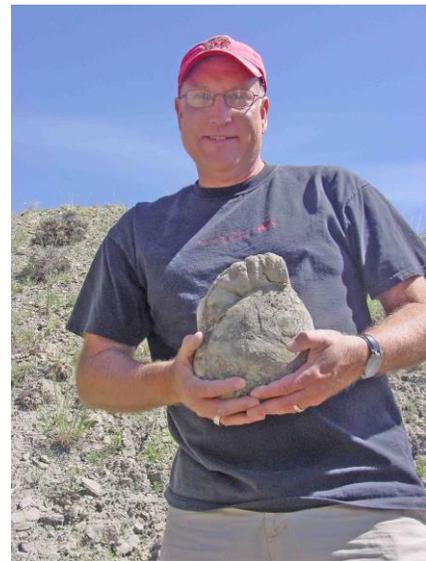


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Return to Wyoming, 2009 Michael Hutchins

My annual trip to hunt fossils in Wyoming was very enjoyable this year. As documented in a previous article, I hunt the Wyoming badlands each year with a group of friends, including Kent Sundell, Curator of Paleontology at the Tate Museum at Casper College in Casper, WY. Kent leases hundreds of acres of badlands for fossil collection for both scientific and commercial purposes. He generously allows a motley group of wildlife biologists and zoo professionals, including myself, to collect on his site annually. This year we spent two days (May 8, 10, 2009) collecting Oligocene mammals from the White River formation at Kent's site near Douglas, WY and an additional day (May 9, 2009) collecting Cretaceous ammonites at a site near Powder River, WY known as "Notches Dome." The site, which is about 50 miles west of Casper, is remote and difficult to find, and we were the only ones present.

The ammonite site, which consists of 120 million year-old Cretaceous marine shale of the upper Mowry formation, was an incredibly rich location, even though it had been collected off and on for the past decade. Upon arrival, all of us fanned out and began searching for the grey nodules containing ammonites, which can be found weathered out of several layers along the steep, eroded terrain. One after another, we all began to spot the exposed ribs of these ancient cephalopods in nodules. While most of the nodules and enclosed ammonites ranged from 8-12 inches in diameter, some of these monsters were over 2 feet in diameter and weighed more than 100 pounds. These had to be rolled down the hill and then transported up the rough, steep road on a dolly to the trucks waiting above. I hauled out two nodules in my backpack that must together have weighed nearly 50 pounds.



Breaking the nodules open with a rock hammer is not recommended, as the nodules are crystallized and hard and will shatter like glass if hit. It is actually preferable to find examples that have been completely weathered out, but these are few and far between. I found one weathered specimen that was light and easily transported, especially compared to those enclosed or partially enclosed in nodules. The other two in nodules I sent home with a friend who is driving back to South Carolina. Carrying them onto a plane would have been virtually impossible and, given their weight, they would have been very expensive to ship. These will be prepared and exposed, hopefully successfully, using a pneumatic hammer and air scribe.

My success at the 30 million year-old Oligocene site was less dramatic, but still productive. As I did last year, I found portions of mandibles with teeth of horses, camels, oreodonts, and rhino. I also found many miscellaneous limb and foot bones of various species, including one of the huge *Archaeotherium*, also known as the "Hell Pig." I'll place this along with the tooth of this species that I found in 2008.

For the first time ever, I actually found one complete skull eroding out of a nodule. This was of an ancient rabbit, *Paleolagus*. I sent this back to South Carolina with my friend to be cleaned and prepared for display. Other specimens were found that day, but surprisingly, no complete skulls or full skeletons of oreodonts were discovered, as had occurred on several occasions last year. However, the rarest and most surprising find of the first day was by John Brueggen, Director of the St. Augustine Alligator Farm in Florida. He found a perfectly preserved, pure white, fossilized bird egg spotted lying loose in a stream bed. Kent has found eggs on occasion, but these larger specimens appeared to be from ducks or geese. The specimen found by John on this trip was slightly larger than that of a robin's egg and appeared to be that of a passerine.



One evening we visited Kent's house, where he usually prepares a wild game dinner for the participants. We all feasted upon barbecued pronghorn antelope, bison, and elk, all of which were taken by Kent who is an avid hunter. All of the participants also had a chance to visit his fossil preparation lab and office, which is filled to the ceiling with specimens, many unprepared. I couldn't help myself and bought (for an extremely reasonable price) a two foot long fossilized turtle shell, something that I've wanted for some time. I'd seen many "blown out" turtles in the field, but this specimen was complete and in fantastic condition. Given its weight and bulk, this too would have been difficult and expensive to ship, so I also sent this back with the friend who had driven from South Carolina. I'll wait until my other specimens are prepared and then make a trip south to pick them up and transport them all home.

I look forward to my trip next year, but wonder how much longer I'll be able to tolerate the rugged conditions. On all three days, we were outside for 7-8 hours in 80-90F degree weather and walked many miles in very rugged, rocky arid terrain, fit for only sagebrush, coyotes, pronghorn antelope, prairie rattlers and horned toads. My feet had to be iced nightly and the constant exposure to the heat and sun (there is no shade) was exhausting. But I held up pretty well and ultimately survived this personal "stress test." I look forward to doing it again next year, even though at 58, I am no longer a "spring chicken." Perhaps all those years of chasing mountain goats at 9,000 feet elevation in the Olympic Mountains of Washington State has had a lasting effect on my health. Then again, I may keel over one of these days . . . But, what a wonderful way to go.