

## STACKING AMMONITES LIKE POKER CHIPS SOUTH TEXAS FOSSIL HUNT    MAY 8, 2004

After experiencing the worst work week this side of Hades, a little outdoor adventure was in order. Up until late Friday I thought I would have to work Saturday, so when the good word came around, there was no time to mobilize any fellow fossil buddies, so I hit the road at 3:30 a.m. alone. Little did I know, there was big surprise in store for me later in the day.

First stop: El Indio. This little hamlet is situated a mile from the Rio Grande River between Laredo and Eagle Pass. It constitutes some of the southern most and most recent Cretaceous exposures in Texas, namely the Escondido formation. My friend Ken Palacios let me hunt deer, bobcats, and varmints on his step-father's 160 acre ranch a few years ago in the area. While I enjoyed measurable success on all the above mentioned critters, what caught me off guard was a preponderance of ammonites on the property, which I now know to be *Sphenodiscus pleurisepta*.

So with permission I entered the back of the property, and soon I was sinking a pick into the tan and red gulleys, landing a couple keeper ammonites plus numerous partials. Upon returning to the truck I found a border patrol vehicle nearby with agents peering into the brush I had just come from. They were sympathetic to my cause and gave me no trouble. Moving to a roadcut in front of the property, I hit a layer in the Escondido containing fossils I did not find earlier, namely pelecypods, gastropods, and a nice surprise of crustacean material consisting of a number of partial claws and a single disarticulated, crushed specimen. But the best was yet to come.

A 25 foot deep valley with steep bluffs on either side bisects the property, and these bluffs became the cornerstone of my trip. Layers of resistant siltstone and shell hash made up the base of the exposure, but the crumbly brown series on top proved to be the target zone. While hugging the narrow benches a few inches away from a 15 foot drop into the creek with handholds akin to cactus, at times I was graced by 3 ammonite keels within an arm's length. See Figure 1.



**FIGURE 1:** *Sphenodiscus pleurisepta* ammonite with gastropod to the left

This particular layer was easy to work, as I could pull the slabs and loose overburden out of the way without hand tools, and many specimens were still intact enough to keep. Others were cracked from weathering, but the breaks were clean enough to glue back together. In all I got 13 specimens plus the bonus goodies mentioned before. See Figure 2.



**FIGURE 2:** 4 more *Sphenodiscus pleurisepta* specimens, Escondido formation

Heading north to Eagle Pass I found that the town rests firmly in the Escondido. Exposures are large and numerous in the area, with some sequences as high as 75 or more feet showing various lithologies within the formation. Gray crumbly clays gave way to red, gray, and brown sandstones, but tan and red siltstones dominated the area. Once upon a time I thought that if I could locate a formation, I'd soon find its fossils. How wrong I was! Not all formations are created equal, and the Escondido is no exception. I found nothing in Eagle Pass, but the area has potential.

My, did the air smell! Every time I stepped out of the truck, my olfactory was assaulted. Perhaps it was burning garbage riding the air currents from across the Rio Grande.

Pressing north on Hwy 277 the red and brown Escondido gave way to cemented Quaternary/Tertiary cobbles and finally a series of blinding white Austin Chalk roadcuts. Near the Tequesquite Creek crossing I located a cingulum cast a fellow collector had knocked out at previously while collecting an ammonite. I soon found a crumbly ammonite too cruddy to keep, and luckily noticed the brown scorpion 6 inches away as it headed for my hand! Across the road I found another impression where an ammonite was removed and was about to write the place off. But just a few feet away my whole perspective changed when the

sutured keel of an inflated ammonite peeked out at me from beneath the chalky overburden...it was love at first site. With a few minutes of careful chiseling, I was able to land a very collectible *Parapuzosia americana* and head back to the truck cradling it like a newborn. See Figure 3.



**FIGURE 3:** *Parapuzosia americana* ammonite from the Austin Chalk

Bouncing from roadcut to roadcut in the area I hit paydirt once again in a gully. The ammonite shown in Figure 4 was freed from the extremely hard Austin with careful scribe work. I haven't yet identified this specimen, but my first guess would be *Texanites*.



**FIGURE 4:** *Texanites?* Ammonite from the Austin Chalk

Next I targeted some Eagle Ford roadcuts north and south of Del Rio. Eagle Ford/Austin and Buda/Eagle Ford contacts were clearly visible in certain locations. The Eagle Ford lithology in this area is different from the same formation as viewed in Dallas, Austin, and San Antonio areas. It is dominated by thinly bedded layers of hard limestone in hues of brown, yellow, orange, red, and lavender. Where I was looking fossils were sparse. I fell back on the go-to method of locating condensed zones of crushed oyster shell, then looking for teeth and vertebrate material. I found 2 small fish verts this way and nothing else except a 1983 Mexican peso shoved in the rocks. The area is known to hold shark teeth and echinoids, so a little more self-education is required before I can fully realize the fossil potential of the area.

Striking out in the Eagle Ford of Bracketville, I pressed on to my last site, a large Austin Chalk bluff on the north side of Hwy 90 a few miles west of Uvalde. I zigzagged in and out of a narrow strip of brush to get to the base of the exposure, and while entering the brush I quite unexpectedly heard the maraca go off!

In my 11 years of Texas backwoodsmanship I have never encountered a diamondback, but now I was 2 steps from the granddaddy, coiled up rattling in full glory, his body seemingly the girth of a Fat Albert wiffle bat! I only remember

bellowing “Holy CRAP!” while I did my own version of the Moon Walk. A barrage of Austin Chalk ensued, followed by me yanking his tail, slinging him out in the open, and administering the *coup de grace* with my trusty rock hammer. Figure 5 puts things in perspective. This dude was 6 ½ feet long, and his skin will adorn my house. His meat won’t go to waste either, in fact I’ve already fried and eaten half of him. Perhaps I can try “Snake n’ Bake” with the rest. Sorry, I couldn’t resist!



**FIGURE 5:** Big Texas rattler!

Well, in a roundabout way, I achieved my goal...buckets of fossils and forgetting about work. I can truly say that for a few tense moments, work was the last thing on my mind! As for encountering snakes in the future, I think I'd much prefer the fossilized variety.