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# Lehr's Team First to Name Amphibian After BBC's Attenborough

March 7, 2017

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Although a number of species have been named after famed British broadcaster and naturalist Sir David Attenborough, not until now has the BBC *Life* series host been honored with an amphibian.

Illinois Wesleyan University Associate Professor of [Biology](#) Edgar Lehr and his research partner, University of Michigan Postdoctoral Fellow Rudolf von May, discovered a new fleshbelly frog, formally described as *Pristimantis attenboroughi*, during an expedition in the Peruvian Andes. The species is informally dubbed Attenborough's Rubber Frog, and is described in the open access journal [ZooKeys](#).

Lehr and von May have conducted three separate expeditions to different regions within Peru's Pui Pui Protected Forest — two of these expeditions were sponsored by National Geographic. Their efforts have been rewarded with several new species of frogs and a new spectacled lizard.

Over his career, Lehr and his colleagues have been involved with the discovery of 89 species (85 from Peru, one from Ecuador, and three from Vietnam), while Attenborough has had numerous species – from mammals and reptiles, to invertebrates and plants – named after him. Putting the two together did not occur to Lehr until he was watching a TV program celebrating the broadcaster's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday.



*Pristimantis attenboroughi*, or Attenborough's Rubber Frog



In giving his permission for the new frog species to be named in his honor, Sir David Attenborough told Edgar Lehr of his lifelong admiration for "this wonderful, versatile group of animals."

localities across the upper montane forests and high Andean grasslands of the Pui Pui Forest. The adult males reach sizes of 14.6-19.2 mm in length, while the females are larger, measuring between 19.2 and 23.0 mm. Their ground color ranges from pale to dark gray, or reddish brown to brownish olive with dark gray scattered flecks. Meanwhile, the juveniles are paler (yellowish to reddish brown) with contrasting dark brown flecks and distinct stripes.

Because the amphibian is known from fewer than 10 locations, the species should be deemed either Vulnerable or Endangered, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature 'Red List' Categories and Criteria. However, the authors suggest that Attenborough's Rubber Frog should be listed as Near Threatened instead, since the Pui Pui Forest is formally protected and still largely unknown, so it is likely that there are more additional populations of the new species. On the other hand, factors such as fungal infections, climate change, pollution, and man-made fires continue to be threats for many Andean amphibians even inside protected areas.

In a [2013 profile in IWU Magazine](#), Lehr spoke of the fun of naming a new species, but said he hoped his discoveries of new species encourages increased conservation efforts in the areas he explores.

"The Pui Pui Forest is protected from direct human interactions because it is difficult to reach," said Lehr. "However, my publications have raised interest among other scientists who study other organisms to go there and to continue the exploration of its biodiversity. In the end, we can only try to protect what we know."

Lehr wrote to Attenborough asking the legendary broadcaster for his permission. "In my letter, I introduced myself shortly to him along with the abstract of the manuscript, the etymology in which we explain the species name, and a photo of the new frog species," said Lehr.

The biologist said Attenborough wrote back that he was "thrilled" with the idea and granted his permission. Lehr said Attenborough wrote that he'd kept a European tree frog when he was eight years old, calling it "one of the loveliest creatures" he had ever seen, and that he had never lost his "delight in this wonderful, versatile group of animals," according to Lehr.

"You can actually see Attenborough's admiration for frogs in his movies or on photos where often he has a frog on his hand," said Lehr. He and von May said they dedicated the new species to "Sir David Frederick Attenborough in honor for his educational documentaries on wildlife, especially on amphibians, and for raising awareness about the importance of wildlife conservation."

Attenborough's Rubber Frog is known to inhabit several localities across the upper montane forests and high Andean grasslands of the Pui Pui Forest. The adult males reach sizes of 14.6-19.2 mm in length, while the females are larger, measuring between 19.2 and 23.0 mm. Their ground color ranges from pale to dark gray, or reddish brown to brownish olive with dark gray scattered flecks. Meanwhile, the juveniles are paler (yellowish to reddish brown) with contrasting dark brown flecks and distinct stripes.



Lehr, left, and his research partner, Rudolf von May (far right) conduct expeditions with local assistants in the Peruvian Andes.