

Rare deer-like species photographed for first time in wild

HANOI, Vietnam (AP) — A tiny deer-like species not seen by scientists for nearly 30 years has been photographed in a forest in southern Vietnam, a conservation group said.

Images of the silver-backed chevrotain, commonly called the Vietnamese mouse deer, were captured in the wild by trap cameras, Global Wildlife Conservation (GWC) said.

It said the rabbit-sized animal is not a deer or a mouse, despite its nickname, but is the world's smallest hoofed mammal.

They are shy and solitary, have two tiny fangs, appear to walk on the tips of their hooves, and have a silver sheen, the group said.

"For so long this species has seemingly only existed as part of our imagination. Discovering that it is, indeed, still out there, is the first step in ensuring we don't lose it again, and we're moving quickly now to figure out how best to protect it," said An Nguyen, a conservation scientist at the Leibniz Institute for Zoo and Wildlife Research, a partner of GWC in the



project.

The chevrotain was first described in 1910 by four people. A fifth sighting was reported in 1990 in central Vietnam,

making it one of the rarest animals in the world, GWC said in a statement.

An and his team set up camera traps after receiving reports from local villagers

SMALL & SCARCE. A photo of two silver-backed chevrotains was captured by a camera trap in an undisclosed forest in south central Vietnam, in this June 6, 2018 file photo. Global Wildlife Conservation says the rabbit-sized animal is not a deer or a mouse, despite its nickname, but is the world's smallest hoofed mammal. (Southern Institute of Ecology/Global Wildlife Conservation/Leibniz Institute for Zoo and Wildlife Research/NCNP via AP, File)

and forest rangers of the animals. The cameras took some 1,800 photos of the species over a period of five months.

"The rediscovery of the silver-backed chevrotain provides big hope for the conservation of biodiversity, especially threatened species, in Vietnam," Hoang Minh Duc, head of Vietnam's Southern Institute of Ecology's Department of Zoology, was quoted as saying by GWC.

"This also encourages us, together with relevant and international partners, to devote time and effort to further investigation and conservation of Vietnam's biodiversity heritage," Duc said.

Wildlife in Vietnam face many threats including poaching and habitat loss due to urbanization.

Japanese emperor performs secretive key succession ritual

By Mari Yamaguchi
The Associated Press

TOKYO — Japanese Emperor Naruhito has performed a secretive and controversial ritual, a once-in-a-reign event to give thanks for good harvests, pray for the peace and safety of the nation, and play host to his family's ancestral gods.

Or at least that's what experts and officials say.

The *Daijosai*, or great thanksgiving festival, is the most important succession ritual an emperor performs. But it is closed to the public, even as taxpayer money funds it.

It has drawn criticism as a throwback to Japan's authoritarian past and as a colossal waste of money, and provoked speculation the emperor is spending the night on a bed with a goddess.

Here's a look at the significance of the ritual and what people are saying about it:

First communion with gods

Daijosai marks the emperor's first communion with the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, the monarchy's mythological ancestor, and with other gods of Shinto, the religion of the imperial family. Harvest rituals originated in Japan's ancient rice growing culture from around the 7th century, historians say.

The two parts of the ritual each last a few hours. Naruhito, after purifying himself and donning a white robe, enters the Yukiden, one of two main halls at a newly prepared, and very expensive, shrine complex inside his palace. Only he can enter the innermost sanctum to

present harvested rice, saké, vegetables, seafood, and local produce from around the country to the goddess and gods.

Japanese television showed Naruhito, accompanied by assistants, walking slowly in a hallway and then disappearing behind white curtains at the entrance of the Yukiden.

He was expected to offer arcane prayers for peace and bountiful harvests in the direction of Japan's most sacred shrine at Ise, where the sun goddess is believed to be enshrined, then partake of the offerings in a symbolic communion. After a short break, he was to perform a similar ritual at another main hall, the Sukiden.

One night, \$18-million shrine

The venue, Daijokyu, is a one-off shrine complex of about 30 structures in various sizes, including the two main halls, all of which will be demolished afterward. The shrine complex alone costs about 2 billion yen (\$18 million), and the whole ritual totals about 2.7 billion yen (\$25 million).

It's all funded by the government. The ritual shrank when Japan was ruled by warlords and the monarchy had little money and power. There was a 200-year hiatus before it was restored during the Tokugawa shogunate, which ruled from the 17th to the 19th century.

The ritual and the shrine were expanded when the pre-World War II government deified the emperor and used his status to drive Japanese aggression. The event has not been scaled down even after the emperor became a mere symbol, with no political power, under the postwar constitution, and there's been little public

debate about the use of taxpayer money for the highly religious and secretive event.

Keiko Hongo, a University of Tokyo historian who was invited to speak before a government committee on the ritual, said officials wanted to cut costs of other events but not the Daijosai.

What's the bed for?

There's speculation about many aspects of the ritual, but especially about the presence of a bed in the main hall, and what it might be used for.

Some experts believe the emperor uses it to sleep with the sun goddess to gain divinity. Others say it's for the goddess to rest and that it's not even touched by the emperor.

"The so-called bed, as we understand it, is a sacred seat for the imperial ancestor to rest," then-Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu said before the Daijosai in 1990 was performed by former Emperor Akihito, the current emperor's father.

Officials have denied that the emperor uses the bed to gain divinity.

Religion and state

The government's funding of the highly religious rite remains contentious.

A group of more than 200 people filed a lawsuit against the government last year, saying the ritual violates the constitutional separation of state and religion. The wartime government turned Shinto into a fascist ideology to promote its colonial aggression.

Abe's government says even though the rite is too religious to be considered an official duty of the emperor, it is an "extremely important" succession ritual

for the country's hereditary monarchy written in the constitution and therefore it serves the public interest and deserves state funding. The cost is paid in the name of "palace expenses," which ordinarily cover maintenance and ceremonial spending by the palace, following a precedent set by the government at the time of the earlier event.

"There seems to be a political intention to resist (calls to stop funding the ritual) because of a sense of nostalgia for the (prewar) era," Takeshi Hara, a monarchy expert at the Open University of Japan, told a TBS radio talk show.

Abe's government wants the emperor to be a more authoritative figure, as he was before the end of World War II.

Imperial criticism

Naruhito's younger brother, Crown Prince Akishino, says he is against using public money for the ritual and that it's questionable under a constitution that separates religion and state.

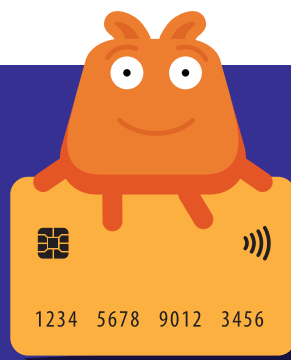
"It's a royal family event, and it is highly religious," Akishino said last year. The palace budget for the Imperial family's private activities, including religious ones, was about one-seventh of the amount needed for the event. "I think the Daijosai should be held ... by making it an affordable ceremony."

His view was quickly dismissed by the government and conservatives, but widely welcomed by some palace watchers and legal experts. They say it's doable because the emperor already performs a regular annual harvest ritual in November at the palace's existing shrines.

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