

Ice Age giants lurk in desert underground



Eric Scott, curator of paleontology at the San Bernardino County Museum, tells a Hi-Desert Nature Museum audience how he orchestrates digs for Ice Age fossils in the Upper Las Vegas Wash.

By Rebecca Unger Hi-Desert Star

YUCCA VALLEY — Eric Scott, curator of paleontology at the San Bernardino County Museum, has been digging the Ice Age scene in the Upper Las Vegas Wash for the past 10 years.

“There are beautiful exposures of Ice Age sediments, and you can wander around and see all kinds of spectacular stuff,” Scott said during his slide-show presentation at the Hi-Desert Nature Museum earlier this month.

Scott pointed to a slide photo of large bones lying on an outcrop of rocks. “Yes, some of you are dropping your jaws,” he laughed.

The Ice Ages began 2.5 million years ago and ended just 11,000 years ago. The ice and glaciers were mainly in the extreme North America and Canada.

The lower Western states were not covered in ice sheets, Scott explained, but the jet stream pushed down into Southern California and southern Nevada. Mammoths, mastodons, giant ground sloths, dire wolves, bison, camels, horses, lions and saber-toothed cats (our state fossil) were common North American mega-fauna during this time.

“‘Las Vegas’ means ‘the meadows,’ and this was probably the best place to be living during the Ice Age,” Scott said.

The first big dig in the wash area was mounted by the American Museum of Natural History of New York in the early 1930s. The expedition found what diggers thought was a stone tool, suggesting that humans were contemporaries with the large animals.

In the 1950s, the Southwest Museum of Southern California took up the Las Vegas digs.

“They were using the new technology of radio carbon dating, and they, too, found the ‘tool,’ the bones and charcoal, which could be radio carbon dated,” Scott told his audience. “This led to the really big digs of the 1960s, where massive trenches were dug out by bulldozers to see the layers of sediment that made up the geology of the region, and to look for the charcoal sediments.”

The Las Vegas fossil-bearing strata has been dated to a depth of 250,000 years. By contrast, the La Brea Tar Pits contain animals remains back to only 40,000 years.

However, by combining carbon dating with analyzing the layers of trenches, researchers realized “in every case the artifacts were not associated with the animal fossils,” Scott said. “When they found stone tools, they were above the fossil-bearing layers. Throughout the Mojave Desert and the Southwest, we don’t find evidence that early people were here with Ice Age animals. But, we’re still looking for those stone tools.”

Scott’s team from the SBC Museum has been digging in the Las Vegas Wash under contract from the Nevada Bureau of Land Management.

“We get really dirty, we get hot, we get sandblasted, we get cold, we get sandblasted, and we find all kinds of fossils sitting on the surface. In fact, we’ve found 438 new localities for fossils in the wash,” he said proudly.

Columbia mammoths are most commonly found in that area. Woolly mammoths lived in Canada and the Northeast, and mastodons have been found in Southern California from Los Angeles to Hemet, but not in the Mojave Desert.

Other fossil animals include smaller species like bobcats, mice, wood rats, snakes, frogs and marmots, which Scott says are “kinda cool,” because they don’t live in the area today.

“Large animals roam, but small animals tell us a lot about an area, since they stay where conditions are favorable. Marmots require cooler and moister conditions than are found here today, so obviously those conditions were present during the Ice Age,” Scott said.

To Scott, the significance of the Upper Las Vegas Wash is its huge time span and the events taking place during that time span that aren’t represented anywhere else in a single locality.

“It’s the abundance of fossils, their preservation and the paleo-environmental indicators like carbon and sedimentary deposits, mollusks and the porous limestone formations that create an amazingly complete picture of the end of the Ice Age through multiple glacial cycles, unique in the American Southwest,” the scientist declared. “And this study is funded by your tax dollars through the federal government, so this research is your research, these fossils are your fossils.”