

Kris Helgen, Coon Rapids High School, Class of 1997, Curator, Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of Natural History

Friday, April 17th, 2009

1997 Coon Rapids High School grad finds mammals in the remotest places

Anyone who thinks there's nothing new under the sun should talk to Kristofer Helgen. Helgen has discovered about 100 new species of mammals previously unknown to science.

He knows it's surprising to many people to think about new species of mammals, but Helgen said there are many types of animals that haven't been named.

"It's easier to imagine new species of insects or flowers, but the truth is there are areas of the planet that are so little-explored," Helgen said. "There are still opportunities to find birds and mammals that no one has given a scientific name to."

Helgen said his favorite classes in school were AP European History and geography and history. He was also interested in math and active in the orchestra.

However, he has always had a passion for animals that goes back to his earliest childhood. When he was young he was "phenomenally interested" in National Geographic. "That was how I knew there were people out there that did this sort of thing, and that was what I wanted to do," Helgen said. "My post-high school life has been trying to become one of those lucky few."

After graduation, Helgen enrolled in Harvard University where he met Tim Flannery, a professor from Adelaide University. Helgen later moved to Australia and completed his doctorate with Flannery as his advisor. While he was there, he began participating in New Guinea biodiversity surveys, going to remote tropical areas and documenting what he found there. "A common outcome of those expeditions is finding new plants and animals," Helgen said.

He completed his Ph.D. in 2006 and accepted a postdoctoral research position at the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of Natural History. After a year, he was named a curator. He is the youngest curator at the museum.

Many of his discoveries have come not in the field, but in specimen storage rooms of museums around the world.

"For every new species I find in the field, I find two or three more by studying historical samples in museums," Helgen said. "There are vast numbers of species stored from past centuries. There is so much material and a limited number of experts, it just hasn't been possible to study them all."

One of his discoveries was an animal called the striped bandicoot. Helgen describes a bandicoot as a marsupial rabbit. In 2004, he described a new species with a distinctive striping pattern. He discovered them by fieldwork and studying specimens he discovered in museums, but only four samples existed in the whole world - they were in Honolulu, Hawaii; Port Moresby, New Guinea; Jakarta, Indonesia, and Berlin. He found that the species existed only in one specific mountain range in New Guinea.





The process of discovering new species is not a quick and easy one, but Helgen believes it is all worth it.

"It takes many years, it is long work. But to me, it's the most rewarding thing in the world to find something and name a new species that no one has ever named before," he said.

Helgen left the country on Feb. 13 for another expedition to New Guinea. First he will join a BBC expedition to a gigantic extinct volcano crater containing an isolated mountain forest. The second half of the expedition will take him to an isolated mountain range on New Britain, an island near New Guinea.

Photo captions: (Upper right) Kris Helgen with field assistants in Papua New Guinea. (Lower left) Kris Helgen with wolf and thylacine skulls at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. Helgen is the curator of mammals at the Smithsonian, the youngest curator in the museum's history.
