

# Creepy hollow

Jeremy prided himself on his scientific objectivity, so what made him believe in a caterwauling centipede?



**JEREMY HOLDEN**  
Ecologist  
Sumatra

**THE MYSTERY OF** the upah began one sultry afternoon in a small west-Sumatran village. I had been chatting with some locals about the venomous creatures that could be found in the surrounding forests and, as expected, the list included snakes such as king cobras, kraits and green pit vipers. I also heard about giant hornets that could knock out buffalos, and enormous scorpions whose stings were no worse than those of bees.

But the creature that was most feared was one with which I wasn't familiar: the upah. I was told that it was a giant, 30cm-long centipede with a thick, ghastly green body. It lived in the dead limbs of tall trees, from which it made a noise like a cat, and it could be heard calling from the same spot year after year. One villager said he had once found a large fallen branch from which this sound emanated. When he cut it open to see what was inside, a huge upah dashed out, gnashing its hook-like pincers. Everyone agreed it could deliver such a painful bite that grown men had been known to cry during the agonising nights that followed an attack.

I was sceptical. Why would a centipede –



**A *Scolopendra* centipede:** big, poisonous, but not renowned for calling from hollow tree trunks.



The search for the upah became even more tantalising when Jeremy's recording equipment strangely failed to work.

especially such a big one – be restricted to a single hole in a tree? How could it make any sound? And why hadn't I heard about it before?

I did know that there were big *Scolopendra* centipedes in Sumatra. Indeed, I was fortunate not to get bitten when I shook one out of my trousers one morning. But these beasts were forever on the move and certainly couldn't yowl like a cat. I asked if they were what the locals knew as the upah, but they said no. The upah was bigger, much bigger.

## The upah was a giant, 30cm-long centipede with a thick, green body, and it lived in the dead limbs of tall trees.

Some weeks later, as I walked through the forest, I heard a cat-like 'yao' followed by a rattling 'churr' coming from high up in the canopy. I didn't recognise it – it was not quite bird and not quite insect. Scanning the trees through binoculars, I noticed a hollow-looking branch at right angles to the trunk. The sound seemed to be coming from there. My guides heard it, too. "That's the upah!" they told me excitedly.

Over the years, I have learned to spot when local people are making things up – the game is given away by their shifting gaze or a pleading whine that implores belief. However, when telling stories they believe, their tone is natural and matter of fact. This is what I had sensed when they spoke about the upah, which is why I hadn't dismissed its existence out of hand.

Later that week, I trekked back into the forest with a tape recorder and gun mic to record the sound. The upah – or whatever it was – was still calling from the same place. I set up the mic and pressed 'record', but for some reason the machine wouldn't work. This unaccountable equipment malfunction spurred me to believe that I was on to something; I was experiencing what is known as 'the curse of cryptozoology'. The mystery was deepening, but I was obliged to move on before I could solve it.

**A FEW YEARS** later, while walking through a different Sumatran rainforest with the legendary birder Frank Lambert, I recounted the story of the upah. He listened, but was more interested in hearing about my bird list for the national park, which now stood at 381 species. He mentioned one that I hadn't seen: the cryptic Malaysian honeyguide. "They're not easy to spot," he told me, "but you can often hear them."

Moments later, I froze. From the canopy came that cat-like 'yao' followed by the rattling 'churr'. I stood there with my finger in the air, pulling that face people adopt when they're really concentrating: mouth slightly ajar, eyes widened in anticipation. "That's the upah!" I cried when the sound came again. Frank looked at my delighted face with a touch of pity. "No," he said. "That's actually the Malaysian honeyguide."

And so the mystery of the upah ended, not in a giant centipede with vocal abilities as I had credulously hoped, but with the 382nd species on my bird list.



**It was the call of a Malaysian honeyguide that finally solved the upah mystery.**