

## FOSSIL ROAD TRIP 072203

I took a vacation day to knock a few more fossil hunting sites off my hit list. And when opportunity presents itself, I like to make use of the full day, as you may have noticed.

At daybreak I found myself at a big limestone bluff on Hwy 190 at Copperas Cove. This was a wildcat site, i.e. I just saw it and decided to search it on a whim. It proved to be a worthwhile stop. In one hour of hugging the exposure I collected about 25 or 30 nice smooth urchins, one big spiny urchin (Tetragramma), a dozen or so big gastropods and bivalves, and about 10 quarter to half sections of neat looking ammonites. I GPS marked the spot for future plundering.

By 9:30 I was at the Army Corps of Engineers' office at Lake Waco, signing paperwork allowing me to access the Research Area below the dam. This 90 acre borrow pit is a treasure chest of fossils in Del Rio clay. Many of the fossils are pyritized micromorphs (dwarf specimens preserved in pyrite), and the miniature ammonites and gastropods became my focus.

To make a long, hot, thirsty story short, I was out there from 10 to 3 in the Texas summer heat. Uncomfortable, of course, but productive searching made me forget about the heat. In all I found about 100 perfect, tiny pyritized ammonites ranging in size from 1/8 to 1 inch diameter. I think I found at least 5 species including Scaphites, Engonoceras, Mantelliceras, Adkinsia and Plesioturrilites, and all had the metallic sheen of an old penny. I'm not sure if this is picked up in Figure 1, but these specimens are superbly detailed. And some of the weathered pieces have more character than the intact ones.



Figure 1

I also found some gastropods, urchin parts and maybe a starfish arm, but missed out on the shark teeth and brittle stars. No complaints from this end, except that my head throbbed, my fingers cramped up, and nausea began to take effect by the time I reached the truck. I dropped a towel in the ice chest and laid it over my head and sat with the AC running, drinking ice cold beverages for a few minutes before driving off.

An hour and a half later I rolled into College Station, 90 miles to the southeast. I picked up an internet lead on a site for collecting petrified wood from the Eocene Yegua Formation, and dropped by for a look. The site is the playground behind an elementary school, and it was chock-full-o-wood. The ground was nothing more than sand studded with wood chunks large and small. There was so much material, I had to be choosy in what I picked up. I focused on specimens with pronounced wood grain, outer surface profile, flashy

colors, and/or knots. Look for a few examples in Figure 2. Note the superb surface detail in the biggest piece. The chunk at the right has a vein of amber running through it, and the smallest piece has a hole bored through it by a bug.



Figure 2

In about 45 minutes of selective searching I filled a 5 gallon bucket. I saw one last interesting piece in the middle of the kiddie soccer field and after clawing at it a bit with my pick, I lifted the 35 LB chunk from the ground. I kicked sand into the hole so as not to create a tripping hazard when school starts back up. But you have to wonder which is worse: a pothole to break a leg in or a big rock to hit a head on. I figure I did the school a service.

My final stop was the Eocene Claiborne Group exposure where the Hwy 21 Whiskey Bridge crosses the Brazos River. 30 minutes of clawing at the river bank dumped out 50 or so delicately ornamented gastropods as can be seen in the bottom half of Figure 2.

Only a confounded fool would challenge the Texas heat in the name of fossils. But the lack of competition is quite nice. It was nice to take an “abbreviated” trip this time as I was “only” on the go from 4 a.m. to 10 p.m. I covered 4 good exposures scattered over 450 miles, and it was once again quite fulfilling to spend an exhaustive day exploring nature.