Giant Predatory Ichthyosaur Discovered in Nevada

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An enormous marine predator lurked in the Triassic seas covering Nevada: a 30-foot-long sea monster big enough to eat reptiles its own size.

Named *Thalattoarchon saurophagis* — lizard-eating sovereign of the sea — the four-finned icthyosaur was a large apex marine predator, occupying the same position atop its food web as present-day great white sharks and killer whales, a team of paleontologists reports Jan. 7 [in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.](http://www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1216750110)

“It was the first giant air-breathing marine predator equipped with teeth with cutting edges,” said[Ryosuke Motani](https://www.geology.ucdavis.edu/faculty/motani.html), a paleobiologist at the University of California, Davis who was not involved in the discovery.

*T. saurophagis* had a mouth full of 5-inch-long teeth and existed just 8 million years after a mass extinction killed most of the planet’s marine fauna at the end of the Permian period, 252 million years ago. That such a large predator emerged so soon after a catastrophic resetting of life on Earth suggests marine ecosystems might have rebounded more quickly than terrestrial ecosystems, the team reports.

Pulled from a remote mountain range that’s part of the Favret Formation in central Nevada, the beast’s 244-million-year-old fossil is now housed in [The Field Museum](http://fieldmuseum.org/) in Chicago. Paleontologists unearthed the mega-reptile’s partially complete fossil in 2008, though it was first spotted in 1997.

[](http://blog-admin.wired.com/wiredscience/2013/01/enormous-ichthyosaur/01_ms1004_091030_0104/)

A jaw full of five-inch teeth helped*Thalattoarchon saurophagis* tear into prey. (*John Weinstein,*[*The Field Museum*](http://fieldmuseum.org/)*, Chicago)*

[](http://blog-admin.wired.com/wiredscience/2013/01/enormous-icthyosaur/02_jaws-at-discovery-nk-2005/)

The jaws of *Thalattoarchon* in the field. ([*Nicole Klein*](http://www.paleontology.uni-bonn.de/ma_nicole_klein)*, Universität Bonn, Germany*)