

## THE MYSTERY OF THE FERNANDINA "MOUSE".

by

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In Noticias 44, Fritz Trillmich contributed an article on the danger to the endemic rice rats of Fernandina (Narborough) Island if alien black rats should be introduced. He pointed out that two species had been recognized, *Nesoryzomys narboroughi*, which was present in good numbers, and *N. fernandinae*, a smaller species which was known only from skulls recently found in fresh owl pellets. No mouse has hitherto been identified on Fernandina, an island still considered free from introduced species. Dr. Trillmich's article has provoked comment — which is just what he intended. Ed.

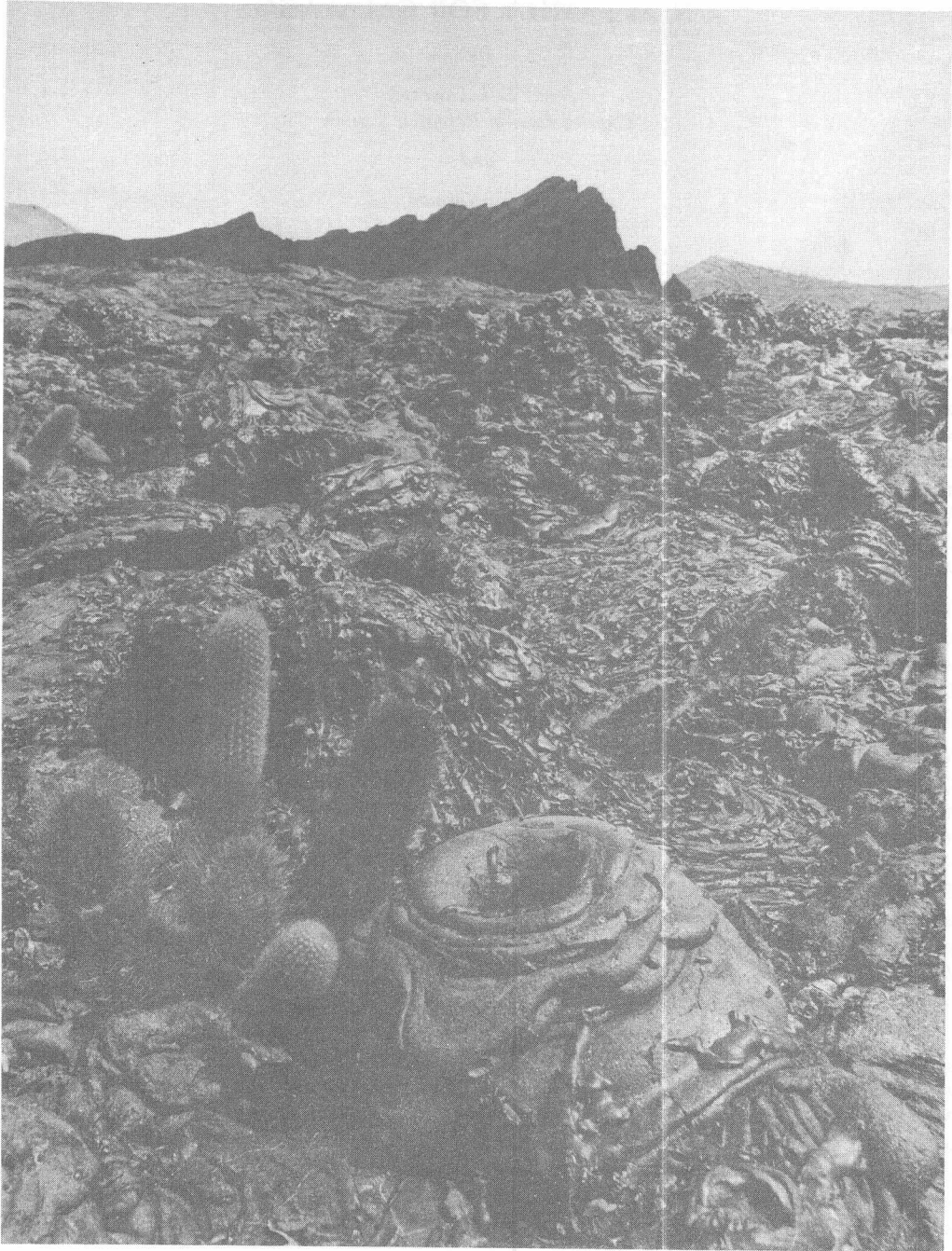
Debbie Clark's chapter on the native mammals in the Galapagos volume in the Key Environments series (Pergamon Press, Oxford) and Fritz Trillmich's recent plea in Noticias for captive breeding of the Fernandina endemic rat have revived memories of observations we made 13 years ago.

In late May 1974, Beagle III set us ashore at Cape Hammond, together with the Belgian malacologist, Guy Coppois. There we had plenty of opportunity to get acquainted with rice rats, not only at night but even in the morning when we had to drive them out of the tents. After some days on the coast, we had to begin the wearisome task of carrying supplies of water to our secondary camp at the base of the main slope of the volcano. On one of these shuttles we found it convenient to stay the night in the middle of a vast lava field; it was an area where large lava plates offered a rough but even surface for spending a night under the stars.

A few tall *Jasminocereus* cacti stood guardian over us. One of them had lost one of its cylindrical segments, and this lay on the lava as a hollow tube as the soft tissue inside had decayed. During our frugal breakfast we suddenly noticed a small rodent probing around the dead cactus tube. We were immediately convinced that it was not the same species as our furry tent-mates at the coast. Then it ran into the hollow cactus and we were able to catch it by holding our hands on both ends of the tube. Its capture presented problems because we were only equipped to collect plants and snails. While we were considering what to do, it escaped and disappeared into a fissure in the lava. To cut down weight on these tiring water treks we had brought no camera and so we cannot produce any proof of our observation. In view of this and of the passage of 13 years, the following description should be treated with great caution.

The animal had a distinctly mousy appearance and was only half the size of the rats we knew at the coast. It was more slender; its fur was less dense, more grey and lacked the brown tinge of the other. Its ears were larger and they were naked; we are fairly certain that it was this last fact which immediately persuaded us that this was a different kind of animal. It did not seem particularly scared of us and we believe that it disappeared into the lava crack to avoid the sunlight rather than to escape from us. Our immediate reaction was to think that Fernandina had got its first introduced mammal but, on further consideration, it struck us as unlikely that recently introduced mice would have traversed the several kilometres of sterile lava that separated us from the coast. It seemed more likely that this little animal had come from one of the clumps of vegetation that occur in the south-western part of Fernandina's lava fields.

When we returned to the CDRS and reported our observation, we were met with solid scepticism and ended up by concluding that what we had seen must have been an immature Fernandina rat. However, now that there is recent evidence of another species of rodent on the island, we are left with little doubt in our minds that this was the animal we actually saw alive. Furthermore we believe that there should be a fair chance of capturing a specimen in, or close to, the islands of vegetation in the sea of lava that covers south-western Fernandina.



Lava Flow with Cactus — *photographed by Alan Root*