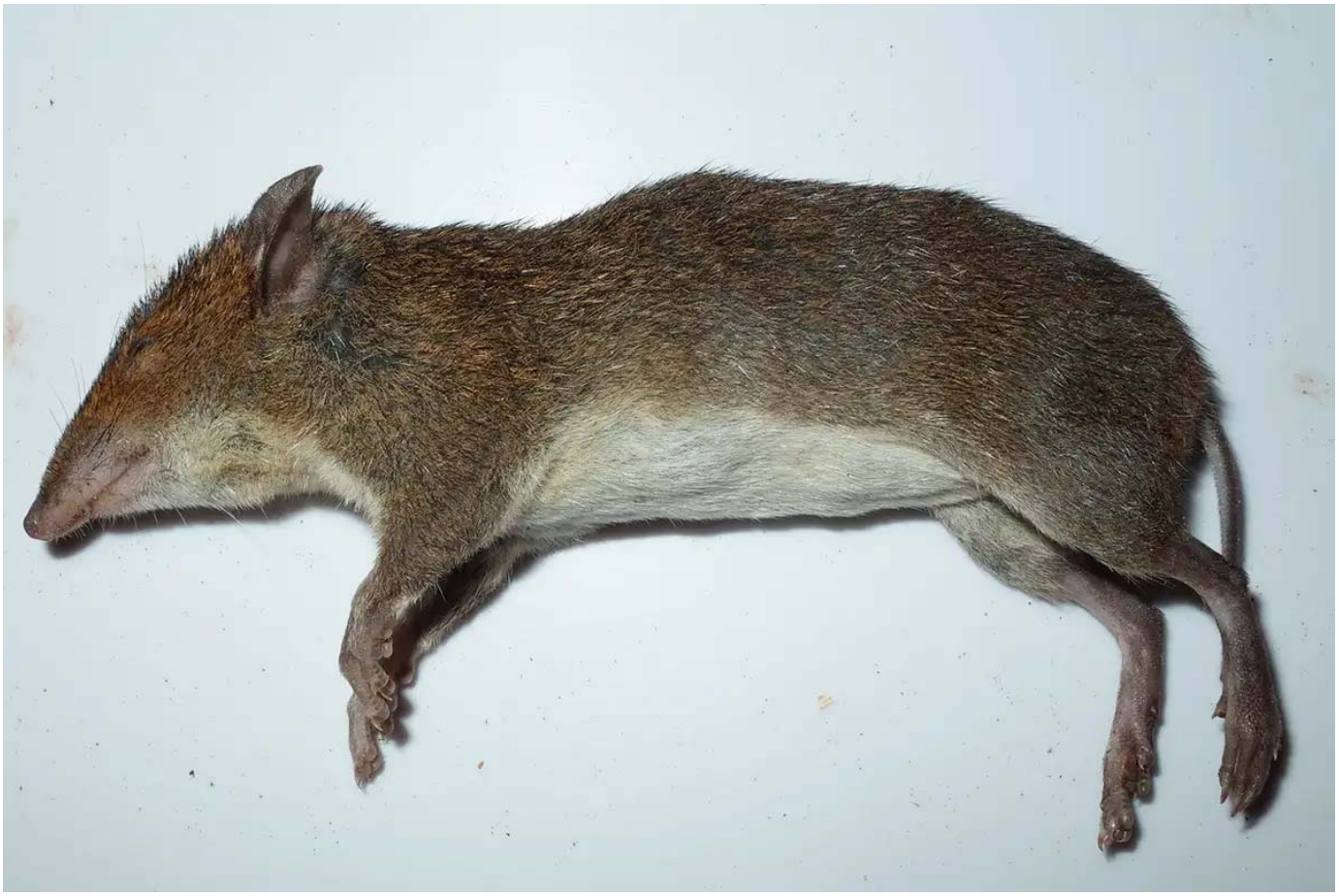
By **Jake Buehler**

The Hainan gymnure is a bizarre, poorly understood hedgehog-like mammal, previously thought to live only on the island of Hainan off China's southern coast. But recently, scientists found the mammal in Vietnam – hundreds of kilometres away – where it may actually be relatively common.

Gymnures and moonrats are close relatives of the winsome spiky hedgehogs. But, lacking prickles, they resemble rats or opossums. They often reek strongly of garlic or ammonia due to their potent, territory-marking scent glands. Native to Southeast Asian forests, the animals are nocturnal and reclusive. The Hainan gymnure (*Neohylomys hainanensis*) is the most elusive of all.

"In the world's scientific collections, there are only a few specimens of *N. hainanensis*," says Alexei Abramov, a zoologist at the Russian Academy of Sciences in Saint Petersburg and lead author on the study. "I know of ten specimens."

Earlier this year, Abramov and his colleagues conducted a small mammal biodiversity survey in Cao Bang Province in northern Vietnam. During this survey, the team obtained five gymnures from local villagers. After measurement of their physical features, the team identified the gymnures as the rare Hainan species, suggesting that the island dweller is more widespread than realised.



More common than we thought?
Dr. Alexei V. Abramov

Lawrence Heaney, curator of mammals at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, is a little surprised the gymnures didn't turn up earlier.

"There's been work done on the mammal fauna of Vietnam in the past, and these are apparently not particularly rare animals," he says, offering that gymnure preference for earthworms and insects rather than typical bait may have kept them undetected.

The gymnure's presence in Vietnam also implies that Hainan and Vietnam were physically connected millennia ago, when glacial expansion lowered sea levels by 120 metres.

"I'd love to see what the DNA tells us," says Melissa Hawkins, a conservation geneticist at Humboldt State University, California. "Molecular data can date the split between these two lineages and confirm whether or not they are the same species or closely related."

Abramov says he and his team are working on a review of species interrelationships among gymnures. If the Vietnam and Hainan populations are indeed one species, the gymnure's endangered status on the IUCN Red List may need updating.

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