

New fossil bird found

May 1 2008



Eoconfuciusornis zhengi, skeleton and feather impressions. Photo by Dr Zhoiu Zhonghe

Details of a fabulous new fossil bird from the world-famous fossil deposits of Liaoning in China, are published this week in the journal *Science in China*. Details of the bird's bone structure and feathers are exquisitely preserved.

The new bird, Eoconfuciusornis is the oldest known confuciusornithid, a group unique to China. It therefore represents an early stage in bird evolution. Confuciusornithids lived from 120-131 million years ago and include the oldest birds with horny beaks.

The fossil deposits of Liaoning, called collectively the Jehol Group, span much of the Early Cretaceous. Eoconfuciusornis falls between

Archaeopteryx (150 million years) and the bulk of the Liaoning birds (125 million years), and it shows an intermediate stage in the improvement of bird flying capabilities.

Most bird fossils come from the Jiufotang and Yixian groups, dated about 125-120 million years, but the Dabeigou Formation where *Eoconfuciusornis* was found is 131 million years, so giving a span of 11 million years of evolution of this particular bird group.

The research was carried out at the University of Bristol by Dr Zhang Fucheng during 2005-6 in the Department of Earth Sciences. Professor Mike Benton who supervised Dr Zhang Fucheng when he was at Bristol said: “China never ceases to amaze, with remarkable new fossils being found again and again. The *Eoconfuciusornis* fossil is hugely important in plugging a major gap in our knowledge of bird evolution immediately after *Archaeopteryx*.”

Source: University of Bristol

Citation: New fossil bird found (2008, May 1) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-05-fossil-bird.html>

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