

The Bioluminescent Lizards that Lived in New York City Sewers
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On October 3, 1893 workers building new waste pipes in service of the East River sewage treatment plant Manhattan discovered three 3-foot long lizards lighting up the subterranean tunnels that had just been completed. Of the four men, one survivor gave an interview in 1975, describing the creatures as “bright as a kerosene lamp and the size of hound.” One of the lizards was promptly captured and brought to the Museum of Natural History on the Upper West Side. There it was euthanized and dissected by one of the first women veterinary doctors in the city, Dr. Angela DeHamalalala. Under the lizard’s armor plating, and just anterior to its brain, she located a sac of luminous fluid whose source of light could not at first be identified.

Dr. DeHamalalala set aside some of the liquid from the sac, a viscous fluid similar to the consistency of blood that long ago lost its glow. It was only in recent years, with the advent of advanced microscopy and that scientists have begun to unlock the secret of the “glow lizard’s” luminosity. One of the scientists, a molecular biologist Dr. Deirdre Flyswallow, is the great-great granddaughter of Dr. DeHamalalala. “I owe this to Angela. We never met, of course, but her portrait hangs in my apartment and I see her every morning on the way to the lab.”

After nearly a decade of analysis, genetic examinations, and gas mass spectrometry, it turns out the the fluid, once able to light up a room with just an ounce, is a complex organic compound made up of acetic acid, carbon dioxide, zinc tri-oxide, and organic compounds that have degraded to such an extent that only molecular fragments remain. Tissues samples from the “glow lizards” have also been genetically sequenced and a better understanding of the animal’s evolutionary roots is becoming clear. The three animals were likely the last specimens--what’s known as endings--of what’s been posthumously called *Iguana illumini*. No additional species have been found.

Dr. Flyswallow has shown that the extinct creatures likely mated by flashing different tones and prospective mates. That all the specimens discovered, and since euthanized, were female implies that their illuminated state at the time of discovery meant they were eager for mates, though none were to be found.

One final note: a patch of one of the creature’s scaly skin can be found in a display case at the Museum of Natural History, though this writer has promised to keep it secret. On a recent evening, well after closing, this research scientist was escorted to the case and noticed a slight glow emanating, a need for a mate across time.