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Lonesome George may have cousin

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Lonesome George, the last giant Galapagos tortoise of this species, on June 24, 2006

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CHICAGO, Illinois (Reuters) -- Lonesome George, a giant Galapagos tortoise thought to be the last of his kind, may not be so lonely after all, with the discovery of a possible cousin, researchers reported on Monday.

Lonesome George is famed for his status as the sole surviving member of a species of giant tortoise from Pinta Island, one of the Galapagos Islands off South America.

He has spent the last 35 years at the Charles Darwin Research Station on the island of Santa Cruz, sharing a pen with two similar-looking female tortoises from Pinta's neighbor, the volcanic island of Isabela.

But so far George has shown no interest in mating -- even though they brought in virile young males of the same species as the females to demonstrate.

"The future looked pretty bleak for Lonesome George up to now," said Adalgisa Caccone, a biologist at Yale University in Connecticut who helped lead the research.

Now, he might have a first cousin on Isabela, Caccone said in a telephone interview.

Caccone and colleagues at Yale have discovered a tortoise that is the offspring of a pure Pinta male that bred with a female on Isabela.

"This is the first time that an individual that carries as much as 50 percent of the genes from the same population (as) Lonesome George has been found," she said.

George's clan was driven to near-extinction by whalers in the 19th century, who hunted the tortoises for food, and later by the introduction of goats on the island, which ate up the tortoise's food and trampled their nesting grounds.

Natural selection

George was discovered in 1972 and brought to the Charles Darwin Research Station. The tortoises on the Galapagos Islands, part of Ecuador, helped inspire Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection in the 1800s.

The Yale research, published in the journal *Current Biology*, relied on genetic material taken from museum samples of the Pinta tortoises, a species known as *Geochelone abingdoni*.

They matched that to a large database of genetic samples from all 11 existing species of Galapagos tortoises.

"We had this genotypic database for Pinta. With that data, we compared all of the individuals from our large database and bingo, we found this individual," Caccone said.

An exciting part of the finding is that the tortoise they found was the male offspring of a pure Pinta.

Now the search is on to find George's cousin, if he is alive, and any other close relatives.

"What we hope is that other tortoises from Pinta have survived as well," Caccone said.

She and colleagues hope to take a team of about 20 people back to Isabela for about a month to tag the population of about 1,000 tortoises and take blood samples from each -- no easy task for a creature that can weigh up to 400 pounds (200 kg).

Prospects of finding a suitable mate for George, who at 70 is still in his prime, are not yet clear, she said.

"This has now a ray of hope," she said. "Maybe he is not alone."

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