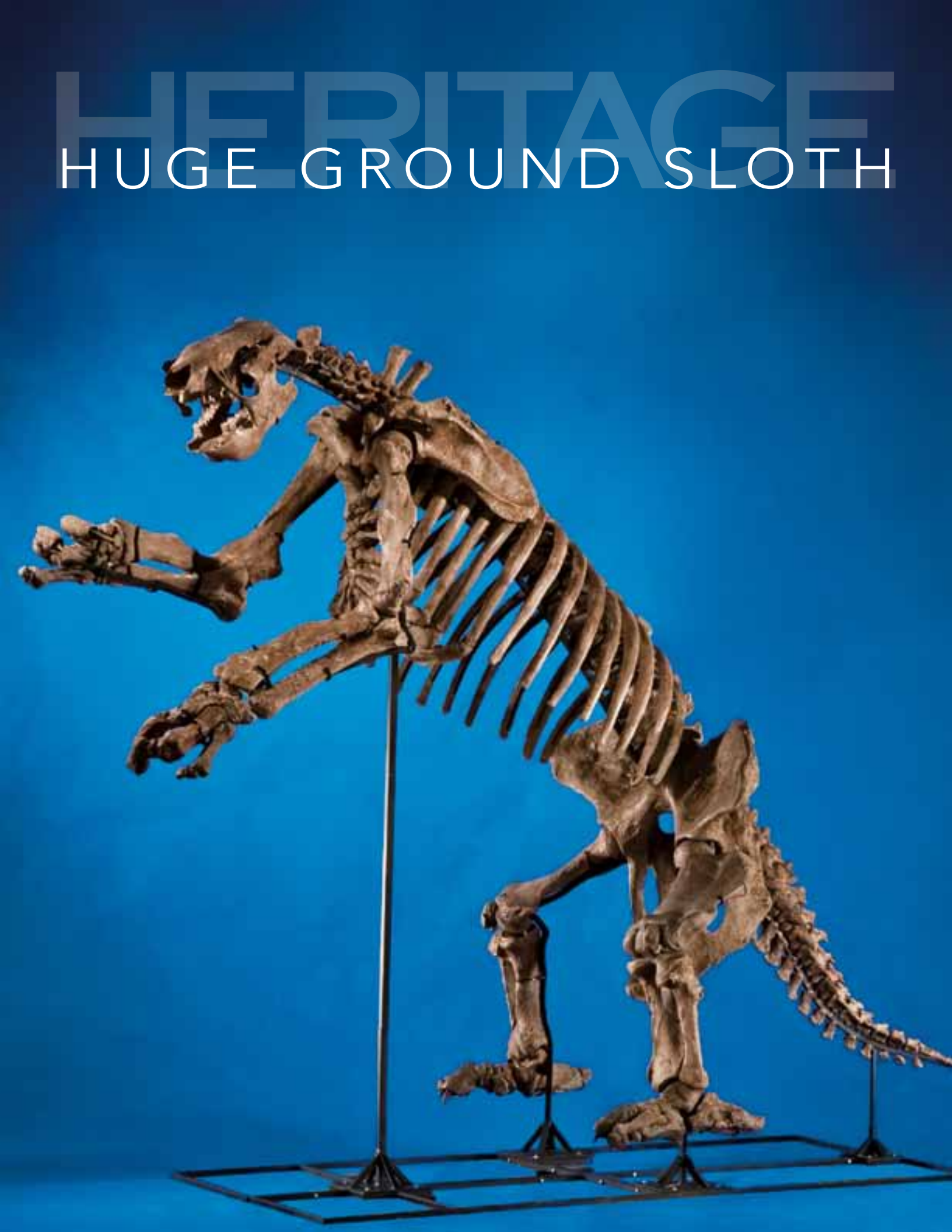
HERITAGE

HUGE GROUND SLOTH



In the Late Pleistocene Epoch of Florida, there existed a diverse mammalian fauna which included some of the largest mammals to ever exist on our planet. Among these giants were huge mastodons and woolly mammoths, semi-aquatic gomphothere elephants, bison with 8 foot horn spreads, huge camels, giant armadillos the size of Volkswagen Bugs, and huge ground sloths; the largest of which was Eremotherium.

A SUPERB GIANT GROUND SLOTH SKELETON

Eremotherium laurillardi - Late Pleistocene - 180,000 to 550,000 years old
Fort Thompson Formation
Daytona Bone Bed, Daytona Beach, Florida

Biology of the Eremotherium

Eremotherium is the largest sloth to have ever existed and is believed to have migrated from South American to North America during the Middle Pleistocene, approximately 2.2 million years ago, over the then newly-formed Panamanian land bridge. It was the largest mammal in the western hemisphere aside from the giant Woolly Mammoth and weighed approximately 5 tons at full maturity and stood up to 15 feet tall. The Eremotheres possessed huge foot-long claws on their hands which may have looked fearsome and deadly but were likely only used to denude tree limbs of their tender shoots and leaves. A powerful but stubby tail functioned as a third leg to form a tripod with the legs and massive hips, providing great stability when the animal was leaning back and stretching upward to reach the highest tree branches in order to consume the most succulent foliage. The massive arms and wide hips would allow this sloth to pull down huge branches and even whole trees if desired, and this likely led to total devastation of the forest in areas where these giant sloths were feeding. Eremotherium was a nearly perfectly designed tree destroyer and thrived in the lush tropical rainforest environments of the Florida Pleistocene. It had no natural enemies because of its size; and even the huge bears and saber-toothed tigers that coexisted with this sloth could not challenge an adult. It is possible the juveniles would have been vulnerable to attack from the largest and most powerful carnivores, but it is also quite likely these sloths possessed a strong maternal instinct that would've made a mother sloth a very aggressive and dangerous opponent in the event of an attack on its offspring.

The Discovery near Daytona

Over 180,000 years ago, near where the Daytona International Speedway is today, a herd of giant sloths were peacefully feeding on lush vegetation amid a grove of trees, when a catastrophic flash flood swept them into an estuary and out to sea where they drowned. Their carcasses soon sank and collected in a channel-lag, an area where the current suddenly decreases on the edges of an underwater channel. Sharks, crabs, and other organisms scavenged on some of the carcasses, but luckily silt and sand quickly covered the sloths and preserved them largely intact up until modern times. Over tens of thousands of years, the sloth graveyard was covered by 30 feet of silt, sand, shells, corals and other marine remains.

In October of 1975, what was once an undersea channel was now a dry land borrow pit quarry for road bed material. Amateur paleontologist and full-time TV repairman Don Serbousek and his friend, Roger Alexon, were out hunting fossils in the borrow pit when they made the discovery of a lifetime. In the quarry wall they saw dozens of chocolate-brown fossil bones exposed in a peaty clay layer 12 feet below the ground level. In this bone bed, they found the remains of the giant ground sloth, Eremotherium, and in great quantity. Most of the sloth bones they collected belonged to just one individual, but there were isolated bones of many different individuals found indicating that the site could be prolific. Realizing the scientific importance of his find, Serbousek contacted world-renowned sloth expert Dr. Gordon Edmund, then Curator of Vertebrate Paleontology at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto.

Dr. Edmund proclaimed upon visiting the site and seeing the nearly complete skeleton, "From my research, I'd say this is by far the best Eremotherium, or giant sloth, skeleton discovered in North America." Backed by Dr. Edmund's worldwide reputation and strong recommendations about the scientific importance of the site, plans were made for a complete and thorough scientific excavation. The Volusia County government authorized public funds to expose the bone layer by stripping off the top layers of the shell beds, draining the groundwater from the pit, and using high pressure hoses to help clear matrix from around the bones. Over the next two years a team of scientists and volunteers, along with Serbousek and his friends, toiled long days in the pit using the water hoses to extract the bones while other volunteers worked to clean and conserve the bones in a preparation lab. Tens of thousands of man hours were invested in collecting and preserving the incredible giant sloth fossils found in the "Daytona Bone Bed", as it was named by Dr. Edmund in the scientific paper he published about the site. After the excavation work was completed, over 1,300 giant sloth bones had been collected from 11 different individuals in the herd; however, there were only two complete skeletons found. All of the specimens were initially taken to the Royal Ontario Museum for study and publication, with one skeleton to be mounted and returned to the Museum of Arts and Sciences in Daytona. The other unmounted skeleton was given to Don Serbousek in grateful appreciation for him selflessly bringing the most important giant sloth site ever found to the attention of science, and for his tireless efforts managing and excavating the site over the course of two years. The rest of the 1,300+ bones found during the dig were accessioned into the permanent collection of the Royal Ontario Museum where they reside to this day.

The Present Specimen

The complete mounted skeleton offered here is the Serbousek specimen, and it is the sister specimen to the skeleton currently on display at the Museum of Arts and Sciences in Daytona Beach, Florida. The Serbousek sloth bones were initially prepared by technicians at the Royal Ontario Museum, and some missing elements were provided by them in the form of casts or real bones from other individuals so that Mr. Serbousek would have a 100% complete skeleton to mount. Unfortunately, making the armature and mounting such a huge skeleton is a very expensive and time-consuming process that Mr. Serbousek was never able to accomplish it in his lifetime.

Over 80% of the original bones are present in this specimen, with only the following major elements being casts: pelvis, sternum, and sternal ribs. Minor cast elements include one thoracic vertebra, 5 ribs, several tail vertebrae and chevrons, and some foot and hand bones. The skull is superb and original with all original teeth but has restored zygomatic arches and minor crack repair. The skeleton mount was completed in November, 2010, only three months after Mr. Serbousek's death at the age of 83, and is now ready to be displayed proudly in any museum or private collection in the world. As mounted, this skeleton measures 15 feet in length from head to tail yet stands 11 feet tall from the floor. It measures 5 feet wide across the hips, with the massive skull measuring 28 inches long by 14 inches wide by 15 inches tall. The natural color of the bone is a gorgeous chocolate brown, making for a truly beautiful and exquisite mount. There are only 3 known complete skeletons of these giant sloths mounted in museums around the world; one in the MOAS at Daytona Beach, Florida; one in the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; and one in the British Museum of Natural History, London. With the preparation and mounting of this sloth now finished, it has become the fourth complete mounted skeleton of Eremotherium laurillardi in the world, making this a scientifically important specimen and a true paleontological treasure.

NATURAL HISTORY

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For more information, contact:

David Herskowitz
Director of Natural History
DavidH@HA.com
214-409-1610
800-872-6467 ext. 1610

Peter Wiggins
Assistant Director of Natural History
PeterW@HA.com
214-409-1639
800-872-6467 ext. 1639