

Lonesome George was discovered in 1971 while slowly plodding across Pinta Island, perhaps in search of a mate. Before the discovery of Lonesome George, the Pinta Island subspecies was thought to be extinct, killed off by 19th century mariners and by the introduction of goats to the island. The goats destroyed the vegetation necessary for the giant tortoise's survival. Intensive searches in Pinta Island since George's discovery have failed to turn up any others. Indeed, Lonesome George may hold the distinction of being the rarest creature in the world.

In 1972, George was brought to the Charles Darwin Research Station on Santa Cruz Island, the headquarters for most research on the Galapagos, a group of islands of the Ecuadorian Coast. His age is estimated at 40 to 60 years. The World Wildlife Fund, a conservation organization, today is scouring zoos across the globe in hopes of finding a mate for George. A spokesman for the organization said many zoos have captive giant Galapagos tortoises. Whether one of these tortoises will turn out to be a Pinta Island subspecies instead of one of the 10 other subspecies remains unknown. It takes an expert or another tortoise to tell the difference, the spokesman said.

"If even one female can be found, then the chances for saving the Pinta tortoise are very great", says Craig MacFarland, director of the Charles Darwin Research Station, in a recent paper on the tortoise. Wardens have killed almost 37,000 goats on the island and the vegetation on Pinta Island "has recovered remarkably", said MacFarland. "There is no doubt, based on experience on other islands, that young tortoises would survive well on Pinta if repatriated there", he adds.

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