

Hominid-fossil seeker revisits South Africa

April 29 2014



A view of command central set up at the entrance of the Rising Star Expedition cave in South Africa that was found to contain more than 1,500 ancient human bones. Credit: SFU

(Phys.org) —In contrast to the adage, third time lucky, a Simon Fraser University archaeology student has already been twice lucky in helping to unearth ancient hominid finds in a well-hidden South African cave.

Actually, this spring, luck had little or nothing to do with Marina Elliott's recovery of another 320 bones in addition to the 1,200 she helped find in the same cave last fall.

"There certainly were again some very exciting fossils found in our latest caving adventure. But, unfortunately, I can't tell you what they are yet. Stay tuned!" says Elliott. In the first trip, one of the highlights was the retrieval of a palm-sized section of skull.

Elliott's years of recreational caving allowed her to easily slither back down an 18-cm-wide opening in a secret cave at the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site, 50 kilometres from Johannesburg.

"The whole team was very sad to have to leave some very important pieces behind the first time because we ran out of time. Scientists had to move onto other obligations. So it was very satisfying to go back in and get these remains and discover new ones, especially as we were working with a skeleton crew of just seven people this time, pun intended."

As a member of the international Rising Star Expedition, Elliott is athletically and academically instrumental in helping the expedition's leader Lee Berger to retrieve and identify his team's finds. Berger is a research professor in human evolution in the Evolutionary Studies Institute at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg, where all of this expedition's archaeological cache is being analyzed.

Elliott's hard work has earned her the title of Honorary Research Fellow at Wits.

In May a global team of scientists, including Elliott and Mana Dembo, another SFU archaeology student, will assemble at Berger's Wits lab to begin describing their colossal cache of fossils. The team aims to produce a peer-reviewed journal paper about its find as soon as possible.

"All aspects of the taxonomy, morphology and function of the specimens will be covered as thoroughly as possible," explains Elliott, who along with Dembo is in SFU's Human Evolutionary Studies Program.

"My role will be to assist with the analysis and description of the below-the-skull fossils in relation to features like body size and variation."

Dembo studies early hominins and uses several methods to try to understand how various species, including ours, are related to or different from each other.

"She will be helping the Rising Star team understand how these new species fit into what we know about humans and where they lie on the broader hominid family tree," adds Elliott.

The two leave Vancouver for South Africa on May 4, arriving there May 6.

Provided by Simon Fraser University

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