



KENNETH FERRIERA PHOTOS, JOURNAL STAR

Highway paleontologist Shane Tucker holds the jawbone of a mastodon, an Ice Age elephant, that was found recently in Southeast Nebraska. Travis Benda and his sons found the fossil in early December while deer hunting along the Little Nemaha River.

Family finds rare mastodon fossil

Jaw from Ice Age elephant found in riverbed

LAUREN PENINGTON
Lincoln Journal Star

When Travis Benda and his sons ventured out on an early December deer hunting trip in Southeast Nebraska, they weren't expecting to find a millennia-old fossil.

The group discovered the lower jaw of a mastodon, an elephant from the Ice Age, frozen in a sandbar along the Little Nemaha River.

"I thought it was nothing," Benda said. "It looked like a tree limb until my son saw the teeth."

Unsure what the bone frozen in dirt was, Benda took photos and emailed them to Shane Tucker, a highway paleontologist at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the first person he saw on Google who might have an answer.

"When I sent those photos to



KENNETH FERRIERA, JOURNAL STAR

A closeup of the mastodon jawbone.

Shane, I thought it might be from a buffalo, maybe a mammoth if we were lucky," Benda said. "So, to find out that it was rare, the kids were super excited."

Tucker said Nebraskans call about fossils frequently, with common finds like horse and bison teeth being reported two or three times a month. Mastodons are much rarer.

Out of the University of Nebraska State Museum's collection — more than 1.5 million fossils — there are only 10 mastodon jaws. As soon as Tucker knew what the fossil was, he reached out to the landowner to see if she would be willing to donate it to the museum.

"Shane reached out and left a voicemail for me," said Arlis Scanlan, the landowner. "At first, I laughed — I thought it was a prank."

The farmland the fossil was found on has been in Scanlan's family for more than four generations. Currently, it's leased out under Nebraska's Open Fields and Waters Program, which allows public access to private land for hunting, trapping and fishing.

"The creek bed where the kid spotted the fossil is my mom's old swimming hole," Scanlan said. "She used to meet her cousins and her brothers at the bank to swim during the summer."

Scanlan and her 86-year-old mother joined the Bendas, Tucker and other UNL employees for the excavation.

When they reached the site, they found themselves in a unique situation.

Usually, Tucker said, collec-

Please see **FOSSIL**, Page A2



SHANE TUCKER, COURTESY PHOTO

Logan Walters, a student at Wayne State College, assists in removing a mastodon jaw bone from a riverbed in Southeast Nebraska. Travis Benda and his sons found the fossil in early December while deer hunting along the Little Nemaha River.

Fossil

From A1

when the ground is soft and easy to dig. With the increased snow and rain, the team was concerned that the river would rise and cover the jaw.

Instead of lifting the fossil out of the ground, the team covered the area with plaster and burlap to build a protective outer shell. Then, the group used a wheat-burning torch to melt the ice and

slowly chipped away at the sediment.

After hours of work, the jaw, still encased in layers of dirt and grime, was removed and transported to a lab.

The fossil will be prepared in front of the public at Morrill Hall starting at the end of February.

Scanlan is a seventh grade teacher at Platteview Central Jr. High School and said her 91 students will be front-and-center, watch-

ing.

Paleontologists will use small scalpels and brushes to remove the dirt from the fossil, then use a chemical solution to seal any cracks and stabilize the bone.

"The students are studying Earth layers and fossils right now," Scanlan said. "This experience makes it real for them, it takes it off the page and puts it in front of them."

Tucker said the fossil is anywhere between 12,000

and 40,000 years old.

"Eventually it'll come back to our research collection," Tucker said. "It'll be here for students to research, faculty and staff to research, or even researchers from all over the world. ... Morrill Hall is a library of Nebraska's past; we just have bones instead of books."

Reach the writer at 402-473-2657 or lpenington@journalstar.com.