

Rare giant worm may wriggle far from home on Palouse

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COURTESY OF LEE MATTHEWS

The giant Palouse earthworm can grow up to 3 feet long, scientists say. This worm was found near Leavenworth.

The giant Palouse earthworm is still among the Northwest's rarest inhabitants, but two new discoveries suggest the native wigglers might be a bit more abundant than previously thought.

A pair of pinkish-white worms from opposite margins of the Columbia River basin appear to be members of the species, reputed to grow up to 3 feet long.

In March, researchers digging in a remnant of native prairie near Moscow, Idaho, accidentally minced one of the creatures and collected the bits. The rolling grasslands of the region, called the Palouse, are believed to be the species' historic habitat.

But the second worm came from a more surprising location: a forested slope above the Chelan County town of Leavenworth.

"If it is the correct species, it's pretty exciting to find it in an area where it hasn't been described before," said University of Idaho soil scientist Jodi Johnson-Maynard, who has been stalking the giant earthworm for years. "Maybe it's not just tied to the prairie."

The worm is the subject of a lawsuit filed in January by conservationists who want the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list it as an endangered species. The new discoveries are good news, said Noah Greenwald of the Center for Biological Diversity, a party to the lawsuit.

"This indicates that they're out there, they're not extinct, and it's not too late to save them," he said.

Both of the specimens were too damaged to identify conclusively, Johnson-Maynard cautioned. Based on outward appearance, though, *Driloleirus americanus* seems the most likely bet, she added. The scientific name means

"lily-smelling American worm," presumably because early naturalists reported the worms spit floral-scented mucous.

With most of the wild Palouse prairie plowed under for wheat fields, only about five of the worms had previously been spotted in the past 30 years. Night crawlers and other nonnative species have also contributed to the demise of the region's native earthworms.

But Seattleite Lee Matthews, who collected the Leavenworth specimen, said he's seen several odd worms since buying his property near the Bavarian-themed town in 1991. One of his first sightings came as he chipped away at a dirt bank to widen a roadway. A chunk of clay broke off and he saw something white.

"It was big enough that we thought it was a white snake," he said. "There must have been 12 to 16 inches sticking out."

He's seen one or two of the worms nearly every year, usually in wet weather.

"I haven't been hunting for these worms," he said. "They just pop up."

After reading about a University of Idaho student's discovery of a giant Palouse earthworm in 2005, Matthews contacted Johnson-Maynard. Last November, he scooped up a worm that appeared near death from the cold, and FedExed it to the University of Idaho.

The specimen was probably about 10 to 11 inches long when alive, Johnson-Maynard estimated.

Johnson-Maynard hopes to mount a more intensive worm search on the Leavenworth property. She's developing methods, such as the use of electrical currents, to flush worms out of the ground. She's also working with University of Kansas earthworm specialist Sam James to come up with a DNA test to easily identify the worms.

"The thought that keeps me going is that I know there are more out there," she said. "They're just difficult to find."