

Dinosaur unearths baby Stegosaurus

In any word association game that's ever been played, most everyone would think "big" when the word "dinosaur" is mentioned.

But at Dinosaur National Monument, the word is "small." Because the monument has the world's smallest Stegosaurus on display in its Quarry Visitor Center.

Set amidst the fossil remnants of gargantuan creatures many times its own size, the Stegosaurus has been a feature attraction since its unveiling in the Dinosaur Visitor Center last spring.

Denny Davies, chief of Interpretation, says the fossil Stegosaurus is estimated to be 140 million years old, and is one of only three infants ever found. The one at Dinosaur is the smallest and most complete.

Russ King, the monument's late

paleontologist, conceived the plan in 1977 to remove the baby Stegosaurus from the quarry's cliff face and create a new exhibit. The quarry staff, including Museum Technicians Jim Adams and Tobe Wilkins, Paleontologist Dan Chure and long-term Seasonal Linda West, made molds of each of the fossil bones and poured casts using resin plastics. The replica "bones" then were drilled and assembled, using threaded steel rods. The baby Stegosaurus is mounted in a standing position.

Dan Chure says Stegosaurus was an herbivorous animal distinguished by its small head and by leaf-like plates that protruded along its spine. It lived during the middle period of dinosaur domination, a period known as the Jurassic.

"An adult Stegosaurus was about 24 feet long, stood 10 feet tall at the hips and weighed perhaps 4,000 pounds," Chure says. "Our specimen was about the size of a collie and weighed perhaps 75 to 100 pounds."

Because soft bone parts would decay rapidly after death and before fossilization could begin, Chure explained, the young of all animals are extremely rare in the fossil record. "To have the smallest and most complete Stegosaurus in the world is a fantastic find," he said.

About 40 percent of the youngster's fossilized bones have been recovered and include all of the diagnostic parts. The parts most conspicuously missing include the skull, back plates, backbones and tail spikes.

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Superintendent Joe Kennedy says the Stegosaurus project produced two major benefits. First, by removing the actual fossils from the cliff face, the rare specimen was made available for "hands on" research by dozens of paleontologists who visit Dinosaur each year. Secondly, the project provides the visitor with the only standing, articulated dinosaur at the park.

"Most visitors who come here apparently come with expectations of seeing a mounted dinosaur. And up until now, we've not had such an exhibit for them," Kennedy said.

The mounted specimen was unveiled last spring at a special ceremony attended by Bunny King Tyus of Vernal, Utah. Her late husband, Russ King, conceived the project.

Dinosaur Paleontologist Dan Chure, left, and Museum Technician Jim Adams take measurements on their "prized" Stegosaurus.

