



LAS January 2014 Headlines:

Cave women unearth skull of unknown human ancestor

Alan Boyle, Science Editor NBC News, Nov. 15, 2013

An all-woman team of spelunking scientists has retrieved hundreds of fossils from a 100-foot-deep (30-meter-deep) cave in South Africa — including the cranium from what appears to be a prehistoric humanlike creature.

Friday's retrieval of the skull was a climactic moment for the three-week expedition to the Rising Star Cave in South Africa's Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site, just 25 miles (40 kilometers) north of Johannesburg.

The Rising Star Expedition, backed by the National Geographic Society, was put together after a pair of recreational cavers came upon the trove of bones last month. They alerted Lee Berger, a paleoanthropologist at the University of the Witwatersrand who has been behind a long string of significant finds in South Africa and serves as a National Geographic explorer-in-residence.

Berger was excited to hear that the fossilized bones could represent a new group of hominins. ("Hominins" has become the preferred term for humans and our close extinct relatives, such as Neanderthals. Scientists now use the term "hominids" to refer to those species as well as to gorillas and chimpanzees.)

The call went out for scientists to join the expedition. Some of the top experts in paleoanthropology, such as the University of Wisconsin's John Hawks and Duke University's Steven Churchill, joined the team. But the scientists tapped to go into the cave and bring up the fossils were required to have an almost superhuman combination of talents.

They had to have a master's degree or Ph.D. in paleontology, archaeology or an associated field. They had to be experienced cavers. And they had to be able to fit through a 7-inch-wide (18-centimeter-wide) choke point in the passage leading to the chamber. Fifty-seven qualified researchers applied for the job. Six were chosen: Lindsay Eaves, Marina Elliott, Elen Feuerriegel, Alia Gurtov, Hannah Morris and Becca Peixotto.

"It ended up that the most qualified human beings on this planet to do this very dangerous, very remarkable job were young women," Berger said in a video profile of the "underground astronauts."

The project is already paying off big time. "Wonderful fossils coming out now," Berger tweeted from the site on Friday.

The cranium and a hominin jawbone were among the most-prized specimens. "Cuddled the cranium all morning, then made first run carrying fossils entire way. Getting the hang of this!" Gurtov reported.

By the end of the day, a box containing the cranium was carefully handed up from the depths by a human chain. "Lots of celebration out here. Rising moon, beautiful evening, and twenty celebrating people," Hawks wrote.

Gurtov exulted over the skull's retrieval. "CRANIUM IS OUT! No revealsies until tomorrow, though," she tweeted. "Needs pampering."

Berger said more than 200 hominin fossils have been brought up so far. After coming up to the surface, the bones are taken into a "SCIENCE" tent where they're compared with replicas of previously found hominin skulls and other bones.

For now, the team is holding back on saying where the Rising Star fossils fit on humanity's evolutionary tree. Berger said he expected a scientific paper on the find would be prepared for publication in late 2014. Meanwhile, National Geographic and the "Nova" science documentary team are working on a TV show about the expedition.

<http://www.nbcnews.com/science/cave-women-unearth-skull-unknown-human-ancestor-2D11603661>



Loveland Archaeological Society, Inc.

A Colorado Non-Profit Corporation

LAS Find of the Month, January 2014:

Members can bring an artifact to be entered into the competition at the monthly meeting, which will be judged based on the following rules:

1. Must be a member of LAS in good standing.
2. The artifact must be a personal find.
3. It must have been found within the specified time frame, i.e., within the month prior to the meeting.
4. The artifact doesn't have to be a Colorado find—all that matters is that it was found in the last month.

The Find of the Month for January 2014 was made by Shellene Hettinger

Type: Hannah

Material: Quartzite

Location: South Platte River

Weld County, Colorado



LAS News and Upcoming Events:

- Speakers Needed!** We need speakers for our monthly meetings starting in January 2014. If you would like to give a presentation or know of someone who would give a great program please contact Andy Coca, Jean Steinhoff or Kevin Zeeck. No experience is necessary. All that is needed is a passion for our hobby and a willingness to share that passion. Thanks!
- February 4, 2014** February meeting. Program: "Running of the Buffalo: Communal Bison Hunting in Northern Colorado" by CSU Master's student Chris Johnston. Chris will provide some discussion on his thesis site, the Roberts Buffalo Jump in northern Larimer County.
- March 4, 2014** March meeting. Program: to be announced.
- March 28-30, 2014** Fort Collins Rockhounds Club annual show at the Ranch (McKee 4-H, Youth and Community Bldg) in Loveland, Colorado. See the website for more information: www.fortcollinsrockhounds.org.
- Summer 2014** The Crow Canyon Archaeological Center is holding two field sessions during the 2014 Summer season. Dates are June 22-28, 2014 and July 20-26, 2014. For information visit <http://www.crowcanyon.org/programs/campus/NEHsummer2014.asp>.