

FOR RELEASE
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DNA analysis of fossils found in Klondike goldfields leads to new horse genus

An international team of researchers has discovered a previously unrecognized genus of stilt-legged horses that once roamed North America. The findings are based on ancient DNA analysis from fossils of the New World stilt-legged horse found in sites including Wyoming, Nevada and Yukon's Klondike goldfields.

The team named the new horse *Haringtonhippus francisci* after Dr. C. Richard (Dick) Harington of the Canadian Museum of Nature. Harington is familiar to many in the Dawson region thanks to his annual visits between the 1960s and 1980s—and his time spent searching for fossils in the goldfields, spending time in the homes of placer miners and sharing tales of ancient creatures.

Prior to this study, these ice-age horses were thought to be related to species including modern horses, wild donkeys and zebras. The new results reveal they were not closely related to any population of horses alive today. An evolutionary dead-end, *Haringtonhippus francisci* became extinct at the end of the last ice age.

Quotes

"This discovery was possible thanks to a collaboration of international researchers and demonstrates how cooperation furthers discovery. Dr. Harington has shown great dedication to working with local communities, including Klondike gold miners and Yukon First Nations."

—Minister of Tourism and Culture Jeanie Dendys

"The evolutionary distance between the extinct stilt-legged horses and all living horses took us by surprise, but it presented us with an exciting opportunity to name a new genus of horse."

—Study senior author Beth Shapiro, University of California, Santa Cruz

"I had been curious for many years concerning the identity of two horse metatarsal bones I collected, one from Klondike, Yukon and the other from Lost Chicken Creek, Alaska. They looked like those of modern Asiatic kiangs, but thanks to the research of my esteemed colleagues they are now known to belong to a new genus, *Haringtonhippus francisci*. I am delighted to have this new genus named after me."

—Emeritus curator of quaternary palaeontology at the Canadian Museum of Nature in Ottawa Dr. C. Richard Harington

Quick facts

- The term genus refers to a group of animals or plants that are closely related to each other, in the same evolutionary family tree. A genus may include more than one species.
- The new findings are the subject of an article entitled *A new genus of horse from Pleistocene North America*, published recently by eLife.
- This research shows the new genus, *Haringtonhippus francisci*, was a widespread and successful species in North America. In the North, they survived until roughly 17,000 years ago – more than 19,000 years later than previously known.
- Dr. Richard Harington spent his career dividing his time between hunting fossils in the North and conducting research at the National Museum (now the Canadian Museum of Nature) in Ottawa. With the help of northerners, he collected about 40,000 specimens.
- Harington received his PhD from the University of Alberta in 1977. His thesis was entitled *Pleistocene Mammals of the Yukon Territory* and was based on research begun in Yukon in the 1960s.

Learn more:

eLife article

University of California, Santa Cruz press release

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