

## My First Field Trip with HGMS

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The October 30, 2005 HGMS field trip was my first fossil hunting expedition down the Brazos River and my first field trip as a member of the HGMS. I learned long ago as a collector that sharing the thrill and excitement of another collector's discovery is almost as much fun as finding it yourself, and I always learn more about ancient landscapes and animals by exploring it with friends who share my passion for understanding the history of the Earth. In fact, the shared experience of being with a friend who makes a great find has always produced the most memorable and exciting moments for me in this hobby.

This trip was especially wonderful. Spectacular weather, a calm smooth river, a faint, cool breeze, and Neal Immega's boundless enthusiasm, good humor, and vast knowledge of what we were seeing made this one of the great days of my life. It was a team effort all day long, everyone shared what we learned and found, and we all found fossils. Pleistocene and Ice Age Texas became very real for me, and it was easy to envision the rising and falling of a much larger ancient Brazos River as massive glaciers far to the north shrank and expanded. My mind's eye could see the ancient landscape filled with the huge animals of which we found fragments, and I could visualize the fear and courage of humans on foot armed only with spears and rocks and arrows who faced these beasts. However, I also remember that these first Americans were so successful as hunters that they ate all the large land animals in the blink of an eye geologically, including all the horses. Only sheer volume of numbers saved the bison.

As the day drew to a close, I had found a fair number and variety of fossils and had a great time with my fellow club members. It had already been a very good day as we headed for home. My boat was the next to the last one to pull up on the last gravel bar of the day, and there were so many boats beached by the time we arrived that we had to pull into a narrow spot between two others. Dozens of club members were already finding fossils and bringing them to Neal who was happily and excitedly identifying each one and describing in vivid Technicolor detail the size and living habits of each vanished animal.

We stepped out of our canoe. I walked about ten feet and spotted a curved piece of what appeared to be fossilized wood almost directly in front of the bow of another beached canoe. By now I was largely ignoring the vast quantities of fossilized wood everywhere, but I knew wood normally would not have smooth curves. Many others had walked right over this spot ahead of me, so I did not expect much when I picked it up and turned it over—but it had teeth. That was a happy surprise.

Now I am a real rookie at this fascinating hobby, and I never hunted fossils on the Brazos River before, so I thought that if I found a jaw bone, they must be fairly common. Neal had quite a crowd around him, so I waited my turn and just handed the jaw into the circle and gave it to him without comment. He lit up immediately, as did the



Three views of a Pleistocene wolf jawbone--1.8 million years old. Closely resembles *Canis Armbrusteri* fossils found in Maryland.



crowd. It was a great moment, and I am thrilled to be able to add this small find to the litany of interesting fossils that HGMS field trips have uncovered over the years.

Neal and David Wolf have identified it as a wolf, and placed its age at about 1.8 million years old. I have also shown it to Dr. Robert J. Emry, the curator of the Smithsonian's Pleistocene fossil mammal collection, who agrees that it is a Pleistocene wolf. Dr. Emry says it is too small to be a dire wolf, and that a rib I found nearby on the same gravel bar also came from a wolf. (Perhaps the same animal?) We checked the fossil wolf jaw drawers for comparisons and decided that the jaw I found most closely resembles *Canis Armbruster* fossils found in Maryland. Dr. Emry also pointed out that my specimen was a very old wolf because one of the front teeth had dropped out in life and bone growth had closed the socket. It is interesting that the animal was able to survive into old age, and I have to wonder if its family members helped protect it and feed it.

The trip and the jawbone have given me a first-hand example for my colleagues in Congress when I remind them why we need to stop the Senate bill that is trying to outlaw mineral and fossil collecting by amateurs on federally owned lands. I am glad to report to HGMS members that House Resources Committee Chairman Richard Pombo has reassured me that this bill will never get out of his committee and that he appreciates the fact that it has been amateurs who have made most of the discoveries of new species and specimens. Without amateurs, the scientific world would not have gems like Sue, described by Chicago's Field Museum as "the largest, most complete and best preserved *Tyrannosaurus Rex* fossil yet discovered."

Chairman Pombo tells me that someone always files this same bill every session, and it never passes. As long as I am in Congress, I intend to keep it on my radar screen and to do everything I can to be sure it does not become law and shut down the good work of thoughtful careful amateur collectors.