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In Newsweek Magazine

Prehistoric Fat Rat

Sep 28, 2003 8:00 PM EDT

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The most pampered of guinea pigs, raised on the finest pet food, might, with a bit of luck, grow to more than a kilogram. That makes even more remarkable the massive proportions of Goya, a prehistoric guinea-pig cousin whose skeleton was recently uncovered in South America by paleontologists from the University of Tübingen in Germany, the Francisco de Miranda National Experimental University in Venezuela and UCLA. The researchers estimate that Goya, the first known specimen of the 8 million-year-old rodent *Phoberomys pattersoni*, would have tipped the scales at 700 kilograms and measured three meters from nose to tail—the size of a modern-day buffalo.

Northern Venezuela, where the skeletons turned up, is now bone-dry, but back then it was covered with plenty of riverside grasses for Goya to graze on. How this bucolic existence came to an end remains a mystery. One theory is that climate change killed Goya. Or, if Goya were still around 3 million years ago, when the land bridge at Panama first joined North and South America, foreign animals may have migrated south to prey on *P. pattersoni*, who would've been too big to hide and too slow to run.

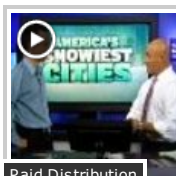
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