

## Houston museum unveils \$85 million dinosaur hall

May 22 2012, By RAMIT PLUSHNICK-MASTI , Associated Press

---



In a photo made May 15, 2012 Director Pete Larson of the Black Hills Institute of Geologic Research, right, discusses with artist Tomas Schneider how he will use a forklift to hoist a Tyrannosaurus Rex fossil skeleton into place in the new Hall of Paleontology at the Houston Museum of Natural Science Tuesday, May 15, 2012. The exhibit that opens June 2 includes the only Triceratops skin ever found, and a T-rex with three fingers. (AP Photo/Michael Stravato)

(AP) -- Pups in her womb, a large eye visible behind the rib cage, one baby stuck in the birth canal: all fossilized evidence that this ancient marine beast, the Ichthyosaur, died in childbirth.

Jurassic Mom's almost certainly painful death is perfectly preserved in a rare fossil skeleton, one of the many unique items that will go on display in the Houston Museum of Natural Science's \$85 million dinosaur hall when it opens to the public June 2. The Associated Press got a first peek

at the exhibit as the finishing touches were put in place.

Paleontologists and scientists at the museum and the Black Hills Institute of Geological Research in Hill City, S.D. have worked tirelessly for three years to collect, clean and preserve artifacts designed to give visitors a look at how life evolved beginning 25 billion years ago.

"You'll actually be able to touch a fossil that's 3.5 billion years old," Robert Bakker, the museum's curator of paleontology, says in a conspiratorial whisper. "A microbe, simpler than bacteria, which had in its DNA the kernel that would flower later on into dinosaurs, mammals, then us. That's the beginning of the safari."

His long white beard and locks bobbing with all-too-obvious excitement, Bakker raises his brows below his cowboy hat as he continues to describe the journey visitors will experience when they enter "The Prehistoric Safari," expected to be among the top six dinosaur exhibits in the United States.

Jack Horner, curator of the Museum of the Rockies in Bozeman, Mont., who acted, along with Bakker, as an adviser on the Jurassic Park movie series, agreed there will be some unique and exclusive items on display in Houston, including Triceratops skin. But he said that to him, an object's value is determined by science and should always be peer-reviewed before being displayed.

"Anybody can have stuff," Horner said, adding that he is curious to see the scientific findings on the items displayed in Houston. "Opinions are cheap."

Bakker says the safari is designed to teach about evolution. Visitors, he explains, will experience the Cambrian explosion, when life went from "literally slime" into "beautiful, elegantly sculptured things, the trilobites,

which are gorgeous."

These bizarre, insect-like creatures, which are sometimes horned or sporting antennae, roamed the Earth's seas in the Paleozoic era before the dinosaurs and were one of the most complex living things that existed to that point. At the Houston museum, visitors will be treated to one of the largest displays of trilobite fossils in the world, and Bakker rubs his hands with enthusiasm at the thought of young children pressing their nose to the glass to get a glimpse or reaching a tiny finger out to touch an impossibly old piece of rock.

"Dinosaurs are the jumper cables to the human mind. Kids can't curb their enthusiasm when they're in a hall of dinosaurs and mammoths and mammoth hunters and trilobites and giant fish that could chomp up a shark. These natural objects in motion and context make kids want to read, you can't stop them from reading and thinking," said Bakker, who in the 1970s was one of the first to argue the massive prehistoric beasts were warm-blooded and further challenged scientific thinking in his 1986 book "The Dinosaur Heresies."

For scientists, and the museum community, the exhibit offers unique objects, including the only Triceratops skin found to date, a specimen that showed they had been wrong in believing the horned vegetarians had smooth skin. In fact, it had bristles, Bakker said.

Then there is the museum's skeleton of a T. rex, one of only two with complete hands, two long fingers and one stub, which Bakker believes could be proof this massive, feared predator also had a soft side. The fingers, too small and badly configured, wouldn't have helped in hunting, or even grabbing things, leaving Bakker and other paleontologists to believe they were for tickling, fondling and even falling in love. The fossil also has a piece of its tail missing, likely because it was bitten off by another Tyrannosaurus Rex.

The hall also will house the world's only complete fossil of a snake-type creature from 50 million years ago, said David Temple, the museum's associate curator of paleontology. The snake is related to the constrictor, and the only other fossil of this type disappeared about 60 years ago.

Original sculptures, paintings and murals will depict scenes scientists and [paleontologists](#) believe occurred based on the fossil evidence, Temple said. And there are creatures native to Texas, including a Glyptodon, an Ice Age, armadillo-type creature the size of a Volkswagen Beetle, and one of the best preserved fin-backed reptiles that preceded the dinosaurs.

"This is what life was like at the beginning of natural history," Temple said.

©2012 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

Citation: Houston museum unveils \$85 million dinosaur hall (2012, May 22) retrieved 24 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-05-houston-museum-unveils-million-dinosaur.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--