

FOR RELEASE
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New information published about ancient bison skeleton found in Whitehorse

In 2012, the discovery of a partial ancient steppe bison skeleton in Whitehorse sparked public interest. Now, the excavation results are being published and tell the story of a time long past.

The excavation took place over two days with the help of local community volunteers after the remains were found during a house construction. Since then, researchers from across North America have come together to examine this ancient part of Whitehorse history.

They learned this young bison died around 5,400 years ago after being mired down in a small lake. At the time, the area was covered in white spruce forest. This suggests the northern steppe bison population survived the mass extinction event at the end of the ice age, living longer than previously thought.

Although there was no evidence this particular bison was hunted by humans, archaeological discoveries at Fish Lake and alpine ice patches show that bison have long-been important animals in the traditional territories of southern Yukon First Nations.

Quotes

"This discovery was possible because of the community coming together. Partnerships with Yukon First Nations and support from local residents allowed us to preserve these unique traces of an ancient world. We appreciate the support of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation and Ta'an Kwäch'än Council in this research and for enabling excavation in their Traditional Territories. Thanks also go to Craig and Sandy Duncan for calling the Heritage Resources Unit to investigate this discovery."

–Minister of Tourism and Culture Jeanie Dendys

"Every fossil discovery provides a window to the past and shines new light on life in the Yukon from long ago. Finding this specimen must have been quite the surprise for the Duncans while they were building their home. I applaud their mindful approach to the find and their decision to involve the Heritage Resources Unit."

–Kwanlin Dün First Nation Chief Doris Bill

"Ta'an Kwäch'än Council is supportive of this palaeontological research that was conducted respectfully upon our Traditional Territory. We are interested in the discovery of specimens and archaeological artifacts that provide tangible evidence of life and our culture from many years ago."

–Ta'an Kwäch'än Council Chief Kristina Kane

Quick facts

- The new findings are the subject of an article entitled A middle Holocene steppe bison and palaeoenvironments from the Versleuce Meadows, Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada which was recently published in the Canadian Journal of Earth Sciences by NRC Research Press.
- Public engagement and fossil donations to the Yukon Palaeontology Program allow researchers to continue to uncover Yukon's past. Partnerships with Yukon First Nations, placer miners, and other community members are vital to furthering research in the territory.
- Steppe bison first crossed the Bering land bridge around 160,000 years ago, making their way from Europe and Asia to North America. They are now extinct. Bison seen in Yukon today are not direct descendants of these ancient animals.

Learn more:

Canadian Journal of Earth Sciences
KDFN News Centre – 2013 release

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