

Giving Back

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A Penchant for Paleontology?



Get your hands dirty and discover hidden gems beneath the soil.

When the [Denver Museum of Nature & Science](#) was called in to excavate a significant bone find near Snowmass, Colorado, two years ago, it was given just 51 days to dig up a mother lode of ice age fossils before a dam-building project would resume. The museum issued a plea to its trained paleontology volunteers, and over the next seven weeks more than 200 of them made the four-hour jaunt to Snowmass, helping to excavate nearly 6,000 giant bones — from mastodon skulls to mammoth tusks to the claws of ground sloths — plus tens of thousands of smaller ones. It turned out to be the most important fossil discovery ever made in Colorado.

"There's no question we couldn't have done this without our volunteers," says Ian Miller, curator of paleontology. "The thing that distinguishes our museum from any other national history museum in the world is our volunteer corps."

Altogether over 1,700 volunteers, ranging in age from 6 to 96, assist the Denver Museum of Nature & Science in everything from zoology and anthropology to the health, space and earth sciences. They greet visitors, talk at exhibits, facilitate touchable specimen carts, or catalog and archive specimens for the museum's spider, shell and dung beetle collections, among other contributions. Nearly 300 of them are graduates of the museum's Paleontology Certification Program, which qualifies them to help with fossil research and work in the field with scientists. It is the largest known volunteer paleontology program on the planet.

Volunteers can often be found hunched over a table in the museum's paleontology lab, chiseling rock away from bones with tiny tools. Rick Millerick, one such participant, explains his attraction to the program as he cleans the shoulder of an ice age mammoth before piecing it back together. "I was the little kid who had all the little plastic dinosaurs, but I just didn't see myself as a scientist," he explains, adding, "This is a great way to do it as an avocation instead of a vocation."

There are many more like him — people with the spirit of Indiana Jones who became accountants or engineers or paralegals instead. Many are over 50, and a growing number are younger. They spend days, weekends and summer vacations working with curators around the West, as well as closer to home at hundreds of sites along Colorado's Front Range.

For instance, volunteers were called in to collect a couple of thousand fossil leaves in west Denver, and they helped to excavate a 64-million-year-old tropical rain forest discovered about 30 miles south of the city. They also pitch in when a bulldozer turns up an occasional shocker. "We have a Tyrannosaurus rex that was found in somebody's backyard when they were digging an extension to their basement," says Miller.

The paleontology certification program can take two to four years to complete, but fast-track options are also available. So why is the program so popular? "I think Colorado is a place where people like to do these kinds of things and they really want to give back to the community," Miller speculates. "We need the help, and anyone is capable of this kind of stuff once you take the classes. Then you get to work with the scientists, and we're all part of the same team."