



News Release

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Giant prehistoric reptile prowled Scottish waters, fossils reveal

A new species of marine reptile that lived around 170 million years ago has been identified from fossils found on the Isle of Skye.

The dolphin-like creatures were as long as 14 feet from snout to tail, and inhabited warm, shallow seas around Scotland during the Jurassic Period, researchers say. They were near the top of the food chain at the time and preyed on fish and other reptiles.

A team of palaeontologists – led by the University of Edinburgh and including a consortium of Scottish institutions – studied fossil fragments of skulls, teeth, vertebrae and an upper arm bone unearthed on the island over the past 50 years.

They identified several examples of extinct aquatic animals – known as ichthyosaurs – which lived during the Early-to-Middle Jurassic, including the entirely new species.

The team is the largest collaborative group of palaeontologists working in Scotland. Their analysis of the fossil collection is the first study of ichthyosaurs found in Scotland, and many of the specimens studied have been donated to museums by amateur collectors.

The new species – *Dearcmhara shawcrossi* – is named in honour of an amateur enthusiast, Brian Shawcross, who recovered the creature's fossils from the island's Berreraig Bay in 1959. *Dearcmhara* – pronounced 'jark vara' – is Scottish Gaelic for marine lizard, and pays homage to the history of Skye and the Hebrides. The species is one of the few to have ever been given a Gaelic name.

During the Jurassic Period, much of Skye was under water. At the time, it was joined to the rest of the UK and was part of a large island positioned between landmasses that gradually drifted apart and became Europe and North America.

Dr Steve Brusatte, of the University of Edinburgh's School of GeoSciences, who led the study, said: "During the time of dinosaurs, the waters of Scotland were prowled by big reptiles the size of motor boats. Their fossils are very rare, and only now, for the first time we've found a new species that was uniquely Scottish.

"Without the generosity of the collector who donated the bones to a museum instead of keeping them or selling them, we would have never known that this amazing animal existed. We are honoured to name the new species after Mr. Shawcross and will do the same if any other collectors wish to donate new specimens!"

Skye is one of the few places in the world where fossils from the Middle Jurassic Period can be found. The team say discoveries made there could provide valuable insights into how marine reptiles evolved.

Dr Nick Fraser, of National Museums Scotland, said: “Not only is this a very special discovery, but it also marks the beginning of a major new collaboration involving some of the most eminent palaeontologists in Scotland. It has brought together key organisations, local collectors on Skye and specialists from further afield. We are excited by the programme of work and are already working on additional new finds. This is a rich heritage for Scotland.”

The study is published in the *Scottish Journal of Geology*.

The work was carried out by a consortium involving the University of Edinburgh, National Museums Scotland, the University of Glasgow’s Hunterian Museum, Scottish National Heritage and Staffin Museum, Isle of Skye.

Members of the research team, known as PalAlba, will be exhibiting the bones of *Dearcmhara* at a one-day fossil event at Our Dynamic Earth in Edinburgh on Sunday, 18 January from 10am-4pm.

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