

February 17, 2007: A Passel of Pleistocene Pieces

For almost 2 years Virginia fossil collector Ron Hunter and I have been internet buddies exchanging tales of our days afield. We have many interests in common. As a retired business executive Ron tries to pack as many big game hunting, saltwater fishing, and fossil collecting adventures as possible into his schedule. He and a buddy guided themselves in Texas 3 years prior hunting fossils and did quite well for non residents, but an inside scoop makes a world of difference in this game. I invited Ron back to TX for a second whirl, this time to select sites which I suggested to him, some which I gleaned from old references, others I personally found and haven't sent anyone to in the past, some well known amongst collectors, and still others made known to me by buddies whom I asked permission on Ron's behalf before sending him there. Ron planned a road trip of over 2 weeks for the occasion. He ran around North Texas the first week and laid hands on fossil leaves from the Woodbine fm, his first mosasaur vertebra from the Ozan fm exposed at the North Sulphur River, *Oxytropidoceras* and *Eopachydiscus* ammonites along with *Macraster* and *Holaster* echinoids from the Duck Creek fm near Lake Texoma, *Phymosoma texanum* and *Heteraster texanus* echinoids from the Walnut fm, and some great examples of the Pennsylvanian echinoid *Archaeocidaris brownwoodensis* from the Winchell fm of the Lake Brownwood spillway. He spent the first weekend collecting with me, the next week back up in the DFW area collecting alone, then returned to San Antonio to hook up with two buddies and me for a South Texas wild hog hunt. The focus of this log entry will be documenting a very successful weekend of Pleistocene fossil hunting along some Texas river and beach exposures.

I woke Ron around 3 a.m. Saturday morning as planned and jumped into his 4WD Explorer preloaded the night before with my boat strapped to the roof. An ungainly looking setup proved to be all the equipment needed for full access to some of Texas' best Pleistocene vertebrate collecting available. We were on our first site at just about daylight and began our grid search of the first gravel bar under chilly, clear skies. A variety of horse and other bones came to hand quickly, some mineralized to a glassy brown and others more lightly mineralized. Bones that appeared recent were unceremoniously drop kicked back into the river. I left Ron to search the remnants of this once huge and productive bar of coarse gravel, now largely overwashed by sand from the last flood.

I plowed upstream and worked a couple other harder access bars. I landed a few vertebrae and other odds and ends before finding a large ball joint from some sort of long extinct critter. Figuring this bone was as solid as the rest I grabbed it and yanked it from the wet sand and gravel only to have it explode into 4 crumbling, waterlogged pieces. I'll do my best to restore this specimen for identification. A nice horse molar kept my attention on the ground in that area as well. Just a few steps ahead I found a 5 inch femur ball from some sort of large animal such as mammoth, mastodon, or sloth. This was a welcome find but I already had 2 at home so I decided this one was for Ron since he had driven so many miles to get here. This modest sacrifice for a buddy was shortly thereafter rewarded many times over in a fashion I never thought I'd experience.



FIGS 80-82: Horse? limb bone above, turtle scutes, unidentified vertebra and horse calcaneum lower left, miscellaneous bone fragments and bovine calcaneum lower right (Site 132)



FIGS 83-85: Extinct javelina jaw *Platygonus compressus*? found by Ron Hunter at Site 132 above, large humerus/femur ball found by Woehr at Site 140



FIGS 86-88: Woehr's weathered humerus/femur ball above, horse tooth below (Site 140)



FIGS 89-95: Horse tooth above, unidentified jaw fragment second row, unidentified humerus/femur head third row, turtle and deer material below (Site 140)



FIG 96: Mammoth or sloth limb fragment (Site 140)

My expectations plummeted when I found my target exposure nearly completely overwashed by sand. I have never been skunked at this particular site so I proceeded as planned. When I was climbing out I picked up 2 small bone chunks before my eyes passed over a 2 foot long arc shaped object..."Hey, I know what that is!" I remember saying out loud. What would look to most like an old tree limb was in fact a 25 inch section of mammoth tusk, my very first! Tusks are extremely fragile as they are essentially teeth lacking enamel. When exposed to the elements they tend to explode like grenades. This specimen was broken all the way through about 9 inches from one end so I dug a trench around the specimen, bare fingers clawing at the clay and sand, hoping to lift it out on a pedestal. It broke anyway so I carefully bagged the two halves individually and placed them in my pack, taking care not to slip and fall on them or even jar them on the hike back to meet Ron.



FIG 97: Mammoth tusk section in situ (Site 157)



FIGS 98-101: The author stabilizing the broken tusk in the field with huge amounts of superglue top left, broken tusk prior to bonding top right, two views showing internal voids after outer bark replaced below (Site 157)



FIGS 102-105: Tusk with bark fragments glued in place above, same view after voids filled with epoxy putty second row, tusk soaking in Butvar solution third row, distal and proximal views of tusk below (Site 157)



FIG 106: The author hamming it up with his first mammoth tusk (Site 157)

A wade out into the river to a gravel island resulted in unbearably cold feet and a large diameter section of crumbling mammoth leg bone. Working my way back to Ron I had to pick up 4 big Ziploc bags loaded with bones. He had little sympathy for my sore shoulder and arms from carrying all these bones which ended up nearly filling 2 five gallon buckets. Ron made 2 great finds while I was gone, the first a heavily mineralized section of *Alligator mississippiensis* mandible with 2 teeth intact and several empty sockets and the second a section of jaw with 2 teeth which I believe belonged to the extinct flat-headed peccary *Platygonus compressus* based on the features preserved in the better of the 2 teeth. In all my time afield I have not encountered this particular critter as it is somewhat rare. High fiving over personal landmark finds is a great way to kick off a friendship.

Leaving Ron to continue his methodical search I pressed on to a distant bar that has given up a few notable pieces in the past. This time was no different. 15 minutes was all that was necessary to completely search the bar, but within my first minute there I saw it in the distance 30 yards away: a large mammoth vertebra. This thing is huge, about 12 ½ inches wide. It is missing the centrum and the top of the posterior process but the neural canal and adjacent features are intact and preserved in wonderful detail. A whole vert would have been nice though (I know I'm picky as Ron would later testify). Another great horse molar with a bit of jaw bone attached was last to come to hand before my departure.



FIGS 107-110: Chevron of a mammoth vertebra 12.5 inches wide – so big it was spotted from a great distance away (Site 137)



FIGS 111-115: Mammoth jaw fragment? first 3 frames, horse tooth below (Site 137)

Once we finally got ourselves and our equipment back to the truck I spent almost an hour stabilizing my mammoth tusk. I first superglued everything loose then scrubbed dirt away to reveal cracks which were also saturated with superglue. In the end I poured 4 tubes of superglue into this specimen. This cheap disaster insurance cost me \$1 at the grocery store and I always keep some on hand. Wrapped in bubble wrap and our down vests this specimen was treated with kid gloves.

After lunch we lugged the boat, motor, and related gear down to another put-in point and got underway. We bucked the wind and current and finally reached a huge bar upstream that was mostly sand with little gravel. We still found cool stuff, most notably a big blue and white bison molar I lucked into. Miles downstream we jumped onto a small bar where I landed a good horse tooth then onto the bar where I found a human skull a couple months prior along with a number of cool animal bones. Strangely fossils were sparse this time despite the lack of bipedal footprints. We still found various bones and horse teeth but my favorite find was a lustrous single enamel hump

from the tooth of a mastodon. It was unerupted as noted by the lack of wear on the top of the cusp. Of course I would have liked all 6 humps intact but I really couldn't complain.



FIGS 116-119: Bison molar in situ top left, Ron Hunter in action with mineralized vertebra next 2 frames, mammoth enamel, turtle scute, foot bone and bison tooth lower right (Site 210)



FIGS 120-126: Mastodon tooth cusp above, horse teeth second row, miscellaneous turtle, deer, and unidentified ulna material third row, "Texas Star" concretion below (Site 373)

It was cold and windy running back upstream and we had a very steep take-out so we pulled the plug in time to get off the water by 6 p.m. A meal, shower, and clean sheets were welcome preparation for the next day's events.

February 18, 2007 Pleistocene Passel: The Sequel

Sequels are never as good as the original movie, and in like fashion our second day had its high points but simply could not trump our first day's success. By our second day we knew each other a little better and the ribbing and banter began. Ron remarked on his observation from the day before that the best finds were made only after I said, "You hunt here and I'm going up around the corner. I'll be right back." On several occasions, he says, 2 hours later I dragged my withered carcass back into view heavily laden with bags of huge bones. Personally I failed to note this observation.

After breakfast we located a shell pit and spent a half hour probing its banks and spoil piles. Several nice whelks and other shells came to hand, their bleached surface condition and the depth of the excavation leading us to believe we were looking at late Pleistocene mollusks.

A few miles later we were greeted by sunny skies, low tide, and gulf seas knocked flat by a light north wind. It was a wonderful day to go 4 wheeling 15 miles down the beach exploring an area new to both of us and stopping to search for fossils along patches of exposed shell, gravel, and Beaumont Clay. We ran as far as we could before the driving got a little more treacherous, taking note several miles back of the rusted out drive train of a vehicle that at one point failed to negotiate the unforgiving forces of Ma Nature.

We spread out and began working the high tide line. Not satisfied with the results I headed down to the ebbing surf and soon laid hands on a wonderful section of *Alligator mississippiensis* mandible with 18 empty tooth sockets, a few throw down bone shards, and a bag full of cool recent shells. We actually ran into some local competition along this beach, moved several miles and started over again. Ron laid hands on what looked like a bovid radius/ulna but we opted to cut our losses, drive a little while, and deploy the jon boat for one last amphibious fossil assault for the weekend. Along the way Ron threw in a CD with a song he felt was appropriate for my style of fossil collecting. The Queen song was called "I Want It All and I Want It Now."



FIG 127: Alligator jaw of unknown age (Site 388)

The wind and current were much more calm than the previous day and we were able to pick up a little speed heading upstream, this time moving at a back-straightening 6 MPH. The fossils weren't able to go completely into hiding despite our slow approach so we were still able to slay a few. The first gravel bar was Ron's shining moment of glory. He found several horse/camel distal femur sections and other odds and ends, his favorite being the one right next to my footprint, the bone's dark, mineralized hue in sharp contrast to the gray sand.



FIGS 128-129: Our ridiculous boat lugging setup left, unidentified distal femur found by Ron Hunter with Dan Woehr's footprint right next to it right (Site 128)

We drew a blank at the next bar and pushed several miles upstream to the next exposure. Ron had a blast seeing a new stretch of river in great weather and barked over the engine in his dry Yankee way that "Today is the complete opposite of yesterday...no wind, little current, and completely unproductive!" Finally a big bar loomed into view. First the big, sandy tail of the bar emerged and then a tiny strip of gravel could be seen at the head. Having ridden in the boat so long we got out without hesitation. There weren't any notable finds until I turned to walk toward Ron then picked up a curious object at our feet. What at first glance appeared to be a piece of wood deserved a closer look. The river polished surface, coloration, grain, banded structure, and fracture pattern in one area were completely un-petrified wood-like...we had another fist sized chunk of mammoth tusk! This one went to Ron's collection. I was in a giving mood after landing a 2 foot tusk the day before (not giving enough to surrender the biggun however).



FIGS 130-131: Mammoth tusk fragment (Site 130)



FIGS 132-133: Another view of the same mammoth tusk fragment left (Site 130), unidentified skull fragment right (Site 131)

The next bar produced lukewarm results but I pocketed an interesting piece of skull cap before pointing the bow downstream and ripping back to the truck at the breakneck speed of 8.2 MPH. In no time we had the boat back up on top of the truck and we were on our way back to San Antonio.

Cementing friendships over a pile of ancient bones provided a Neanderthal bond appealing to both of us. It was not over here though. The following weekend was scheduled for 2 days of wild hog hunting followed by a jab at some crabs in the Corsicana formation closer to home.

February 25, 2007: Winding Down in the Corsicana

After a successful weekend hunting trip resulting in a mixed bag of hogs, javelina, and coyotes Ron and I swung by the fabled Corsicana construction site late Sunday afternoon, donned our kneepads and began our purposeful crawl. In the first place where I kneeled I immediately laid eyes on a crab leg jutting out of an orange marl clod. Ron thought I was pulling his leg so I called him over to show him how *Dakoticancer australis* specimens hide so well in this formation.

We spent a couple hours making uphill passes along the hillside. I continued to call out isolated crab legs and claw fragments every couple of minutes. In the most good natured fashion possible Ron asked me, "Did you bring me here to humiliate me?" He wanted his first crab badly. Lots of rain in the last month would have made that a more attainable goal. Ultimately Ron found what appeared to be half a crab with a left claw jutting out of the nodule with just the tips of the two fingers knocked off. Considering the condition of his knees after 2 hours of this drill he seemed happy to end his search with articulated crab material in hand. I found a similar piece just feet away from him but they didn't come from the same specimen.

Our search also brought to hand perhaps a dozen echinoids including one damaged *Plesiaster americanus* and the remainder *Hemiaster bexari*. To this we added a number of nice gastropods and Ron's 8 or 10 big oysters *Exogyra costata* and *Pycnodonte mutabilis*. At this point we cut our search short and ran back to the house for several hours of prep work on his 2 week take of Texas fossils. He doesn't have prep equipment at home so it was a scramble to whip through as many fossils as possible and he had scores of ammonites and echinoids begging for attention.



FIGS 134-137: Corsicana crab legs and claw *Dakoticancer australis* found by Ron Hunter above, Woehr's best *S. serrata* tooth middle, damaged *Plesiaster americanus* and 5 *Hemiaster bexari* echinoids below (Site 248)



FIGS 138-141: Various Corsicana gastropods, *Baculites* (straight ammonites), partial ammonite, bivalve, and scaphopod above and bulk sampled *Hamulus* worm tubes and broken regular echinoid spines second frame (Site 248), echinoids *H. bexari* and unidentified gastropod below (Site 348)

We truly live in a new age these days. I met Ron on the internet in a Florida fossil hunters Yahoo group. After 2 years of fossil, artifact, saltwater fishing, and big game hunting exchanges we finally hooked up for 2 weeks of down to earth Texas fun. Even in hunting camp surrounded by young guys Ron proved himself to be a man of high moral character. Back home my wife enjoyed hours of conversation with him solving the world's problems. I'm glad he made a good impression on her as I'm about to drop my next bomb: a 4 day Florida fossil hunt with Ron and a mutual friend just 5 weeks from now. The boss is on board, our fossil guide and accommodations are pre arranged, and now I need to score some serious points with the spousal unit to earn her endorsement of my next fossil junket.