



SANTA CRUZ MUSEUM of natural history

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FOSSIL SLOTH BONE FOUND IN THE SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS, THE FIRST OF ITS KIND REPORTED IN THIS COUNTY

SANTA CRUZ, CA — March 21, 2024 — Local students from Tara Redwood School playing in the Santa Cruz Mountains last spring found a strange object that they suspected was a bone from a large animal. This bone was brought to the Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History where their Paleontology Collections Advisor, Wayne Thompson, recognized it as a fossil arm bone (left radius), likely belonging to an ancient sloth. Thompson called in fossil sloth experts who confirmed that this bone came from a Jefferson's ground sloth (*Megalonyx jeffersonii*), making this specimen the first ever fossil evidence for this species reported in Santa Cruz County.

"*Megalonyx jeffersonii* is one of the very first fossils documented in North America - it's just one of those iconic animals that more people should know about," states ground sloth expert Melissa Macias on the importance of this discovery.

The Museum of Natural History is currently working with local scientists to determine whether it is possible to come up with a precise age for this specimen. In the meantime, they know it was found in an Ice Age sediment deposit, placing it in a ballpark of between 11,500 years and 300,000 years old. This find follows on the heels of the [mastodon tooth](#) that was discovered on Rio Del Mar beach in 2023. Both of these fossils are from the same era and their discoveries increase our understanding of what this region would have looked like in the Pleistocene.

"Fossils are a great way to engage people with the deep past," said Felicia Van Stolk, the Museum's Executive Director, "and we're so excited that young students made this important discovery that will continue to inspire generations of museum visitors and scientists."

Jefferson's ground sloths are large, extinct, plant-eating mammals with blunt snouts. At full size they were about the size of an ox, up to three meters long and 2200-2425 lbs. They mostly lived alongside rivers and lakes in woodlands and forests, and their long sharp claws were probably used for grasping at

food, such as stripping leaves from branches. These three-toed sloths walked on all fours but could stand on their hind legs, and some used caves for shelter.

The Museum engaged local science illustrator Mason Schratter to bring this species back to life in a gorgeous depiction of the Santa Cruz landscape in the Pleistocene era. This artwork will be exhibited alongside the fossil in the Museum's annual exhibit of science illustration, [The Art of Nature](#), open March 23 - May 26, 2024. After the exhibit, the fossil will be carefully stored in the Museum's collections where it will be accessible for research and future publication.

About The Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History

The Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History is an independent nonprofit organization dedicated to connecting people with nature and science to inspire stewardship of the natural world. Founded in 1905 with the collection of Santa Cruz lightkeeper and naturalist Laura Hecox, it is the oldest public museum in Santa Cruz County. The Museum features hands-on educational exhibits and events for people of all ages to discover and learn about science and the natural history of this region. The life-size gray whale model outside the Museum, created in 1982, is a cherished Santa Cruz landmark, often observed with children climbing on and playing around it.

Learn more about the Museum and plan your visit at santacruzmuseum.org. We invite you to follow us on social media to see updates on current events, fun facts about nature, science, and local nature sightings.

Fast Facts

- The fossil bone is a left radius (arm bone) of an extinct ground sloth found in Santa Cruz County
- The species is *Megalonyx jeffersonii*, Jefferson's ground sloth
- Dates 11,500 - 300,000 thousand years old, from the Pleistocene Era
- On exhibit March 23 - May 26, 2024

Images

1: [Ice Age Sloth Skeletal Art](#) Credit Mason Schratter

2: [Wayne Thompson](#) Paleontology advisor for the Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History

3: [Sloth Bone image](#)

4: [Wayne Thompson with kid in front of the Museum](#)

5: [Kids who found the bone](#)