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Ice-age jaguar among fossil finds

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Long before people began visiting the Oregon Caves, ancient animals roamed the chilly cavern. The long list of fossils found inside includes salamanders, bats, mice, voles, mountain beaver, bears and birds.

In 1995, researchers were amazed to discover a 14-inch skull and other bones of a 500-pound jaguar.

"The bones were dated at being 38,600 years old, making it one of the oldest and most complete jaguar skeletons," said John Roth, natural resources specialist for Oregon Caves National Monument.

The ice-age cat, about the size of a modern African lion, may have died on a remote ledge after becoming lost in the cave while hunting for prey.

Kevin Seymour, a Canadian paleontologist and jaguar-fossil expert at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, is studying the bones. He said Oregon Caves is the farthest north and west that a jaguar fossil has ever been found.

In addition to the jaguar, bear bones -- thought to be that of a grizzly -- have been dated to more than 50,000 years ago, making it one of the oldest grizzly-bear fossils ever found in North America.

-- Richard L. Hill

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