

Rare dinosaur skeleton turned over to researchers

January 25 2010

(AP) -- A rare and nearly complete dinosaur skeleton stolen from private property in Montana and stored in an evidence locker for more than two years has been turned over to researchers.

Scientists at the Black Hills Institute of Geological Research in South Dakota say the 70-million-year-old turkey-sized predator could be a new species of raptor.

"It's a mean and nasty little dinosaur," said Peter Larson, president of the institute. "Even though it's not very big, you wouldn't want to meet it in a dark alleyway."

Researchers say it's unusual to find the skeleton of a meat-eating dinosaur, and especially one that's so small.

"So many things can happen to a small-bodied animal," Larson said.

The commercial [fossil](#) hunter who dug up the dinosaur removed it without the knowledge or permission of the property owners. Nathan Murphy was convicted last year in state court of felony theft for taking the raptor fossil from a ranch in northern Montana and sentenced to 60 days in jail.

In a separate federal case last year, Murphy was sentenced to four months in a halfway house and three years probation after pleading guilty to stealing fossils on federal land, and was ordered to pay \$17,325.

After Murphy's conviction in state court, the raptor fossil was turned over to the owners of the property, Bruce and Barb Bruckner, and they in turn sent it to the institute in South Dakota.

Larson wasn't upset at the delay in getting the fossil.

"What's a few years here and there when you're talking about a dinosaur that's 70 million years old," he said. "The science could wait. It's more important to do things properly and make sure the proper owner was identified."

Institute officials say they hope to finish work on the [skeleton](#) by May. Two large museums are interested in buying it for display and study. Larson said he was unsure how much the fossil might be worth to the museums.

The institute will recover the hundreds of hours it spent restoring the fossil by selling replicas. Larson said the replicas will cost about \$12,500 each.

He said one replica will be donated by the Bruckners and the institute to the new Great Plains Dinosaur Museum and Field Station in Malta.

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Citation: Rare dinosaur skeleton turned over to researchers (2010, January 25) retrieved 16 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-01-rare-dinosaur-skeleton.html>

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