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The Fossil Time Forgot

Rare Remnants Offer Illuminating Glimpse of Dinos

By Kathy Blumenstock
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Sunday, September 14, 2008; Y03

He lived 77 million years ago, and now Leonardo, an immense creature preserved by time and elements, stars in his own TV special. The program chronicles the story of the first dinosaur mummy unearthed with an intact digestive tract: the fossilized Brachylophosaurus was a duck-billed, four-legged plant-eater.

Scientists estimate the male, 20-foot-long juvenile dinosaur was only 3 or 4 years old. He was discovered by amateur paleontologists near Malta, Mont., in July 2000.

The dinosaur could not be excavated from the dig site until a year later, after more than 18 feet of canyon wall was bulldozed or blasted away. Twenty diggers spent more than nine weeks just removing the cliff face above the fossil, whose body was covered 90 percent by skin.

The massive find both excited and puzzled scientists. The dinosaur's identifiable stomach contents are a rarity, because the preservation of plant matter demands specific conditions.

"No one knows why the bacteria didn't eat into him," said Robert Bakker, part of the team that deconstructed Leonardo. Bakker, curator of paleontology for the Houston Museum of Natural Science, said a good fossil requires "the right kind of mud, and the carcass needs to be buried quickly."

After its death, this dinosaur rested on a sandbar, and the wet sand covered and protected his body from scavengers. Centuries later, the creature, which originally weighed about a ton, had transformed, along with its sandy resting place, into more than six tons of solid rock and fossil.

[Discovery Channel](#)'s cameras follow the journey of Leonardo -- whose name was inspired by an old graffiti message inscribed near where he was found -- as scientists transport the giant carcass from Montana to the [Johnson Space Center](#) in Houston for detailed inspection.

The program also spotlights a unique physical feature on Leonardo's neck. The crop, a pocket-like spot that modern birds use to help digestion, provides temporary storage for chewed food, Bakker said.

The crop is significant, Bakker added, because its presence indicates dinosaurs may have been more similar to birds than to reptiles.

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The program also includes a dramatized snapshot of early paleontologists, whose discovery of dinosaur remains often earned them financial rewards and attention.

With computer-generated animation, real-time photographs and interviews, the broadcast offers viewers a glimpse into the still-mysterious creatures that Bakker likened to dragons or monsters, "except they're real."

"Secrets of the Dinosaur Mummy" airs Sunday, Sept. 14, at 9 p.m. on Discovery Channel.

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