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20 Baht

VISA RUN CRASH LEAVES THREE DEAD > PAGE 3

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A world first, the *Acanthosaura phuketensis*. Photo: Montri Sumontha

PHUKET LITTLE DRAGON CONFIRMED AS A NEW SPECIES

The Phuket News
editor@classactmedia.co.th

Scientists on Monday (Dec 19) confirmed that Phuket was home to an entirely new species on the planet: a particularly horny lizard now officially known as *Acanthosaura phuketensis*.

The discovery was originally made by Belgian biologist Olivier Pauwels and his team Montri Sumontha, Kirati Kunya, Awat Nitikul, Phamon

Samphanthamit, Perry Wood Jr and Lee Grismer amid jungle in central Phuket.

Although the discovery was published in the scientific journal *Zootaxa* late last year, the confirmation this week followed a lengthy verification process ensuring the lizard was indeed the first of its kind identified on Earth.

The *Acanthosaura phuketensis* grows to 35cm long and has long horns on the head and a row of sharp spines along its back, and the lizard's name

is dedicated to Phuket, explained Mr Pauwels. "It literally means spiny lizard from Phuket; it is an extraordinary discovery," he said.

In spite of its scary looks, the lizard is harmless. "It feeds mostly on insects. It is very discreet, and lives on trees in dense forest. It rarely comes down to the forest floor," Mr Pauwels told *The Phuket News*.

"Although Phuket is one of the most touristic places in the World, this is the third such major discovery

our team made on this island, after a new gecko species and the now famous viper. They are endemic, which means they are found nowhere else on our Planet," he said.

Pauwels, 45, who works as a Research Associate at the Royal Belgian Institute for Natural Sciences in Brussels, Belgium, has already described 80 new species.

Four years ago his team discovered a viper in the middle of the island, the "Phuket Bamboo Pit Viper"...

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

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NEWS PAGE 3

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LIFE PAGE 17

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SPORT PAGE 40

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News



Spirit of support sees stricken GM home in time for Christmas > page 7

New species discovered in island jungle reserves

Continued from page 1

...They also discovered a unique gecko at the Khao Phra Thaeo Non-Hunting Area in Thalang, where team member Mr Awat once served as chief. The gecko was subsequently named *Cyrtodactylus phuketensis*.

The rapid pace of development, driven by tourism and the island's property industry, worries Mr Pauwels.

"Human infrastructures still expand, threatening the last remaining tropical forest patches on the island. This new discovery stresses how important it is to save the remaining jungle on the island. If these forests disappear, many unique creatures which live only there will also disappear," he said.

Piyawat Sukon, Chief of the Khao Phra Thaeo Non-Hunting Area Office in Thalang, this week told *The Phuket News* that he was unaware of any new lizard species in his park area.

"I know nothing about this yet, but our office should be informed for research," he said.

"We have records of similar species in Khao Phra Thaeo, the Marked Spring Lizard (*Acanthosaura cf. Crucigera*) and the Greater



A pair of baby *Trimeresurus phuketensis* baby snakes. Photo: Montri Sumontha

Spring Lizard (*Acanthosaura armata*)," Mr Piyawat added.

Mr Pauwels explained that his team have worked for years in discovering new species in Phuket.

"We worked in collaboration with the Gibbon Rehabilitation Centre of Phuket and began to comb through the jungle. This led to the discovery of VanDeventer's Rock Gecko *Cnemaspis vandeventeri* in 2010, the Phuket Pitviper *Trimeresurus phuketensis* in 2011, the Phuket Bent-toed Gecko *Cyrtodactylus phuketensis* in 2012 and the Phuket Horned Tree Agamid *Acanthosaura phuketensis* (also known as the Phuket Little Dragon) in 2015!

"Absolutely fantastic and unexpected! Not sure if more reptile species remain to be discovered on Phuket Island, but who knows, so we are pursuing our research," Mr Pauwels told *The Phuket News*.

Underpass merited

Highways Dept praised for completing project

The Phuket News
editor@classactmedia.co.th

The Phuket office of the Highways Dept was congratulated for completing the Samkong Underpass, which was finally officially opened with a ceremony on Tuesday (Dec 20), more than 18 months behind schedule.

The plaudits came during an official opening speech delivered inside the tunnel by Phuket Vice Governor Teera Anantaseriwidhya at 7am.

Meanwhile, traffic backed up on the surface roads at the busy intersection above as the northbound lanes through the underpass had been closed since 10pm Monday night to accommodate the ceremony.

"We want to congratulate the Phuket Highways Office, who was in charge of the Samkong Underpass construction and completed this project for the public to help solve traffic problems on the island," said V/Gov Teera.

"We also hope that the construction of the underpasses at the Bang Khu Intersection, Chalong Circle and at the airport turn-off will be finished by 2017 and 2018," he added.



The Highways Dept Phuket office was congratulated for completing the underpass, which was officially opened on Tuesday (Dec 20), 18 months behind schedule. Photo: PR Dept

The official opening began early Tuesday morning with Buddhist and Islamic blessing ceremonies performed. In addition to the official speeches made, the ensemble of officials present sang the National Anthem as well as the Royal Anthem to honour the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who passed away on October 13.

The opening ceremony came after Highways Dept officials confirmed in October that no such ceremony would take place after so many delays

had forced the underpass to open 18 months late.

"We will have no opening ceremony whatsoever. What's the point? The road is already open for the public to use and I do not want to hear any more criticism about this project," said Project Engineer Chalermpon Wongkietkun of the Phuket Highways Office, who was assigned to oversee the project.

"It's has been a long and tough time for us working on this project. To have an-

other public announcement or opening ceremony would be a disgrace," he told *The Phuket News*.

Contractor Vivat Construction Co Ltd, which built the underpass with a government budget of B834 million, now faces fines totalling at least B570mn for breach of contract due to late completion.

Mr Chalermpon has since transferred out of Phuket and is now a Project Engineer with the Highways Dept office in Songkhla province.

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