

Digging history in Fossil

The Oregon Paleo Lands Institute, a nonprofit that educates people about paleontology and geology, is dedicating its new Field Center on Sept. 12

By Inka Bajandas / *The Bulletin*

Published: August 28, 2009 4:00AM PST



Courtesy Ellen Bishop, Oregon Paleo Lands Inst.

Volunteer Bob Andrews, who traveled from Prineville to Fossil to volunteer at the Oregon Paleo Lands Institute Field Center, paints the base holding a newly installed 12-foot-long steel plesiosaur sculpture that high school students from Mitchell helped build. "I've been a fossil geology nut since I was 8 years old," he said.



Bulletin staff photo

The new Oregon Paleo Lands Institute Field Center in Fossil was completed in June, and the center opened its doors over Fourth of July weekend. The center, which serves as a resource for visitors to help them learn about the geology and fossils in the area, will be officially dedicated on Sept. 12.



If you go

What: The Oregon Paleo Lands Institute Field Center

Where: 333 W. Fourth St., across from the Wheeler County Courthouse in Fossil

When: The center is open 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays and 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturdays. The Field Center's dedication will take place from noon to 4 p.m. Sept. 12.

Learn more: www.paleolands.org

FOSSIL —

Seemingly endless dry plains coated with sagebrush and an occasional leafless sun-bleached tree give way to jagged reddish rock pinnacles jutting out of golden hills on the drive to the new Oregon Paleo Lands Institute Field Center.

These geological formations and the fossils preserved in the area under layers of petrified volcanic ash are what the Oregon Paleo Lands Institute strives to educate visitors and residents of north-central Oregon about. The nonprofit organization, founded in 2003, opened a new Field Center in the town of Fossil, located three hours northeast of Bend, about a month ago. It hopes the center, by serving as a resource for visitors to the area looking for places to hike or find fossils, among other activities, will bring much-needed tourism and business to Fossil and the surrounding towns.

“A big part of our mission is to drive economic development,” said Anne Mitchell, the executive director of the institute.

She added that the Field Center is becoming a first stop for many tourists.

“A lot of people come into the area through Fossil.”

The Field Center, which is also the headquarters of the organization, is housed in a new 1,400-square-foot wood building with a high ceiling and flooded with light from skylights and large windows. It features resources for people to explore and learn about the nearby landscape. Visitors can check out a cast of a plesiosaur jaw bone fossil found in Mitchell six years ago and a newly installed 12-foot-long welded steel sculpture of that ancient aquatic creature, inspired by the jaw fossil. It was built with the help of high school students from Mitchell this past school year.

Successful opening

The building was completed in June, after about a year of construction, and first opened its doors to the public over Fourth of July weekend, Mitchell said. People in Fossil that weekend for the Wheeler County Bluegrass Festival also ended up visiting the center, she said. They had more than 1,000 people come through over the two days, and since then, they’ve had about 200 visitors, she said.

The new building, which cost \$300,000 to build, was mostly funded by a \$250,000 Small Business Administration grant. The rest was funded by donations and membership gifts. Wheeler County, Mitchell said, also bought the land the center sits on and is allowing the institute to use it.

Currently, Oregon Paleo Lands Institute staff and volunteers are working on getting all the displays set up in time for the center’s dedication on Sept. 12. The dedication, she said, will feature a live band, cake, speeches and special guests, including artist Larry Williams, who came from California to help Mitchell School students create the plesiosaur sculpture, the students and possibly the finders of the plesiosaur jaw bone fossil.

Williams was at the center on Wednesday helping install the sculpture, which he said he had finished since the Mitchell School students went on summer vacation. Paleo Lands Institute staff and volunteers helped paint the base of the plesiosaur sculpture light blue. When the paint dries, they’ll set up small clay sculptures made by third-, fourth- and fifth-graders from Mitchell last school year. The sculptures are of marine life that lived in Mitchell millions of years ago, when it would have been a coastal town.

Educational resource

The plesiosaur and ancient marine life sculptures were part of an educational project set up by the institute in cooperation with the Mitchell School, which ran from February to June and incorporated educational standards into lessons about plesiosaurs, other ancient life and geology.

The organization is all about teaching people about paleontology and geology, whether it's in the local schools in nearby Mitchell or educating people who walk into the center, said Ellen Bishop, programs director for the institute.

“We want people to come out and learn about how Oregon was formed,” she said.

It's also about informing people about the area, said Mitchell.

“We can let people know about other resources and what people can see and do here,” she said. Sometimes, people will come in without even having a map, she said, and ask where they can go to check out some fossils. They'll also want to know where they can stay, get gas and eat, too, she said.

“We give out a lot of that kind of information to folks,” she said.

Mitchell and Bishop said they want to make the center as interactive as possible by having hands-on activities, and puzzles and coloring available for kids. Bishop said they would like to convert the garage behind the center into a laboratory with microscopes where people can examine rocks and fossils. In addition to the guided hikes, Mitchell said they would like to hold a workshop on how to dig fossils. The Field Center is also a place where people can bring in fossils they find and learn more about them, Bishop said.

“If you don't share (a fossil) with science, nobody learns from it,” she said. “It can also help people understand the past if they show it to the local paleontologist or geologist.”

Inka Bajandas can be reached at 541-617-7818 or at ibajandas@bendbulletin.com.