

GRAHAM BEARD: DIGGING UP THE PAST

BY DAVID MORRISON

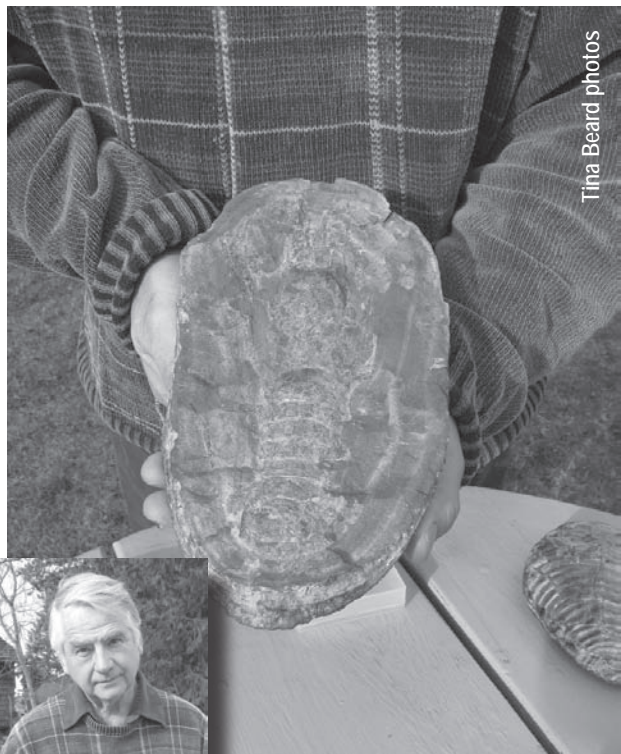
“When a concretion or a piece of limestone is cracked, or a slab of shale is split, that fracture exposes an ancient surface to the light of day for the first time in many millions of years. And the paleontologist wielding the hammer is the first person ever to examine that scene.”

As someone whose pay cheques depend on the oft-testing task of summoning language vivid enough to concisely capture a big moment or emotion, I look on in admiration when a fellow writer truly nails it. A précis beautifully relating the thrilling endgame and raison d’être of paleontologists the world over, even out of context the above paragraph is a fine example of what I mean.

Typical of their rich source, these fifty-two words appear in the introduction to a book entitled *“West Coast Fossils: A Guide to the Ancient Life of Vancouver Island”* (Harbour Publishing, 1998). Co-penned by renowned paleontologists Rolf Ludvigsen and Graham Beard of Denman Island and Qualicum Beach respectively, it’s one of those appreciated labours of love intent on demystifying a deep science. By using lucid language to explain complex processes occurring over brain-bendingly immense spans of time, the layperson is fascinated rather than intimidated by the subject. At least I am.

Co-author Graham Beard founded and runs the Vancouver Island Paleontology Museum, sited in the Power House Museum across from the Qualicum Beach Train Station. And having been in thrall to the world of ancient life forms since he was ankle-high to a velociraptor, this is a man absolutely living the dream.

“Yes, I’ve been interested (in fossils) from the very start,” he told me recently. “As a boy at our home in Vancouver, my dad let me have a little room in the basement – so I had my own little museum there with animals and plants and skulls and things I picked up along the road. And later, when he asked me where I’d like to go on vacation, I said: ‘I’ve heard there’s lots of great fossils in Alberta!’ So we made it to Alberta, and in those days you were allowed to collect dinosaur bones, so I brought some back and still have some of those in my collection.”



Fossil lobster from Hornby Island

Beard’s passion for old bones found flesh in formal education at the University of British Columbia, where he took a double zoology-biology major with a minor in paleontology-geology. It was during his time at UBC that he first learned of the potential treasures

awaiting him at a local paleontological hotbed: Hornby Island.

“It’s fantastic!” Beard enthused. “It’s the type of fossil site where you get both terrestrial and marine fossils, and the preservation is just miraculous. It was Hornby Island that first got me thinking about this part of the world to live in.” True to expectations, it’s this tiny blob of land that has offered up Beard’s most exciting fossil discovery to date – the hind limb of a 65,000,000 year-old bird.

“It possibly could be a totally new species,” our expert casually revealed, though he was quick to assure me that new finds are common in his line of work. “Actually, I’ve made many discoveries of new species; I can’t even remember how many have been named after me,” he confirmed with sincere modesty.

When talking with this fascinating, humble man, it struck me that he seemed far removed from the stereotypical image of the paleontologist, at least as presented in the media. Think of how popular

culture portrays scientists in general – as rather befuddled, nutty professor types, single-mindedly focused on his or her individual preoccupation. In the case of paleontologists, take, for example, Ross Geller from “*Friends*”: jittery, neurotic, forgetful, indecisive and impulsive. Then in the movie “*Jurassic Park*” there’s the double daftness of Sir Richard Attenborough’s eccentric and naïve John Hammond, and Sam Neill’s character, Dr. Alan Grant – an introverted genius, utterly intolerant of children. Since as far back as 1938, in fact, the motion picture industry has been unkind to paleontologists: in the comedy “*Bringing Up Baby*,” Cary Grant’s priggish character, David Huxley, is considerably more interested in securing a dinosaur bone for his museum than the advances of the lovely Susan Vance (played by Katherine Hepburn).

Personally, I think paleontologist is the coolest imaginable job. For a start, the terminology is great. What joy I’d find in conversation with a colleague to be able to chirrup: “Scaphapods? Well, they’re quite

interesting, I suppose – but I much prefer crinoids!”

Joking aside, how incredible it must be, as recounted in that lovely first paragraph, to know you’re the first ever human to gaze at the remains of a species existent hundreds of millennia before our own was even a twinkle in the primordial soup’s eye. There surely cannot be many ordinary folks, in Hollywood or otherwise, who’d pass on an opportunity to experience such a moment, so why is it that the ilk of Graham Beard get such a ribbing from filmmakers? And what does he think about how he and his peers are represented?

“You know, part of that image is correct!” he responded, chuckling – as he did throughout the observations that followed. “Most people I know that work with fossils, both professionals and amateurs, are obsessive-compulsive. They’re collectors, right? And some that I know are just “like that.” Not only do they collect fossils, but also books, bottles, stuff...well, I guess we’re just fun to pick on!”



Fossil crab from Shelter Point

Continuing on the same theme, Beard told me of British paleontologist Sir Richard Owen (1804-92), the man responsible for the term “terrible lizards,” but whose obsession with dinosaurs knew no bounds. By all accounts a deeply unsavoury, malicious individual driven by an ego out of control, he claimed credit on many occasions for the discoveries of fellow fossil hunter Gideon Mantell (1790-1852). Beard tells the full, unbelievable story in one of his talks, “*Dino Wars*,” other off-the-rails rivals like the Americans Edward Cope (1840-97) and Othneil Marsh (1831-99) also named and shamed.

“They started out as friends, but became mortal enemies,” Beard informed me. “They’d hire gangs to go in and collect fossils, but when they finished with the site they’d dynamite it so the other guy couldn’t get in there! And then there was the time that Marsh knew some of Cope’s spies were watching this one particular dig, so as they packed up he left one fossil behind. It turns out it was left on purpose, but Cope went down and found the fossil – a skull. He was all excited and published this thing, then found out it was a set-up, that Marsh’s men had taken a bunch of skulls from different animals and assembled them into a “fictitious” skull! So poor old Cope had to rush around and buy all the papers back that he’d published! They were just terrible to each other, so there are some fascinating stories. I guess this would justify the eccentricity people seem to think we have!”

Wow. Paleontologists, eh? Not in an ichthyosaur’s blink did I think they were such a crazy bunch, so perhaps there’s substance to that stereotypical image after all? Whatever, I don’t care, as it’s still the coolest imaginable job. ~

The Vancouver Island Paleontological Museum is at 587 Beach Road, Qualicum Beach, and open from mid-June to early October. Call 250-752-9810 for further information.

“*West Coast Fossils: A Guide to the Ancient Life of Vancouver Island*” by Rolf Ludvigsen and Graham Beard is available in paperback at all good Vancouver Island bookshops (**including EyesOnBC in Bowser**), priced \$24.95. For further information, contact Harbour Publishing: www.harbourpublishing.com/info@harbourpublishing.com / 604-883-2730. The excerpt reproduced here appears with the kind permission of Graham Beard. ~