

Small Exhibits, BIG IMPACT

BY BECKY BARNES AND CLINT A. BOYD

Since its inception in 1990, one goal of the North Dakota State Fossil Collection is to establish fossil exhibits in towns across the state so that people do not have to travel for hours to see and appreciate our prehistoric past (Hoganson, 2005). This program continues to expand, with fossils from our collection contributing to over two dozen exhibits across the state (fig. 1: Person and Boyd, 2016; Boyd, 2017). We frequently revisit these exhibits, ensuring everything is still in good condition and sometimes swapping in new fossils to keep the exhibit fresh. The overarching goal, as always, is continuing to find new places to set up fossil displays in areas of the state that currently lack an existing display. Over the past few years, we've had good success with this program, both in terms of updating existing exhibits and finding locations for new exhibits.

LIDGERWOOD PUBLIC LIBRARY

In the summer of 2019, we received a donated cast of a mounted skeleton of the small, plant eating dinosaur *Thescelosaurus*, a species from North Dakota that we've discussed in depth in a prior article (Boyd, 2016). While we were considering the best place to display this specimen, we were contacted by the Public Library in Lidgerwood, North Dakota asking if some of our staff could participate in a dinosaur-related kids reading event they were organizing. They were already going to impressive lengths to decorate the library, including assembling a large pterosaur (flying reptile) skeleton to hang from the ceiling (fig. 2). The timing was perfect, so we reached out and asked if rather than just having a paleontologist attend, what if we brought a whole dinosaur skeleton to the event! The skeleton is small, comes apart into seven pieces for easy transport, and can be assembled in minutes. We quickly arranged to have the specimen spend a few months on display at the library and set up an installation date. On Friday July 12th, 2019, the *Thescelosaurus* cast, nicknamed "Bert," was assembled on top of one of the library shelves, making it easily viewable to everyone and keeping it a safe distance away from the inquisitive hands of its young admirers (fig. 2).

The initial plans were to keep the skeleton there until the following spring, but those plans were paused as the COVID pandemic arrived in early 2020. As a result, "Bert" ended up spending almost three years at the Lidgerwood Public Library. During that time the Library added another dinosaur

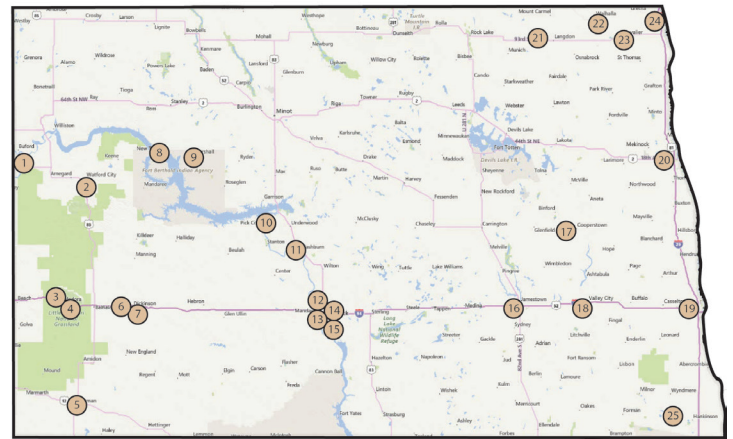


FIGURE 1.

Paleontological and geological exhibits throughout North Dakota that the North Dakota Geological Survey paleontological resource management program has assisted in developing as a part of the "A fossil exhibit in every town" program.

Background layer from Bing Road Maps. Key:

- (1) Missouri-Yellowstone Confluence Interpretive Center, Buford;
- (2) Long X Trading Post Visitor Center, Watford City;
- (3) Theodore Roosevelt National Park South Unit Visitor Center, Medora;
- (4) North Dakota Cowboy Hall of Fame, Medora;
- (5) Pioneer Trails Regional Museum, Bowman;
- (6) Dakota Prairie Grasslands, Medora Ranger District Office, Dickinson;
- (7) Dickinson Dinosaur Museum, Dickinson;
- (8) Three Affiliated Tribes Museum, New Town;
- (9) Paul Broste Rock Museum, Parshall;
- (10) United States Army Corps of Engineers Headquarters, Riverdale;
- (11) McLean County Museum, Washburn;
- (12) Industrial Commission – North Dakota Geological Survey and Oil and Gas Division Headquarters, Bismarck;
- (13) North Dakota Heritage Center & State Museum, Bismarck;
- (14) Dakota Prairie Grasslands Supervisor's Office, Bismarck;
- (15) Bismarck Municipal Airport, Bismarck;
- (16) National Buffalo Museum, Jamestown;
- (17) Griggs County Museum, Cooperstown;
- (18) Barnes County Museum, Valley City;
- (19) North Dakota State University, Stevens Hall, Fargo;
- (20) University of North Dakota, Harold Hamm School of Geology and Geological Engineering, Leonard Hall, Grand Forks;
- (21) Cavalier County Museum, Dresden;
- (22) Walhalla Public Library, Walhalla;
- (23) Icelandic State Park, Cavalier;
- (24) Pembina State Museum, Pembina;
- (25) Lidgerwood Public Library, Lidgerwood

friend to keep “Bert” company, a *Tyrannosaurus rex*, and it was incorporated into numerous other events held at the library (fig. 2).

Eventually the time came for “Bert” to move on to another exhibit (see below), and in April of 2022 we disassembled and packed up the skeleton. However, during that visit plans were made to develop a permanent fossil display case in the library where a selection of fossils from across North Dakota could safely be exhibited.

That display will be updated periodically, removing some fossils and replacing them with a variety of new fossils so that there is always something new and exciting for visitors to stop in and see. It has been a great pleasure

for us to see this partnership expand from a short-term loan of a single specimen to a new permanent fossil exhibit far from our current exhibits.

BARNES COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM

One of the larger fossil exhibits we helped develop in North Dakota is in the Barnes County Historical Society Museum in Valley City. In the spring of 2016, the museum and the NDGS Paleontology Program partnered to develop and install two large cases of Cretaceous fossils from North Dakota, including dinosaurs, mosasaurs, plants, and ammonites (Boyd, 2017). The centerpiece of that exhibit is a mounted cast of the skeleton of the three-horned dinosaur *Triceratops*. That exhibit is now over six years old, and the time has come to freshen it up a bit so that even those that have previously visited the museum have a reason to come back and check it out all over again. After thinking over our options, we decided that the quickest way to add a new feature to the exhibit was to give the *Triceratops* a friend to hang out with: a *Thescelosaurus*!

After picking up the *Thescelosaurus* from the Lidgerwood Public Library in April of 2022, we headed right over to Valley City for its next appointment. A quick study of the area around the *Triceratops* revealed that the location for the *Thescelosaurus* was under the larger dinosaur’s tail. The skeleton was quickly assembled and “Gundy” the *Triceratops* now had a new friend (fig. 3). This addition is the first step in updating the fossil exhibits at the Barnes County Historical Society Museum, with plans in the works to change out some of the dinosaur fossils in the existing display case with some new material that will be sure to give the exhibit a fresh look. Until then, we encourage everyone to stop in a see “Bert” and “Gundy” for yourselves!

WALHALLA PUBLIC LIBRARY

Another example of a great fossil display in a smaller town in North Dakota is the mosasaur on display in Walhalla. This specimen was first loaned to the city and put on display decades ago, but over time the information surrounding the fossil was lost, and staff turnover meant that no one knew what the fossil was, or where it came from. It was eventually handed over to the Walhalla Public Library and stored in its case in a back room. Enter NDGS paleontologists Clint Boyd and Becky Barnes! In the fall of 2019, after driving up from Bismarck to check on the public fossil dig locality in the nearby Pembina Gorge and chatting with locals, we ran into the librarian Barbara, who asked if we could take a look at what she thought was a turtle fossil. Heading to the back room of the museum, we saw a plaster jacket with mosasaur bones in it – which looked like a turtle shell flipped upside down. Lifting the jacket up to inspect it for identifiers, we saw a telltale NDGS field number – this was the first mosasaur specimen we collected from the Pembina Gorge! It had been cleaned and brought up for display years ago, but over time the information about the specimen had been lost. This is exactly why we label all of our fossils with specimen numbers in case they get separated from their loan paperwork!

After discussion, it was decided that the mosasaur should be put on display (with more labels and contact information) in the Library – a wonderful public place where adults and kids alike gather to learn. We were able to load the fossil up and transport it

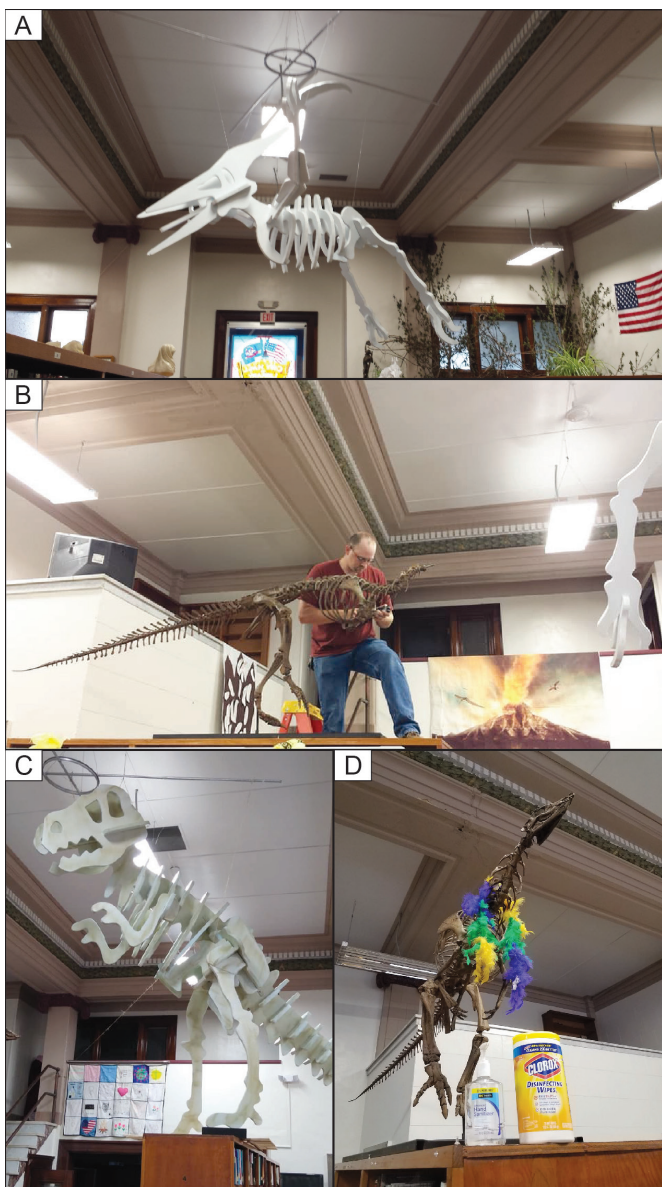


FIGURE 2.

Fossil exhibit at the Lidgerwood Public Library. (A) large toy pterosaur skeleton hanging from the ceiling in the library. (B) paleontologist Clint Boyd installing the *Thescelosaurus* skeleton on top of a bookshelf. (C) large toy *Tyrannosaurus rex* skeleton added after the *Thescelosaurus* skeleton. (D) “Bert” the *Thescelosaurus* decorated for a mardi gras celebration. All images courtesy of the Lidgerwood Public Library.



FIGURE 3. Installation of the *Thescelosaurus* skeleton next to “Gundy” the *Triceratops* at the Barnes County Historical Society Museum. (A) paleontologist Clint Boyd (blue shirt) and Museum Curator Wes Anderson (black shirt) installing the hind legs of the skeleton. (B) Installation of the front arms of the *Thescelosaurus*. (C) Tightening up the final screws on the *Thescelosaurus* skeleton as it takes its place next to “Gundy.”



FIGURE 4. The opening of the mosasaur exhibit at the Walhalla Public Library in January of 2020. (A) the newly cleaned mosasaur vertebrae in their supportive plaster jacket and associated information cards. (B) paleontologist Clint Boyd shows off a Paleocene turtle fossil to the kids. (C) paleontologist Becky Barnes reads her newly completed kids book “PrehiStories: Mosasaur” to the kids.

back to our lab in the North Dakota Heritage Center & State Museum in Bismarck where we did some additional cleaning and added a new jacket to provide additional support for the fossils. That work was completed early in 2020, just as Becky also completed a kids book about mosasaurs in North Dakota (PrehiStories: Mosasaur: Barnes, 2020). This made for a great opportunity to combine the opening of the updated mosasaur display with a reading of the new kids book. Illustrations from the book were added to the informational cards in the exhibit to add a splash of color and help draw attention to the exhibit. In late January the Library invited families and kids in the area to attend their weekly reading event and provided paleontology themed snacks while our paleontologists read the new book aloud to the families present, showed off a variety of other fossils from North Dakota, and unveiled the new exhibit to a crowd of excited kids and parents (fig. 4). When it was suggested that the specimen should have its own nickname one attendee suggested “Walhalla George from the Pembina Gorge” and the name was quickly adopted. George remains on display in Walhalla, just down the road from where its fossils had rested for 80 million years.

A FOSSIL EXHIBIT IN YOUR TOWN?

Looking forward, we are in talks with a few locations to possibly place new fossil exhibits and making plans to expand and/or update some of our current exhibits. That being said, we’re always looking for new places to get some fossils out on display for everyone to see. Have an idea for a location in your community where a fossil exhibit could be installed, either on a long-term or short-term basis? Maybe you have an idea for the next place our “Bert” skeleton should spend some time? Please reach out to us and start a conversation! The North Dakota State Fossil Collection exists for the benefit of all North Dakotans and our fossils best serve that purpose when they’re out for everyone to see!

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