

4-year-old finds 94-million-year-old fossil of an armored dinosaur

By Fort Worth Star-Telegram, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.20.15

Word Count **785**



(From left) Bill Johnson, Wylie Brys and Tim Brys work at a site where a dinosaur bone was found in Mansfield, Texas, April 6, 2015. Tim and his 4-year-old son, Wylie, found the bone near a construction site. Khampha Bouaphanh/Fort Worth Star-Telegram/TNS

MANSFIELD, Texas — Wylie Brys just made the discovery of a lifetime, and he is not even in kindergarten yet.

Wylie, a 4-year-old from Arlington, Texas, was searching for fish fossils with his dad, Tim, last fall. The preschooler found a bone that has excited even experienced paleontologists from Southern Methodist University (SMU) in Dallas.

The 3-inch chunk turned out to be part of a *Nodosaurus*, a dinosaur that lived about 94 million years ago during the Late Cretaceous Period. The *Nodosaurus* looked like a “fat, squatty cow with armor,” said Michael Polcyn, an SMU paleontologist, who studies fossils.

"One Bone Connected To Another Bone"

At first, the scientists were doubtful about what could be found on a construction site less than 100 yards from a busy road.

The scientists thought the bone was probably from a plesiosaur, a marine reptile that lived from about 200 to 66 million years ago. Plesiosaur fossils can be found all over the Dallas area, SMU paleontologist Dale Winkler said.

The paleontologists, along with volunteers from the Dallas Paleontological Society, started digging April 3. They unearthed more than 50 percent of the Nodosaurus.

"We were not expecting to find much of it," Winkler said. "It looked like the bones had been spread around. We started digging and one bone connected to another bone that connected to another bone that connected to another bone."

Wylie's dinosaur was one of only five nodosaurs ever found in the Dallas-Fort Worth area and the first one in decades. An adult, a baby and a skull had been previously unearthed, and a few bones had been found near Dallas/Fort Worth Airport, but none since the 1990s, Winkler said.

The latest find is the most complete of all, said SMU paleontologist Louis Jacobs, author of "Lone Star Dinosaurs."

"Much of the skeleton is there," Jacobs said. "We don't know how much. We took out legs, the backbone and ribs."

Like An Armadillo

Winkler, Polcyn and members of the paleontological society pulled out most of the body Monday. They then uncovered a thighbone Wednesday morning in the thick red clay soil about a yard from the original find.

"We didn't think anything else was in there," Winkler said. "We assumed there weren't any more bones because there's a (utility) trench dug on the other side of the bones. A couple of feet to the left and it would have been bad."

The paleontologists wrapped the bones in plaster and moved the 6-foot-by-3-foot, 18-inch-thick lump to Jacobs' lab at SMU. There, they will take the skeleton apart, clean the bones and reconstruct what they can of the dinosaur.

Nodosaurus were kind of the armadillos of the dinosaur world — short, squat and covered in armored plates with a soft underbelly. The reptiles, which are not related to today's armadillos, were vegetarians and about the size of a small horse, Jacobs said.

Wylie found the bone last fall on the top of a hillside in Mansfield that had been scraped flat by a grading machine during construction of the nearby store, Wylie's father, Tim Brys, said. Several bones were lying on top of the ground. He reburied them and made note of the area.

Millions of years ago, the area was then the Western Interior Seaway, an extension of the Gulf of Mexico. Fossils of fish scales and bones were found all around the Nodosaurus.

"Once-In-A-Lifetime Thing"

The scientists say they probably will never know why the Nodosaurus died, but they already know how, just from where it was found.

"Ever see an armadillo on the side of the road?" Polcyn asked. "He blew up like that and floated out to sea."

Although Wylie found the first bone months ago, the paleontologists couldn't start digging until recently because they needed permission from the people who owned the land. The landowners, whose family has farmed the area for more than a century, have donated the bones to SMU, Winkler said.

The only one who seems unimpressed by the rare discovery is the boy who found it. Asked whether he would rather find dinosaur bones or dig in the dirt, Wylie didn't hesitate. "Dig in the dirt," Wylie said.

"Wylie hasn't said a whole lot about it," said his father, Tim Brys. "I don't think that he gets this is a once-in-a-lifetime thing. I think when he found the first fish vertebra, he was pleased that I was pleased that he recognized it."

Winkler calls the Mansfield Nodosaurus "Beach Ball." The 4-year-old calls his dinosaur Ralphie after another reptile, his favorite Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle — Raphael.

The father and son plan to keep digging for fossils, Tim Brys said.

"I can't guarantee we'll find another dinosaur, but we'll keep looking," he said.