

Black Hills Institute

of Geological Research, Inc.



P.O. Box 643 / 217 Main Street Hill City, SD 57745-0643 USA Ph (605) 574-4289 Fax (605) 574-2518 Web www.bhigr.com e-Mail info@bhigr.com

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Contact: Peter Larson or Marion Zenker
Black Hills Institute of Geological Research
PO Box 643, Hill City, South Dakota
E-mail: PeterL@bhigr.com, MarionZ@bhigr.com
Tel: (605) 574-4289; Fax: (605) 574-2518

***T. rex* Dig Breaks New Ground—in science and online**

A South Dakota fossil company may again have made scientific history. Last month, Black Hills Institute dug its eighth *Tyrannosaurus rex*, a specimen that has revealed a hand bone never before reported with *T. rex*.

“The bone would have been enclosed within the palm, and it may be the remnant of a vestigial third finger,” Institute President Peter Larson said. “*T. rex* is famous for its two-fingered hand, but more primitive meat-eating dinosaurs had three fingers.”

After examining the end of the small bone, where a finger could have attached, Larson believes it is unlikely, although not impossible, that an undersized finger existed in *T. rex*. Still, the presence of this new bone, along with the first reported complete wrist bone (ulnare) found for this species, makes the specimen scientifically significant.

The fossil, known as “Wyrex,” also made headlines with its companion Web site, www.unearthingtrex.com, the first scientific effort to publish on a daily basis the events of a real paleontological excavation. From start to finish, documentation of the process was offered online via video, audio, photographs, slideshows, mapping diagrams, and scientific explanations. Virtual visitors could delve into paleontology, geology, *T. rex* anatomy and behavior—and, of course, the Wyrex excavation as it unfolded. The Web site also told the human-interest stories of the team in the field.

“We loved being able to correspond right from the dig site with people all over the United States, and from other countries,” Larson said. “Parents wrote in for four-year-olds, scientists debated theories, and dino groupies got totally into it. Each evening when we came in from the excavation, we answered questions. It was great!”

While the excavation was active, the Web site inspired a peak daily page view count of 44,000, with downloading of information by site visitors at an average of 1.5 gigabytes per day. CNN, *National Geographic News*, *USA Today*, *National Review*, and “Wild Side News,” among others, all provided links to Unearthing *T. rex*.

Wyrex was named after Don Wyrick, the rancher on whose Montana ranch the specimen was discovered. He and Dan Wells, an amateur fossil collector from Minneapolis, together found the *T. rex* in 2002. Because of how Wyrex was preserved, its overall scientific significance will not be known until it has been fully prepared, a process that has already started in the Institute’s Hill City laboratory.

“Because the specimen is, to a large degree, enclosed in very hard rock, only about one-third was visible in the field, and a lot of tantalizing details remain hidden,” Larson said. “Although we won’t know the exact completeness of the specimen until it has been prepared, we can estimate that it is in the neighborhood of fifty percent complete. I can tell you already that Wyrex falls well within the top ten *T. rex* specimens ever.”

And if Wyrex turns out to be more than fifty percent complete, it will rank higher. To estimate a specimen’s completeness, Larson counts the bones and does some simple math. Using this method, everyone agrees that only two *Tyrannosaurus rex* specimens surpass the fifty-percent mark: Sue (80%) and Stan (70%) (both of which also were collected by Larson’s company). Three other specimens hover around fifty percent.

“It is possible that Wyrex is the third-most complete *T. rex* ever found,” Larson optimistically added. “We’ve already seen parts from the skull, tail, pelvis, legs, feet, ribs, body, neck, shoulder, and hand.”

The company, on behalf of the landowners, will seek a permanent museum home for the specimen. News on Wyrex’s preparation and future home will be updated regularly on www.unearthingtrex.com.

“More than anything in the world, I want to see it up,” co-discoverer Dan Wells said. “I want to see it...where it can be exhibited for a long period of time.”

The whole process—from the Wyrex discovery to the World Wide Web—has been an eye-opener for Don Wyrick. He has watched the ground on his ranch for more than ten years, “realizing the importance of...these old bones.” He’s going to keep looking for more. “In this country, new bones will be showing up for years,” he said.

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