

How Did Amelia Earhart Die? And Was She Eaten By Crabs?

PM [popularmechanics.com/flight/a74133907/amelia-earhart-disappearance-crab-theory-purdue](https://www.popularmechanics.com/flight/a74133907/amelia-earhart-disappearance-crab-theory-purdue)

Andrew Daniels

October 14, 2026



4 min read

This story is a collaboration with [Biography.com](https://www.biography.com).

Nearly 90 years after Amelia Earhart vanished over the Pacific Ocean, a research team has arrived by ship at Nikumaroro Island to investigate what could be the remains of her [downed Lockheed Model 10-E Electra](#). But the researchers have already decided they won't risk sleeping on the island. Following a five-day, 830-nautical-mile ocean voyage, the 17-person expedition backed by Purdue University and the Archaeological Legacy Institute arrived on October 12 to investigate the "Taraia Object," a satellite-image anomaly that could conceivably be the remains of Earhart's aircraft. Researchers plan to probe the lagoon with a magnetometer, sonar and dredging equipment, but every evening they'll retreat to the passenger ship *Marin Mainiku*. Purdue diplomatically says the island's coconut crabs, whose size and nocturnal activity make camping "impractical," are one reason. Translation: When darkness falls and giant crabs begin crawling out of the jungle, the scientists would rather sleep offshore.



Reinhard Dirscherl//Getty Images

That precaution has revived one of the most gruesome theories about Earhart's fate: that she reached Nikumaroro alive, died there as a castaway, and had her remains consumed and scattered by the island's crabs. Coconut crabs—the world's largest land-dwelling arthropods—can span three feet and wield claws capable of exerting an estimated 3,300 newtons of force. They eat fruit and coconuts, but they also scavenge carcasses and hunt animals, including rats and seabirds. One disturbing experiment involving a pig carcass even demonstrated how coconut crabs could seemingly make a body disappear. It's a nightmare-inducing possibility, but it's only one chapter in the decades-long effort to solve history's most enduring [aviation mystery](#).

One of the most ambitious earlier searches began in August 2019, when Robert Ballard, the deep-sea explorer who uncovered the *Titanic* and [John F. Kennedy's](#) WWII patrol boat, among other [famous wrecks](#), set out on a mission to find the aircraft at the center of the mystery.

On July 2, 1937, Earhart and her navigator, Fred Noonan, were en route to Howland Island in the Pacific, about 1,700 miles southwest of Honolulu. They were six weeks and 20,000 miles into their trip around the world. By then, Earhart had already become the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic and from Hawaii to the U.S. mainland; her globetrotting trek would simply be the latest in a line of incredible accomplishments for the aviation pioneer.

Earhart and Noonan, of course, never made it to Howland. Somewhere along the way, the Electra grew short on fuel, and the pilot and her navigator lost sight of the tiny, two-and-a-half-square-mile island in the middle of the ocean. No one knows exactly what happened next.

Conventional wisdom holds that the Electra simply ran out of fuel and crash-landed somewhere close to Howland, sinking thousands of feet into the ocean. That's what the U.S. government believes, at least. But others think Earhart and Noonan instead landed about 350 nautical miles southeast of Howland, touching down on the coral reef barrier that surrounds Gardner Island—now known as Nikumaroro Island. They point to the [distress radio calls](#) that came from the island over the next several nights following the purported crash.

Ballard and Allison Fundis of the Ocean Exploration Trust [searched the waters off Nikumaroro](#), while a team of archaeologists from *National Geographic* combed the island to find traces of the plane.

During the expedition, [National Geographic reported on a theory](#) that might explain what happened to Earhart and Noonan if they indeed landed near Nikumaroro: Noonan died, the Electra floated away, and Earhart lived for weeks on the island with no creatures but the indigenous, three-foot-long coconut crabs to keep her company.

Those [crabs](#), the theory goes, ate Earhart after she perished on the island.



In 1940, British settlers found 13 bones, including a skull, on the island—“possibly that of Amelia Earhardt [sic],” according to a telegram sent after the discovery. Upon further examination, doctors said the bones belonged to a short, European male, though some anthropologists disagree with the assessment.

But if the 13 bones *did* belong to Earhart, what happened to the other 193 in a human skeleton that weren’t found? Credit the crabs: The Brits who uncovered the bones said “coconut crabs had scattered many bones,” per the *National Geographic* report.

To test this theory, The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery (TIGHAR) gave the crabs a pig carcass to feast on. Turns out the crabs swarmed the pig’s body, removed most of its flesh, and moved some of the bones as far as 60 feet away. “This tells us crabs drag bones,” TIGHAR’s Tom King told *National Geographic*.

While Ballard and co. left [Nikumaroro without the Electra](#)—after a visual examination of 100 percent of the island down to 2,400 feet, Ballard couldn’t find any evidence of the plane—the search may not be over.

National Geographic archaeologist Fredrik Hiebert and his team may have found fragments of the skull from 1940 in the Te Umwanibong Museum and Cultural Centre in Tarawa, Kiribati. And forensic anthropologists say it belonged to an adult female.

“We don’t know if it’s [Earhart] or not,” the University of South Florida’s Erin Kimmerle told *National Geographic*, “but all lines of evidence point to the 1940 bones being in this museum.” Kimmerle reconstructed the skull, and the team sent it out for DNA testing. It wasn’t until 2021 that Hiebert told *Radio Kiribati* the DNA results showed the bones actually belonged to a young Polynesian woman who had lived in Kiribati 1,000 years ago, as reported by [Radio New Zealand](#).

We might never know what truly happened to Amelia Earhart—whether she died at sea, survived for a time on Nikumaroro, was eaten by crabs, or eventually met up with [D.B. Cooper](#) and Jimmy Hoffa on a beach in Mexico. But 89 years after her disappearance, researchers are once again searching an isolated Pacific island for her plane, then retreating offshore each night as giant crabs reclaim the darkness. The Taraia Object may prove to be Earhart’s Electra, another false lead, or something in between. Whatever the expedition finds, [the world is still looking for Amelia](#).



Andrew Daniels is the Director of News for Popular Mechanics, Runner's World, Bicycling, Best Products, and Biography. In a past life, he was a senior editor at Men's Health and wrote for Playboy, among lots of other publications that have since deleted his work. He's also the author of *The Barstool Book of Sports: Stats, Stories, and Other Stuff for Drunken Debate*, which one Amazon reviewer called "the perfect book for the crapper," and another called "moronic." He lives in Allentown, Pennsylvania with his wife and dog, Draper.

[Read full bio](#)

Readers Also Read
