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Royal BC Museum collects unidentified prehistoric sea turtle fossil

VICTORIA, BC—In late April 2021, Royal BC Museum palaeontology collections manager Derek Larson returned from the Puntledge River in Courtenay, BC, with a prehistoric sea turtle fossil in tow.

The fossil, now part of the museum’s collections, may be one of two known species of ancient sea turtle previously found in the area, or be a new species altogether.

“Either way, this discovery is a win for palaeontology in BC,” says Larson. “If the fossil is a known species, we’ll learn a lot of new information about that species because these specimens are rare and, so far, incomplete. If the fossil turns out to be a species that is new to science, that could exponentially advance our understanding of marine ecosystems millions of years ago.”

The age of the fossil—approximately 84 million years old—was determined by identifying abundant fossil shells found nearby.

Courtenay resident and fossil hunter Russell Ball discovered the fossil in January 2021 and contacted the Vancouver Island Palaeontological Society, who agreed it was likely a turtle. Ball then contacted the Royal BC Museum, which is the provincial repository for significant fossil finds, and the [BC Fossil Management Office](#) (Heritage Branch), which is responsible for the protection and management of fossils in British Columbia.

“Russell Ball and the Vancouver Island Palaeontological Society did everything right. They recognized the discovery’s significant scientific value and immediately set to work ensuring the fossil would end up where everyone in BC will be able to access and study it,” says Larson.

Professional palaeontologists and amateur fossil hunters have long considered the Puntledge River a well-known site for fossils, but vertebrate fossils are significantly more rare than invertebrate fossils like fossil shells.

The excavation of the fossil was made possible by BC Hydro, who worked with Larson to keep the river’s water at typical low levels to prevent the fossil from being submerged during the dig, and by the BC Heritage Branch, who helped fund this work in partnership with the Royal BC Museum.



Studying the fossil to identify the species is a priority for the museum's palaeontology team, but the process will take some time.

Next steps to prepare the fossil include chiseling away the rock surrounding the fossil, millimetre by millimetre, with a pneumatic air scribe (a miniature air-powered jackhammer).

Larson says this discovery demonstrates the immense value of citizen science: "Without Ball and the other volunteers who helped out, we may not have found this specimen and certainly we would not have been able to extract the fossil so quickly."

He encourages everyone in BC to keep their eyes out for fossils but cautions that there are [fossil collection laws in BC](#) that beginner fossil hunters should review before setting out on their search.

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About the Royal BC Museum: The Royal BC Museum explores the province's human history and natural history, advances new knowledge and understanding of BC, and provides a dynamic forum for discussion and a place for reflection. The museum and archives celebrate culture and history, telling the stories of BC in ways that enlighten, stimulate and inspire. Located in Victoria on the traditional territory of the Lekwungen (Songhees and Xwsepsum Nations), we are a hub of community connections in BC—onsite, offsite and online—taking pride in our collective histories.

Link to story photos:

<https://www.flickr.com/gp/36463010@N05/8011rx>

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