

New coquí species discovered in Toa Baja, Puerto Rico ^[1]

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By Yaritza Rivas Bermúdez / yrivas@elnuevodia.com ^[2] endi.com ^[3] In the heart of Toa Baja, near Sector 26, inhabits a new coquí species so tiny that very few have seen it. It is almost imperceptible, but not for Neftalí Ríos, its discoverer. Ríos, ecologist of the Department of Biology of the University of Puerto Rico-Rio Piedras discovered the Coquí Llanero - as he baptized informally it- by accident, according to what he said as he walked through the wetland where he made the discovery. In any summer day the temperature there can feel like a 160 degrees Fahrenheit. A milestone This discovery constitutes a landmark in contemporary scientific history. It is the first finding of a new species of an endemic coquí in 30 years. His dedication to explore for the Puerto Rican wetlands for the last seven years led him towards the small endemic vertebrate. Two years ago as he investigated Toa Baja's bog , he found the coquí and detected "rare things". In November 2004 it was obvious to Ríos that something was new and different, but he had doubts if the species was exotic or new, he explained. Since then, he has been dedicated to study and to document the species. And he submitted for revision and publication the important finding to the scientific magazine COPEIA, specialized in reviewing investigations about the conduct, surroundings, morphology, physiology and genetics of fish, amphibians and reptiles. This would make official the discovery for science. Its size, song and coloration distinguish the Coquí Llanero of the other coquíes discovered in the Island until now. It is cream colored and with a metallic yellow belly, peculiarly similar to the Golden coqui of Cayey, already extinct. Perhaps by his similarity, it is of the family of the Coquí Grillo, Ríos suspects. The very small amphibian fits in a dime and, unlike the famous song of the common coquí that we hear at night (2.000 Hertz), this one has such an acute tone (9.000 Hertz) that is almost inaudible. The female is bigger than the male, a well-known sexual dimorphism characteristic that the ecologist attributes to the egg storage. It reproduces in aquatic fresh water plants, and only puts three eggs. In addition, it has the most reduced geographic distribution of all the coquíes. Indeed, this little habitat, Ríos thinks, make the habitat essential for the species' survival. Until the moment, the animal is only known to live in one wetland of Toa Baja, that according to the scientist, must have survived more than 500 years of deforestation, drainages, agriculture, industrialization and urban development with little

planning. He specified this issue in a letter sent the past May 22 to the secretary of the Department of Natural and Environmental Resources Javier Vélez Arocho. In the letter, Ríos emphasize the importance of the species and requests the Coquí Llanero, to be declared an endangered species, and its habitat to be designated as essential critical. Meanwhile, and still joyous about what the finding means for local scientists –the first of its nature in 30 years- the Coquí Llanero faces the challenge of surviving in a small habitat, near the sanitary filling of Toa Baja. But what worries scientists the most is that the company Speed Group International is building a racing track in the area. And, although different agencies have shown commitment and urgency to protect the endemic species, is little the affirmative action that has taken shape to guarantee that future generations can enjoy this, our national emblem.

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