

THE ORANGE COUNTY BETA REGISTER

Camping with Ice Age beasts

By [WILLIAM DIEPENBROCK](#)

2010-01-07 08:19:47



Just like that, Spencer Tanguay became the center of attention. Following a trail of broken fossils, the 16-year-old unearthed a thrilling find: Two lower teeth of an ancient horse, embedded just under the surface of a rocky canyon hillside.

Murmurs of congratulations flow from his companions, fellow fossil hunters exploring California's Red Rock Canyon State Park in search of evidence of life long past.

For two days, this is the pattern: More than 40 fossil hunters, some just 10 years old, fan out through the state park's distinctive red-hued hills, scan the rocky soil for clues and erupt into sudden shouts that brought professional paleontologists to confirm a find.

Tanguay's discovery is important — teeth are among the best sources of information about long-extinct critters — and one of 17 significant finds made during this year's Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County fall fossil hunt.

This is our first fossil-prospecting trip, a long-awaited adventure for my son, Julian, a 10-year-old fanatic about ancient life.

Red Rock is an Ice Age fossil hunter's paradise, a stunning area of High Desert where ancient upheavals have tilted up vast cross-sections of lava, ash and sediment dating back 8 million to 12.5 million years. But even without the fossils, the camping trip is worth the long desert drive past clusters of small towns and clumps of Joshua trees.

Friday evening is a social revelation: A whole community of people who are just as passionate as my son about fossils and long-dead animals. A college student sets up a slideshow on her laptop and my son and other kids race to call out the scientific names. Major geek-stuff, and for the first time in his life, my son has real competition.

Saturday's revelation is altogether different.

Red Rock Canyon's sudden, stark beauty hits us when we emerge from our tent into the early morning light. The sun peeks over the rim of the canyon, bathing hillsides in shades of red, amber and brown. We take a few extra minutes just to admire how the light hits the rocks, then gear up and head over to main camp, where a catered breakfast awaits — one of the pleasures of a hosted camping trip.

Julian, bursting with energy, races through breakfast and keeps double-checking his fossil-hunting kit.

The museum, which has hosted the trip since 1998, swiftly prepares us for the day. We're told to seek out the tell-tale smooth shapes and right angles that herald fossil fragments amid the jumbles of rocks and pebbles. We're told to follow the fragments upslope for the best shot at finding something significant.

It's not easy, though. We're new to the desert and there's a lot to see.

Even in the day's heat, the majesty of the surrounding hillsides commands our appreciation. One section looks like a medieval fortress; others are carved by wind and rain into even more fantastical shapes. Patches of Joshua Trees dot the landscape, which is also home to clumps of creosote, buckwheat and Mormon Tea shrubs.

It's hard to accept that we're really, truly digging for history.

When we find our first cluster of fossils, Julian begins bubbling over. "Call a scientist, Dad, call a scientist." He raises his voice: "I've got something."

Our first few finds are exciting, but not of great scientific merit. Bone fragments and root castings. Still, I don't see Julian's fervor lagging. And we're assured few prospectors leave without making a discovery.

We dig all morning without finding much, though others make discoveries. Aviva Stein of Laguna Hills helped find a camel pelvis, toe and heel bone, and the ankle bone of a small horse. These animals are common here, but important steps to learning about their early evolution.

Our turn for glory arrives in early afternoon, when Julian and a girl, 10, dig up a camel shoulder bone. This time, they become the center of attention as the expedition's leader, paleontologist David Whistler, bags the find, identifies it with their names and marks it with the site's GPS coordinates.

That joy carries us into the evening, when we reluctantly retreat to camp. But it's not long before Julian is off again, first for a round of rock climbing, and then a nature hike, a nature talk, stargazing, dinner and s'mores. Julian appears tireless through it all, even pushing other campers to tell scary stories around the fire pit.

Red Rock at night is as fascinating as by day — the colors disappear, replaced by the sounds of the wild desert and a vast ocean of sky speckled with stars. Tonight's moon is so bright we don't even need flashlights to navigate. Telescopes handily discern lunar seas and two of Jupiter's larger moons.

We're back in the tent by about 10. Julian might be tireless, but the old man needs to rest before Sunday morning's nature walk and the trip's final fossil hunt. It's a chilly autumn night, though, and my sleeping bag isn't quite up to the challenge. I add layers frantically before I can settle down. Several times, the howling and yelping of coyotes pulls us to reluctant awareness. And in the morning, paw prints around tent walls testify to our proximity to the wild.

We see a few other signs of modern wildlife. A jackrabbit lopes across a roadway one afternoon. A few lizards scatter on another. A bat flies through the camp and ravens croak amid the hills. Scorpions and tortoises live here, but they don't make an appearance on this venture.

While this was our first trip, many participants, including Stein, have made this an annual trek for more

than five years.

"My favorite part of the trip is getting to work with everyone from the museum," said Stein, 16, who also volunteered this summer at the museum's vertebrate paleontology lab. "It's great to be able to talk to and work with people who really love what they do."

One of those people is Whistler, a museum curator emeritus who is marking his 50th year searching the area for fossils. Whistler is one of the field's premiere field workers. He helped expand the number of species discovered at Red Rock to 96, up from 22 noted in a 1919 survey. Whistler's intimate knowledge of the area, Whistler's Ridge is named for him, means visitors go from desert novices to Red Rock experts in just a few short days.

Sunday's prospecting brings new finds, but not for Julian. And the Saturday discovery has raised his expectations and whet his appetite for more — he's no longer content with bagging fossil fragments. He wants something big, like the skull of an ancient elephant.

The final dig ends too soon for him — he could have stayed out several more hours. Apparently, others feel the same way — as we drag our heels departing, we run into them at the nearby visitor's center, picking over fossil samples and reviewing the area's history.

Like us, they are unwilling to give up the desert just yet.

Will we be back? Julian spends the trip home planning next year's hunt while I calculate the cost of a warmer sleeping bag and bigger tent.

© Copyright 2010 Freedom Communications. All Rights Reserved.

[Privacy Policy](#) | [User Agreement](#) | [Site Map](#)