

LA BREA AVENUE: PART OF AN ICY WORLD NOW LOST IN TIME

Thousands of years ago, before civilization took over and cars traveled the Wilshire corridor daily, dire wolves roamed Los Angeles as one of the top predators of Pleistocene Epoch's megafauna.

BY SORINA SZAKACS

Travel between worlds does not require a yellow ring like Digory used in “The Magician’s Nephew,” C.S. Lewis’ first installment of “The Chronicles of Narnia.” A ticket to the La Brea Tar Pits Museum in Los Angeles does the trick.

While few would associate La Brea’s portal with Lewis’ fantasy world, it is a place where imagination meets reality. Once more, literature finds its inspiration in a world long gone.

George R.R. Martin created the six dire wolves in “A Game of Thrones” and paired them with the Stark children, leaving the albino to the bastard John Snow.

While he made Ghost, Gray Wind, Lady, Nymeria, Shaggydog and Summer bigger than a pony and “twice the size of the largest hound” in the Stark family kennels. He also gave them different fur colors to match the personalities of their owners.

But none of those traits have anything to do with the real world underneath the former Rancho La Brea.

Dire wolves that roamed the La Brea corridor during the Last Ice Age were not bigger than ponies, nor were they so colorful as their fantastic counterparts. They traveled and hunted in today’s Los Angeles, from Disney Hall to LAX and from the Griffith Observatory to Santa Monica.

PHOTO COURTESY GIANT SCREEN FILMS

Dire wolves prey on a prehistoric horse.



Yes, Dire Wolves Existed

George R.R. Martin might be the creator of the most popular six dire wolves in literature and television history, but the famous pack is not the contraption of his pure imagination.

Five-thousand years before civilization, ice covered much of the earth. Giant untamed mammals ruled it.

Now extinct, the Pleistocene carnivores, the dire, or grim wolves *Aenocyon dirus* are the most commonly occurring mammal fossils in the asphalt deposits. They were widespread in North America during the Pleistocene Epoch. Climate change, the competition with saber-tooth cats and human hunters for the same prey and the disappearance of large herbivores might have been the reasons why dire wolves went extinct.

According to “Rancho La Brea: A record of Pleistocene Life in California,” by Chester Stock, dire wolf fossils have been found in deposits at Livermore Valley, along the border of the San Joaquin Valley, at McKittrick and Carpinteria and at San Pedro.

La Brea Tar Pits are unique because they are the only active Ice Age fossil site in the world located in the middle of a city—and special for the number of dire wolves recovered from the Pleistocene deposits.

Thousands of cars trek north and south during rush hour on La Brea and east and west on Wilshire. But 11,000 years ago, dire wolves and saber-tooth cats preyed on mammoths and antique bisons. Predators followed the herds from the tar pits to where UCLA is today and to L.A. City College and as far south as the Valley of Mexico, some 2,000 miles away. Saber-tooth cats were at the top of the food chain. Dire wolves, as fierce hunters as they were, often became an easy kill next to a bison carcass.

Mairin Balisi is a postdoctoral research fellow at the La Brea Tar Pits and a carnivore fossils expert. She always starts her presentations with the statement that dire wolves are real.

“The Tar Pits are scientifically significant because I feel that scientists know about it all over the world,” Balisi said. “But people in L.A. don’t know what a gem they have right here, in the middle of the city- the only urban Ice Age active excavation locality in the world.”

4,000 and Counting

La Brea Tar Pits Museum is now home to fossils of 4,000 dire wolves recovered from the tar pits. Balisi says the excavations continue because there are more fossils to recover. Each piece is part of a bigger puzzle.