

A NORTH TEXAS FOSSIL BLITZKRIEG

With my birthday and Father's Day coming up, I told Georgia not to buy me anything. What I really wanted was a weekend to scavenge fossils from North Texas. With permission slip in hand, I vacated San Antonio at 2 a.m. on Saturday 6/7/03, and drove 350 miles to the fabled North Sulfur River. This trip would hearken me back to days of real adventure-sleeping in the truck, eating peanut butter and jelly, no showers, and no razors.

I selected a series of spots to peruse via internet research, and the Hwy 68 bridge near Wolfe City was the kick off point. The river channel was narrow and deep, probably 40 yards wide and 20 feet deep, with the river more of a creek. The banks were stacks of flaky, wet, gray clay which would break free in micro avalanches as you walked by. At first unnerving, I later concluded that active erosion is what makes this fossil hunting locale so productive.

After spending a couple of hours tooling around, I was pleased with my Pleistocene Era bounty including several bone halves in addition to a large lower jaw bone with one tooth in place. While wading back to the truck I noticed something flashing in the water under a submerged tree. Closer inspection revealed a 3 foot snake rolling underwater in an attempt to position a 3 inch fish in its mouth for easier swallowing.

I jumped in the truck and pushed onward to the Hwy 2990 bridge between Ladonia and Bug Tussle. With town names like that, I expected to see a skinny albino with bad teeth playing a banjo on the riverbank. If that did indeed occur, I would not have noticed since my attention was on the plethora of fossils in the river. Upon walking down toward the bridge, I noticed a half dozen nice 6 inch ammonites on the ground. In my truck they went. From the bridge I could see that the river channel was 75 yards wide and 30 feet deep. Abundant gravel bars were interspersed throughout the riverbed, providing focal points for my search.

Immediately I reduced a mosasaur (giant dinosaur era crocodile) tooth to possession, followed by a 6 inch section of black bone. A little farther up the river I grabbed an odd looking rock from underwater...and it turned out to be a mosasaur vertebra the size of my fist! The lateral and posterior processes (bony projections) had been tumbled off, but concave and convex joints as well as the spinal cord duct were clearly distinguishable.

I showed my find to a kid in the river, and he pulled out of his pocket a huge 3 x 5 inch tan tooth. It had 3 cusps and an open base and looked like it was from a bigger animal than anything else alive in Texas today.

Slogging up a tributary creek, I stumbled upon a section of famous "red beds". This hard clay is as red as a brick, and results in very interestingly colored marine fossils. In short, I found a couple of cool gastropods (snails), numerous

sections of baculites (squid shells), and one rough ammonite (nautilus shell). The baculites and ammonite have intricately detailed white suture patterns between shell sections accented by a background of red.

After pocketing some sort of large mammalian tooth, some petrified wood and numerous sections jet black baculites, I parted with the North Sulfur River and drove to Denison on the TX-OK border. My friend Carl had given me explicit directions to his secret "Valley of the Pearlescent Ammonites", a creek bed with a shale section said to hold a superabundance of ammonites preserved with shell material intact.

So I picked my way through a jungle of poison ivy until I hit the creek, where I vigorously scrubbed myself to ward off the itchies. I waded ½ mile down this winding stream, at times ambushing unidentifiable furry scurrying critters in the underbrush. Soon I began noting large broken ammonites in the creek gravel. Ultimately I came up on the ammonite shale beds. Ammonites were indeed cheap at this spot...their quality was superb, and numbers abundant. They could be seen in the shale shelf as well as submerged in the creekbed. The limitation was not in how many could be found, but rather in how many could be carried. With this in mind, I brought an extra duffle bag expressly for this purpose. I dropped 3 in the backpack and 2 bigguns in the duffle, soon realizing I would need to find an easier escape route considering my burden. The edge of a cornfield ultimately led me back to the truck, weary but excited.

With a little Popeye's fried chicken I sat on a high bluff on the Oklahoma side of the Red River and watched the sun set over Texas. True redneck living at its finest. Crossing back over to TX, I got 4 or 5 hours of much needed sleep in the parking lot of the Texas Welcome Center.

A 4 a.m. cloudburst brought steady rain for 5 hours. I maintained my schedule nevertheless. Fort Worth was a bust. My 3 spots were either built up, overgrown, or picked over. So I moved on to Bridgeport, an hour west, and was able to lose the rain suit and get serious about finding some Pennsylvanian Period marine fossils.

The unassuming reddish brown rocks of Bridgeport hold a treasure trove of fossils in numbers I found astounding. Near the golf course, Carl's directions landed me on a small exposure which produced 100 or so highly detailed armored snails, in addition to abundant crinoid stems, pistachio-looking bivalves, etc.

Near Bridgeport Lake I randomly stopped at a roadcut and found the biggest crinoid mortality zones I've ever seen. Each footprint would cover 50 pieces, and I suspect each shovel full would hold 200-300. In fact, this is the only place I've ever been where there is more fossils than there is dirt. Anyway, I was able to collect some unusually long and detailed sections of crinoid stems, in addition to

some partial calyxes (crinoid heads). I also bagged a number of pentagonal sea urchin plates as well as jaggedly barbed spines. No fish hook today has a better barb than these spines.

Northwest in Jacksboro I visited the Lost Creek Dam Spillway. The park ranger wanted to dampen my plans since people had been damaging his fences near the dam. I asked what his suggestions were for a “responsible fossil hunter who drove 350 miles to be here”, and he waved me through. This place was another huge cache of Pennsylvanian fossils. I collected goniatites (ammonite-like critters with cool suture patterns), many miniature straight cephalopods (chambered squid shells), brachiopods, horn corals, and intricate armored snails, including one monster 1 ½ inches high and just as wide, in perfect condition.

Two other guys backpacked in to the spillway and I struck up a conversation with them. I mentioned two fossil books I had just ordered, and they thanked me. It turns out one guy was the author of one and the other guy was the editor of the other. Nice guys, full of great information.

I skipped out after a couple of hours and headed south on 281 to Mineral Wells for more Pennsylvanian material. At Union Hill and the old town landfill, I found more gastropods, crinoids, cephalopods and such. It was now nearing 5 p.m. on a Sunday evening and I needed to get home. A scenic 5 hour drive down Hwy 281 dropped me back in San Antonio around 9:30 in plenty of time to see the Spurs beat New Jersey and play with my little boy.

This trip was most rewarding with quality pieces found at most locations. I would definitely do this again, maybe 2-3 times per year, but never again as a solo suicide mission. I sure could use the help driving. Jacksboro and Mineral Wells are quaint enough little towns that I may need to take Georgia and Weston up for the weekend in the near future. A little farther down the road, perhaps I can put Weston on some of these “can’t miss” fossil hunting locations.