

There are a lot of things still waiting to be discovered in the underwater world. Divers make new discoveries all the time, but often don't realize the importance of what they have discovered.

But sometimes they do, and when they report their findings, new behaviors and sometimes entirely new species are added to the scientific record. Take, for example, a day last May when underwater videographer Jay Garbose came across something he had never seen before while on one of his local haunts off Juno Beach, Florida.

Jay is not exactly green behind the ears, having worked for both National Geographic and The Discovery Channel. But what he found on that day was a creature unlike anything he'd ever seen before. Lying on the bottom was a long, thin organism that he estimated to be between seven and ten feet in length. In subsequent interviews Jay said that when he first saw it, he thought it was a sea cucumber... then he realized how big it was.

Although scientists have now identified it as a new species of marine worm, they are baffled by what they have seen from Jay's video. It's not the Loch Ness Monster or the Creature from the Black Lagoon, but this new addition to marine taxonomy does have scientists scratching their heads.

For now, researchers at the Smithsonian say it may be some sort of Nemertean worm, but they're puzzled by some of its characteristics, namely its incredibly large

size. They're simply calling it "undescribed."

I just call it Jay's Worm. And it's not the only strange worm-like creature in the ocean. I once ran across an equally baffling animal during one of my own diving adventures.

It was 1994, and I was staying at the Anse Chastanet Resort on the island of St. Lucia, which is located mid way down the Caribbean's Windward Island chain. It was there that I heard about a mysterious reef creature locals called the "Thing."

I enjoy island tales as much as the next guy, but this one seemed especially improbable. A worm-like creature supposedly 15 feet in length and as big around as a man's arm - extremely elusive, and it only came out at night. Oh yes, it is especially sensitive to dive lights. In one divemaster's words, "*Man, light make it snap back into its holes faster than a rubber band.*"

Never one to pass up a good mystery,

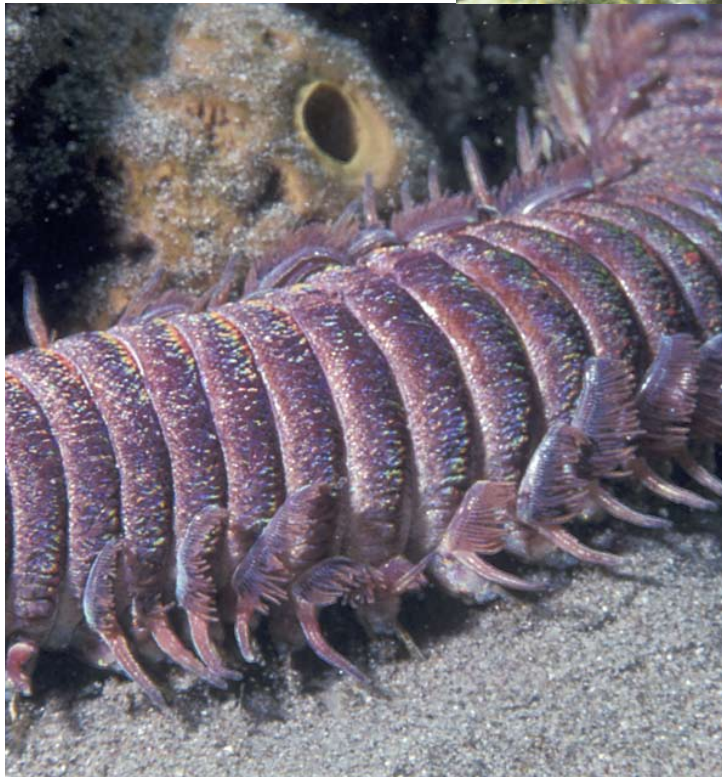


*Say hello to
the Caribbean's
heavy-weight of
sea worms, the
St. Lucia Thing
(Eunice roussaei)*

By Walt Stearns

Like all polychaetes, marine worms belonging to the Phylum *Annelida*, the giant St. Lucia Thing's (*Eunice roussaei*) body is divided into a repetitive sequence of round segments (reddish brown to purple with a pearl-like tint) separated by deep creases.

Like a centipede, large cirri (appendages used for locomotion) and feather shape gills flank both sides of this huge marine worm.



no matter how improbable it might seem, I planned a few night dives. Much to my surprise, I found that The Thing really did exist, and I was even able to get a picture of it!

It was a fairly small specimen compared to what the divemasters had described - about four feet in length and as thick as my wrist. But it didn't recoil from the light. Maybe it was sick.

Excited by my discovery, I passed a few images on to my good friend Paul Humann. He was working on the second revision of his and Ned Deloach's Reef Creature Identification book, so I figured if anyone could, Paul could identify it.

As it turned out, this was a new species never before identified. The best any of the scientists were able to do was determine it belongs to the Phylum *Annelida*, meaning little

rings, which is applied to most segmented worms. "Common earthworms, as well as many marine worms are members of this phylum," according to Paul.

This group's most distinguishing characteristic is that their body is divided into a repetitive sequence of round segments. The marine variety are known as polychaetes. Examples would include the bearded fireworm (*Hermodice carunculata*) commonly called bristle worm. Differing on this creature, body segments of dark to reddish/purple brown with a pearl-like tint, separated by deep creases with large cirri (appendages used for locomotion) and feather shaped gills that are soft to the touch (yes, I touched one) running down both sides, looking sort of like a centipede.

The identification of the Thing is tentative, as more taxonomic research needs to be done once viable specimens or tissue samples are obtained. Problem is not only are they nocturnal, they are still considered extremely rare, with only a handful sightings in Bonaire, Curacao and the Bahamas, in addition to St. Lucia.

For the moment, all anyone can say is that it belongs to the Family of elongated worms *Eunicidae*, giving rise to its genus species name: *Eunice roussaei*. And that it inhabits deep recesses in the reef, and can grow up to six feet in length.

The last part is speculative, since scientists are really not sure how big this animal grows. Who knows, there may be a 15-foot monster out there on the reef. It may be you who will find it. ♦