

COLORADO SUNDAY

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Following in Colorado dinosaurs' footsteps

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Special to The Denver Post

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It's late August, and you know what that means: With the kids barely back in school, the first school-free weekday looms on Labor Day, with a second poised to follow in late September. Rather than submit to shrieks of "I'm boooooored" that could rearrange the plates on a triceratops during those days off, load the kids into the car and head out to visit sites that were home to dinosaurs 150 million years ago, when Colorado was in the tropics and covered with inland seas.



Dem bones

The world's first stegosaurus bones were found at Dinosaur Ridge in 1877. "This stegosaurus is one of the biggest we've ever seen," says Matthew Mossbrucker, director of the nearby Morrison Natural History Museum.

The finding triggered a dinosaur "bone rush" around the same time prospectors were heading out west in search of gold. Dinosaur Ridge turned out to be among the richest fossil sites, also yielding remains from brontosaurus (more accurately known as apatosaurus), allosaurus (the most common carnivorous dinosaur in North America), diplodocus and iguanadon.

Today, visitors can walk along West Alameda Parkway to see bones, footprints and silhouettes that dinosaurs left in the rock. Because the 2-mile round-trip interpretive trail is along a roadway, it may not be suitable for the preschool set. You can drive instead, but somehow it seems wrong to use fuel derived from the very fossils you're looking at. Nonetheless, there are parking pullouts along the way. The visitors center has a Stegosaurus Snack Shack for kids with thunderous appetites

If it's too hot on the ridge, the Morrison NHM on the west end of town has skulls and other bones, hair and footprints from triceratops, tyrannosaurus rex, woolly mammoths and other prehistoric creatures. It also has the world's only footprints from a hatchling (or baby) stegosaurus. The museum encourages hands-on dinosaur petting.

As you head back to Denver along U.S. 6 (near 19th Street in Golden), stop off at the half-mile Triceratops Trail, where you can see tracks from this three-horned, vegetarian dino. The adjacent Fossil Trace Golf Club has a footprint near the 12th fairway that was recently identified as belonging to the mighty T. rex.

Info: Morrison Natural History Museum, 501 Colorado 8, Morrison; mnhm.org; 303-697-1873

Prehistoric passage

If looking at dinosaur exhibits isn't thrilling enough, check out the Museum of Western Colorado's Dino Digs. For \$99, visitors ages 5 and older can dig in an active quarry containing bones from apatosaurus, camarasaurus and allosaurus.

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You'll get field instruction from a paleontologist, as well as lunch and transportation. You can also tour the lab at Dinosaur Journey Museum in Fruita, which has a cool interactive exhibit of robotic dinosaurs. The only remaining dig dates this year are Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, but there's always next year.

Info: Dinosaur Journey Museum, 550 Jurassic Court, Fruita; wcmuseum.org or .org; 888-488-3466

Jurassic park

Garden Park Fossil Area, on Shelf Road between Cañon City and Cripple Creek, is the site of numerous historically important dinosaur finds, including three stegosaurus skeletons. "Most of the Jurassic dinosaurs that are in the Smithsonian are from the (Marsh) quarry" at Garden Park, says Jon Stone, executive director of the Dinosaur Depot Museum in Cañon City, which prepares and exhibits fossils from Garden Park and nearby areas. Take a stroll along the 3,600-acre park's self-guided trails and see fossilized Jurassic-era trees, and have lunch at one of the picnic tables before heading over to the Dinosaur Depot in Cañon City. There, you'll get to see one of the world's most complete stegosaurus skeletons - one of three found at Garden Park. Kids can also explore fossils and learn how they were found in the Discovery Room here, and talk with paleontologists in the lab.

Info: Dinosaur Depot, 330 Royal Gorge Blvd. #A, Cañon City; www.dinosaurdepot.com; 800-987-6379

A river runs through it

Picketwire Canyon, south of La Junta, has more than 1,300 tracks from adult and juvenile brontosaurus and allosaurus within a quarter-mile stretch, constituting the largest set of dinosaur footprints in North America.

To get to the tracks, you'll have to hike or bike in about 5 miles from the Withers Canyon trailhead (count on another 3 miles if you come in a vehicle without four-wheel drive; you'll need to trek in from the Corral parking area). Once you reach the Purgatoire River, you'll have to wade through some very cold water to cross over to the tracks. Relax your bones in one of the footprints and have lunch - it'll give a whole new perspective to those dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets. This trail is for experienced hikers only, who should bring plenty of water.

Info: www.fs.fed.us/r2/psicc/coma/palo/life.shtml; 719-553-1400

Dinosaur Jr.

How cool would it be to have a birthday party with more than 30 life-size dinosaurs in attendance? That's exactly what the Rocky Mountain Dinosaur Resource Center in Woodland Park specializes in. But kids have long had a special place at RMDRC, considering a 14-year-old found one of the skeletons here - a 3-foot bambiraptor that was just a kid itself - in 1995. Other unusual dinos on display include the flying pteranodon and the 45-foot-long, seafaring tylosaurus. There's also a children's learning lab, where your precious progeny can put their hands on - ugh - dinosaur poop. The gift shop sells the usual books and T-shirts but also carries a line of pocketed vests for budding paleontologists, and CDs of dinosaur tunes sung by Al Jarreau.

Info: Rocky Mountain Dinosaur Resource Center, 201 S. Fairview St., Woodland Park; rmdrc.com or 719-686-1820

Urban adventure

Nothing says dinosaurs must be appreciated only in scorching, outdoor conditions. Check out the Prehistoric Journey exhibit at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science for an up-close look at prehistoric environments and the towering reptiles that lived there. The exhibit houses a 13,000-pound stegosaurus skeleton found in Garden Park in 1992, and brings to life the evolution of humans and other mammals, and the climactic changes that occurred along the way. Kids can pick up fossils and watch scientists as they prepare and study the artifacts.

Then head over to the Larimer Street Bridge. Triceratops bones were dug up near here in 1887. Could it be that the brontos once played very close to where the Broncos now play?

Info: Denver Museum of Nature and Science, 2001 Colorado Blvd., Denver; 303-322-7009 or dmns.org

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890 miles
I have no idea

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