

FORT MYERS FLORIDA WEEKLY®

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FOSSILS

... FLORIDA'S PAST
UNEARTHED—ONE
FIND AT A TIME

BY EVAN WILLIAMS
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STANDING IN A DeSOTO COUNTY CREEK near the Peace River in mid-April, when the water is near its lowest annual point, Ken Follmann sifted through the gravel in his screen. A large shark's tooth emerged from the grit. This nearly 3-inch fang from the creek bed conjured Florida's ancient past, a lost world that seems almost mythical

▲ Ken Follmann wades a tributary of the Peace River for fossils.

▲ Barbourfelis loveorum, an extinct large cat once roamed here. This one sits in the Florida Museum of Natural History Fossil Hall at the University of Florida.

SEE FOSSILS, A10 ►

DALLAS KRENTZEL / WIKIMEDIA PHOTO; EVAN WILLIAMS / FLORIDA WEEKLY; ERIC RADDATZ ILLUSTRATION

INSIDE



Soul-searing

Star tenor Michael Fabiano performed for the Metropolitan Opera's gala from his mother's Bonita Springs condo. **A31 ►**



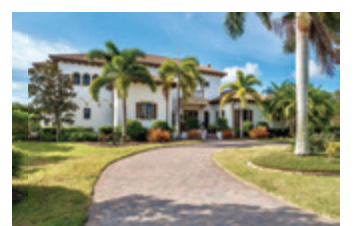
Brash youth

Young leaders on road to success should ask themselves these questions. **A26 ►**



Turtle return

Sea turtle first documented in 2002 returns to Juno Beach. **A8 ►**



Real Estate

Elite, elegant estate at 8581 Belle Meade Drive, Fort Myers. **A45 ►**

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Police look to treatment, not jail, for mentally ill



BY ROGER WILLIAMS
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Law enforcement officers had to deal with him first, before he ever got to a prison where the Florida Department of Corrections allegedly failed to provide adequate mental health treatment.

What finally happened was reported this way by the news site Politico, in

2018: "A schizophrenic inmate in Florida with a history of self-injurious behavior was unmonitored when he bit through his own wrist, teeth gnawing until slicing through his vein."

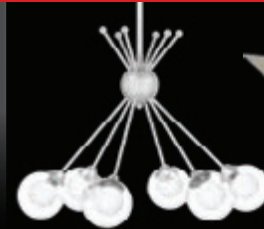
That case and nine others were part of a lawsuit that pressured state legislators last year to boost money supporting

SEE TREATMENT, A14 ►



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“It’s always changing every season . . . And it washes away the bank and exposes new fossils.”

— Ken Follmann, fossil hunting guide



EVAN WILLIAMS / FLORIDA WEEKLY

Ken Follmann sifts through gravel and grit, near the Peace River in DeSoto County, for the fossilized bones of ancient Florida animals.

FOSSILS

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now with 20-foot tall sloths, armadillo relatives as big as Volkswagen Beetles and Megalodon sharks the size of semi-truck trailers, with bone-crunching teeth like this one.

I had agreed to meet Mr. Follmann, a fossil hunting guide, as much for the pleasure of getting out in the woods after being cooped up due to the coronavirus lockdown as for whatever we might discover. But I stared wide-eyed at this fairly vicious looking tooth, which he gave to me to keep; not an entirely uncommon find, but still one of the treasures periodically relinquished by the river.

In the coming rainy months, the area



COURTESY KEN FOLLMANN

A fossil hunting group from Cape Coral Hospital with guide Ken Follmann.

where we stood would fill with water well over our heads.

“It’s always changing every season,” Mr. Follmann said. “... And it washes away the bank and exposes new fossils.”

The Peace River is famous for its fossilized remains; over-picked, some say, though new findings show up every year as its waters rise and fall. It originates south of Lake Hancock just under Highway 17 in Central Florida and flows down past Bartow, Fort Meade, Bowling Greene, Wauchula, Zolfo Springs and Arcadia, finally opening up into the Charlotte Harbor at Punta Gorda and emptying in to the Gulf of Mexico.

With some of the hotspots along the Peace an easy day trip from the Southwest or Southeast coasts, the beds are loaded with fossilized teeth and other remains that offer even those who just like poking in the dirt a chance to feel like a real fossil hunter.

Fossils have been stored under much of Florida since these megafauna — and many smaller, now extinct species — began to make their homes here some 40 million years ago. Amid various sea levels and ice ages, their bones have been unevenly layered throughout the state, a jumble of time periods found under areas from what is now a residential development in West Palm Beach to an old sand mine in Levy County.

You won’t find dinosaur bones here unless you were able to dig down many thousands of feet because they went extinct at 65 million years ago, when Florida was still underwater.

Over millennia, the Peace wiggled laterally like a snake. It has been found to

encase the fossils of at least two distinct age ranges: those roughly 12,000 to 25,000 years old and those in the 8 million to 10 million year-old range, explained Dr. Richard Hulbert, collections manager and coordinator of the vertebrate paleontology program for the Florida Museum of Natural History at the University of Florida in Gainesville.

The more recent age includes classic land animals like the woolly mammoth, mastodon, bison, horse and alligators. The older period when more of the state was covered in water include megalodon or “big tooth” sharks, dugongs (a manatee relative), and other marine creatures.

The time discrepancy is explained by a series of ice ages that brought two periods together, geologically. Geologists call it an “unconformity”: one layer of sediment sitting on another with a big gap in time in between. Once in a while you could find a rare deposit of something between 2.5 million or 5 million years old in the Peace.

The Peace has been heavily excavated by fossil hunters since the 1960s, often amateurs whose findings have proved crucial to professional paleontologists and scientists who study them. You need a \$5 permit to collect fossils on your own or you can hire a guide. The hope is that you’ll also donate scientifically significant finds to the cause of public knowledge.



EVAN WILLIAMS / FLORIDA WEEKLY

A Megalodon shark tooth and other fossils found near the Peace River in April.

Megalodon sharks teeth are the most sought after prize by amateur collectors and sellers. Venice Beach has been branded “Shark Tooth Capital of the World,” though many have been found under the Peace as well — sometimes smaller ones from Megalodon pups who would swim inland to shallower, safer waters.

Fossil hunt

Mr. Follmann and I hiked through the thick grass and dappled light of a Florida forest south of Arcadia off Highway 17, passing a grapefruit tree and crossing a single wooden piling that bridged a ditch on the way to his “office” where he had stashed the supplies we’d need: screens, shovels and pocketed aprons for stashing fossils.

Standing in the creek in a pool up past my knees, we worked at panning. It was a still late afternoon, bugs flitting along the surface of the water, the heat settling in; twice or three times in an hour a breeze rustled through. In addition to Mr. Follmann’s Megalodon find, I brought up several smaller sharks teeth as well as part of a scale from the body of a Glyptodon (the armadillo relative). A full scale is shaped like a daisy.

One of several brothers who grew up in a suburb of Chicago, and now a father and grandfather, Mr. Follmann lives with his wife in Cape Coral and works part time as a security specialist at the hospital there.

In 1980, on his honeymoon in the Florida Keys, he purchased a megalodon tooth and, inspired by the find, later earned a divers certification to find his own off Venice Beach. A member of the Fossil Club of Lee County, he has also used his finds to create one-of-a-kind works of art that he calls Bite Me Fossil Sculptures that have been sold at Southwest Florida festivals as well as shown at the Museum of Art & Science in Daytona Beach.

In the KNOW



If you go

» If you hunt along the Peace or in Florida on your own, you’ll need to apply for a permit or renew yours if it’s from last year. It’s only \$5, but note that due to staffing issues during the pandemic, processing may take a few weeks longer than normal, so submit your application at least a month ahead of time. <https://www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu/vertpaleo/amateur-collector/fossil-permit/>

» If you don’t have a permit of your own, you can head out with a guide whose permit can cover a group of fossil hunters. Ken Follmann of Fossil Recovery Explorations is an experienced guide who leases private land near Arcadia for his hunts and also creates art made from fossils. 815-814-7190; fossilrecoveryexploration.com

One of his most memorable finds on the Peace over the years was embedded in the bank near where we stood: three complete teeth, a five-foot piece of tusk and a femur bone, all from the same woolly mammoth.

“That mammoth had died right there on the edge of the bank,” he said.

I imagined this mammoth taking its last breath and expiring right there in front of me on the muddy, sandy bank.

Paleontology loves amateurs

Mr. Follmann is among the many passionate amateur fossil hunters who play a crucial part in feeding the collections of paleontologists and educating the public about this unique aspect of Florida history.

DeSoto County resident Roxane Wilson, who works as a bank teller, has been a member of the Southwest Florida Fossil Society since near the time it was founded in the mid 1980s. She was inducted into the world of fossil hunting after moving to Florida from Chicago to marry her now ex-husband.

She recalled fossil hunting years ago in the phosphate mines in Central Florida, an area known as The Bone Yard for its abundance of fossils. But it’s difficult for anyone to gain access to these mines now.

“We lived in Miami and we used to come up to canoe on the Peace River and at that time you could get into the phosphate mines,” she said.

On one trip they found a fossilized horse tooth.

“It was amazing to me,” she said. “It looked like more than just a rock ...

“To me fossil hunting is like a treasure hunt and it can be a very inexpensive family hobby, which is one thing we try to represent in the fossil society. We’re trying to get more young people to join.”

Beth Meyer, who grew up in Topeka, Kan., has long nurtured an interest in fossils “even as a little kid.”

“We have a lot of fossils in Kansas but they are way older than what we have here in Florida,” she said. “And when I moved to Florida I discovered when I joined the Fossil Club of Lee County this was really new for me and I love it. I really enjoy it. Florida fossils are very different from where I came from.”

Ms. Meyer buys and sells fossils, seashells and rocks at her shop, Elemental Art, at Paradise Vintage Market in Fort Myers. While fossils exist all over Florida, rivers and beaches are among the most accessible to the public.

“There is success in those places and the other part of it is easy access,” she said.

Dr. Bruce MacFadden, the curator of vertebrate paleontology for the History Museum and a professor at the University of Florida in Gainesville, established a community science project funded by the National Science Foundation that allows amateur fossil hunters to upload pictures and information about their findings to the My Fossil website (www.myfossil.org).

“Anyone, if you have a smartphone and collect fossils, you can upload these to this site,” Dr. MacFadden said.

“I can’t be out there collecting all around Florida but we have hundreds if not thousands of people who like to collect fossils in Florida. They frequently make very important discoveries that advance our science.”

You can also find the My Fossil project on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

“The reason the Peace River is interesting to me is it’s loaded with fossils, it’s heavily collected by amateurs and hobbyists, and is evidence of the kind of animals that used to live in Florida during prehistoric times,” Dr. MacFadden said.

Major Florida findings

Starting in the 1960s, scuba divers began looking seriously for fossils in the Peace River and other areas of Southwest Florida. The late Mitchell Hope gathered



A giant ground sloth found in Daytona Beach now home at the Houston Museum of Natural Science.

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS /COURTESY PHOTO



COURTESY PHOTO

A woolly mammoth skeleton at the Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville.

one of the largest collections, now one of the Natural History Museum’s two largest fossil collections.

“(Mr. Hope) actually had a special Boy Scout troop whose specialty was going out and collecting fossils,” Dr. Hulbert said.

The other major Peace collection was donated in 2011 by John Waldrop, a middle school and community college teacher in Lake Wales. He took groups of students and others fossil hunting and was renowned for keeping good records of times and location. He also recognized that the scientific community had largely overlooked the Peace.

“So he decided to do the first systematic excavation of the Peace River, that we know of, using scuba gear (to) not just go for the easy stuff but to search diligently in places and find species that hadn’t been found before and look carefully for smaller things,” Dr. Hulbert said. “John set out purposely to kind of set the record straight and revive the scientific interest in the Peace River.”

One of the most important discoveries in recent years was uncovered far from the Peace in Levy County in 2015 on private property where the owners operate a small sand mine. It may easily have been covered up had not a 5-year old girl, a granddaughter of the property owner,

discovered the site on a walk with her mother and grandmother.

“I think in the first few weeks we probably found over 5,000 specimens,” Dr. Hulbert said.

What makes the site unique is that the fossils are roughly 5 million years old, an age not usually uncovered in Florida, and therefore introducing scientists to new species.

“The site not only has big animals like several kinds of elephant-like animals and plant-eating animals, but quite a few smaller animals, like things the size of a squirrel or smaller, which were pretty much unknown, not just in Florida but throughout the Southeastern United States,” Dr. Hulbert said. “So it’s an incredibly important and rich site. We’ve been fortunate that the landowners have continued to allow us to access the property.”

Development conceals many fossils in Florida.

A site located seven miles west of downtown West Palm Beach, which was discovered in 1969 and yielded about 600 specimens held by the Florida Natural History Museum, is now covered by a residential community called Golden Lakes.

It used to be a shell quarry operated by P.C. Smith Shell Rock Company and yielded fossils from about 120,000 to 21,000 years ago, according to the Florida Museum website: that’s the late Pleistocene Epoch and late Rancholabrean land mammal age. A worker digging a drainage canal first noticed the fossils here, which included a Mastodon skeleton, *Bison antiquus* (ancient bison), *Neofiber alleni* and *Sigmodon hispidus* (both types of rodents).

“The abundance of freshwater and amphibious species suggest deposition during a relatively warm interval during the late Pleistocene,” the website reads.

While scientists have plenty of fossils to satisfy their studies, the enormous amount of land covered by development suggests that there are many important discoveries that will have to wait for perhaps some other era.

“Unfortunately, as so much of Florida gets covered with asphalt and concrete and peoples’ homes, that means some fossil sites are being preserved for thousands of years from now, but in the short term we’re losing access to a lot of fossil sites that must be out there. Fortunately there’s enough people on private land

who allow us to come collect them to keep us pretty happy and satisfied.

“There’s a lot of stuff we don’t know, ages or types of fossils we’ve never seen before, new species that we didn’t know ever lived in Florida before. So there are constantly new species being discovered, often by amateur collectors,” according to the site. ■

In the KNOW

Rules on collecting fossils by the Florida DEP:

- » In Florida it is illegal to collect vertebrate fossils (excluding shark teeth) without a permit from lands owned by the state. State lands include the bottoms of navigable waterways like rivers, lakes and some streams. **A permit to collect vertebrate fossils on state lands can be obtained through the Florida Museum of Natural History.**
- » There is a \$5 fee per year, and the permit holder agrees to report their vertebrate fossil finds on a yearly basis. The state has the right to claim any fossils found that are deemed scientifically significant as a condition of issuing the permit. This law applies to both Florida residents and those traveling to the state.
- » **Like shark teeth, invertebrate and plant fossils can be collected without a permit** (sea shells, echinoids and petrified wood). Collecting of human artifacts on state lands is illegal.
- » No fossil collecting of any type is allowed inside the boundaries of national and state parks or wildlife refuges. It is suggested that fossil collectors check with the manager of any lands they are interested in collecting from as some areas are off-limits to collecting of any kind. Remember, this applies only to state lands; private lands are a different matter.
- » It is not illegal to remove either human artifacts or vertebrate fossils from private land as long as you have the landowner’s permission. However, the collection of artifacts on private land is not allowed if the area contains a human burial.