

Doctoral student rediscovers rare hummingbird species

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Growing up in San Bernardino County in southern California, David Anderson wasn't the kid who stayed cooped up inside the house.

On sunny days and on rainy days, when water soaked his clothing, Anderson preferred having Mother Nature's sky to be his roof.

"I always like being outdoors; I've always liked wildlife," said Anderson, an LSU doctoral student. "I was always the kid who watched nature shows."

Anderson's infatuation with nature continued to grow and in November he and a team of researchers rediscovers a rare species of hummingbird in Honduras.

The Honduran Emerald is a species native only to Honduras. About 90 percent of the bird's original habitat has been lost in the past 100 years. The bird had been spotted in the eastern part of the country in recent years, but populations had not been found in western Honduras since 1935.

"People started to think that maybe the bird was extinct in the western part," Anderson said.

Robert Hyman, a member of The Explorers Club, based in New York, spearheaded the journey. He said he made calls and sent e-mails around the country to gather the best team he could for the expedition. Anderson was one of the people he chose. He and his colleagues began the expedition in February 2007, and the search culminated in November 2008. Not everything went smoothly. Anderson and the other researchers found it difficult to navigate the unique terrain and climate of Honduras by car or truck, so they took to the air to expedite the discovery process.

"It's true anywhere in the world — if there are no roads, the forest gets cut down first," Anderson said. "We were looking for forests. Rather than try to drive around half of a country looking for forests, we got an airplane.

"We could cover a lot of ground. And part of it had to do with practice. Once we found the bird, we realized what its habitat was supposed to look like and it got easier to find more populations."

While experts on birds and conservation played a big role in the discovery, it might not have happened if not for Hyman.

He and Deborah M. Atwood, ecologist and senior policy adviser at the law firm Crowell & Moring in Washington, D.C., paid the trip expenses, including airfare, hotels, car rental, gas, food, beverages, supplies and permits.

"I'm more of an explorer, an adventurer," Hyman said. "But I heard all this information about it and there was just a light bulb that went off and I thought 'Let's do some science. Let's see what we can do.'"

What they did has been recognized around the country. But aside from the professional accomplishments, Anderson said he felt a sense of personal honor for being part of it.

“It’s like scoring a play in a sport. You work hard for something, you have this dream and then it comes true. It feels good.”

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