

Wyoming Dinosaur Center, Thermopolis, Wyoming

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Fossils on display at the Wyoming Dinosaur Center. Working dig sites are nearby. (Claire Walter photo)

Finding Fossils & Discovering Dinosaurs

For dino-loving kids, the museum and dig site are heaven. The town of Thermopolis offers other kids of low-key, family-friendly fun too.

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Wyoming is where the “bone wars” were fought in the late 19th century by two well-to-do East Coast scientists. The combatants, Edward Drinker Cope and Othneil Marsh, mounted large, expensive expeditions to excavate dinosaur fossils and name as many species as possible.

Unlike most battles fought on the frontier, these had nothing to do with land, mineral claims or grazing rights, but rather over scientific standing with their Eastern academic peers. Acrimonious as they were, these conflicts have faded into scientific history and legend. Still, the western edge of the plains where Cope, Marsh and other early paleontologists worked remains one of the top areas in North America for fossil finds and dinosaur discoveries.

Thermopolis, a small town in north-central Wyoming known for the mineral hot springs that inspired its fancy Greek name, also is one of the West’s important dinosaur centers in the state where the bone wars once raged.

Dinosaurs —terrestrial animals that walked upright with two or four legs positioned directly beneath their bodies — lived roughly 228 to 65 million years ago. During that time, seas rose and retreated, mountain ranges grew and eroded, the climate warmed and cooled, volcanoes erupted and tectonic plates shifted.

An enormous north-south waterway called the Western Interior Sea once covered what are now the Western plains. The wetlands and lowlands flanking it were prime dinosaur habitat. In fact, the long, wide strip east of today’s Rocky Mountains has been nicknamed the “dinosaur highway,” but it was also their graveyard.

In what is now a semi-arid countryside, crenellated layers of rock from various geologic periods lie at or near the surface, and fossils and footprints of the beasts that roamed this land are not uncommon.

A road trip to the fabled national parks of the West can be interwoven with stops along the dinosaur trail, where families can see dino-rich museums and dig sites — and perhaps even be paleontologists for a day.

Thermopolis, which was founded in 1897 and has the no frills, homespun look of many small, Western towns, stands out from the rest in having a nearly life-sized metal sculpture of a Brontosaurus dinosaur overlooking the town square. Along with the Old West Wax Museum depicting the area’s cultural history, a Teddy Bear Museum filled with enchanting toys and the Hot Springs County Museum showcasing local artifacts, the town sports Hot Springs State Park. Its travertine terraces are reminiscent of Yellowstone National Park’s Mammoth Hot Springs.

Families come to frolic in year-round water parks with slides and pools set amid well-landscaped grounds and to visit the park’s resident buffalo herd on a rugged hillside nearby. Other options are a cool raft trip through Wind River Canyon or a half-hour drive to the west to the Legend Rock Petroglyphs. This wall of mystical figures carved by native peoples between the Sixth and Ninth centuries A.D. rivals the Southwest’s best.

But families on a quest for deep pre-history go there for the Wyoming Dinosaur Center, which has first-rate fossil exhibits and a state-of-the-art paleontology lab that is open to view.

Among the awe-inspiring treasures are an Allosaurus, a Triceratops and a Camarasaurus that was found on the Warm Springs Ranch, where the first of the center's home-town collection of bones was unearthed in 1993 and where paleontologists are still digging. Each one is a thrill — akin to the discovery of a new planet.

New species are still being unearthed and assembled. One still-nameless species displayed at the Wyoming Dinosaur Center is a long-extinct armored creature about the size and shape of a giant tortoise. The center also is working on “super-saurus,” a Jurassic giant among giants that is estimated to have been 135 feet long from snout to tail, stood 27 feet at the shoulder and weighed 50 tons. By contrast, the record blue whale — the largest animal living today — measured 108 feet in length.

Weather permitting, the center offers hourly tours to a hillside on the outskirts of Thermopolis where scientists and volunteers are at work digging for bones. For a more expanded experience, adults and youngsters can work alongside the pros in a Dig-for-a-Day program.

“There are uncountable fossils to find,” says the center's science director, Scott Hartman, “but a finite number of people digging for them.” Unspoken is the hope that beneath the beautiful red Triassic layer, green-gray Morrison sandstone or other rocks in Wyoming and elsewhere, another as yet unknown species will be found.

Even a one-day dig provides a hands-on sense of what it takes to discover dinosaurs. Participants learn to differentiate bone from stone, are introduced to the tools of the paleontologist's trade and are sent, under close supervision, to a dig site to unearth what they can.

Each little bone fragment, confirmed by a paleontologist, is a small triumph, but alas, the bones must remain there — hopefully to be assembled with other bones. It is, of course, always possible to buy a fossil, often from China, in the gift shop.

Digging is a painstaking task. Experienced paleontologists work with chisels, trowels and other larger utensils. Amateurs, especially children armed mostly with enthusiasm, are provided with, as Hartman puts it, small implements “that can't do much damage.”

Finding truly complete fossil remains of a single dinosaur at a single site is the stuff of which paleontological dreams are made. Bones were almost always separated, broken, scattered by a flowing river or raging storm, carried off by animal scavengers, consumed by bacteria, or in other ways scattered. Also, smaller, softer bones and cartilage tended to deteriorate or disappear before they could be fossilized.

After fossils have been disinterred and location documented, small fragments are gathered and large ones jacketed in protective plaster and moved to a lab, where they are meticulously cleaned. Technicians use tools as delicate as dental picks to rid the fossils of soil and rock. Then, perfect casts are made of ribs, pelvises, skulls, spine and other bones.

In order to assemble a complete skeleton, they often have to combine castings and real bones from different animals of the same species. Lightweight,

real-looking castings are made of heavy fossilized bones of huge dinosaurs to eliminate the need to stabilize specimens with huge, unaesthetic metal supports. Some institutions indicate which portions of displayed skeletons are real and which are reproductions. But whatever the proportion of original to cast, it is impossible not to be awed by these creatures that roamed the planet so long ago.

From small museums to large institutions, dinosaurs still rule along the dinosaur highway. Dinosaur National Monument, straddling the Colorado/Utah line and under National Park Service jurisdiction, showcases species and a quarry where many specimens were found, including an extremely rare infant Stegosaurus.

In addition to numerous dedicated dinosaur centers and small local museums in the region, a couple of major museums also boast world-class fossil exhibits. The Museum of the Rockies on the Montana State University campus in Bozeman houses the largest collection of dinosaur fossils from the United States. Now open is the first phase of a new dinosaur complex designed by world-renowned paleontologist Dr. Jack Horner, advisor to the “Jurassic Park” films.

The Denver Museum of Nature & Science’s notable Prehistoric Journey exhibit displays its spectacular dinosaurs in the context of their habitat and also has arranged them in a timeline that begins with the most primitive lifeforms 3.5 billion years ago.

Paleontologists have equal admiration for fine examples of older, simpler fossils, from ferns to trilobites, but youngsters seem to have eyes only for dinosaurs.

THE DINOSAUR HIGHWAY

The following organizations and institutions — some not-for-profit or university-affiliated museums, some privately operated by commercial fossil hunters — feature displays and often educational programs, views of fossil prep labs, films and/or summer dig site visits. Check for holiday closures, and further senior, military or veterans’ discounts, as well as multi-day digs.

WYOMING

Wyoming Dinosaur Center, 110 Carter Ranch Road, Thermopolis, WY 82443; 307-864-2997; www.wyodino.org. Open 8 a.m.-6 p.m. daily through Oct. 15; 10 a.m.- 5 p.m. daily Oct. 15-May 15. Admission: adults, \$6; ages 12 and under and 60-plus, \$3.50; family of four, \$15. Dig site tours, \$10. Museum and dig site, \$12; family of four, \$36. Dig-for-a-Day, \$125 per person, \$300 per family of three adults and one child; each additional child, \$75 (no formal age requirement; at discretion of and accompanied by parent).

Glenrock Paleontological Museum & Dr. Robert T. Bakker Educational Center, 506 W. Birch St., Glenrock, WY 82637; 307-436-2667. Open 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Tues.-Sat. Admission: free. Dig for a Day (for ages 12 and older; 18 and under must be accompanied by a parent), \$50 per person, \$100 per family.

COLORADO

Denver Museum of Nature and Science, 2001 Colorado Blvd., Denver, CO 80205; 303-322-7009; www.dmns.org. Open 9 a.m.-5 p.m. daily. Admission: adults, \$10; ages 3-12 and 65-plus, \$6.

Dinosaur Depot Museum, 330 Royal Gorge Blvd., Cañon City, CO 81212; 719-269-7150 www.dinosaurdepot.com. Open 9 a.m.-5 p.m. daily through Labor Day; 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Wednesday-Sunday through Dec. 24 and January 5-May 27, and daily December 26-December 31. Admission: adults, \$3, ages 4-12, \$1.50.

Dinosaur Journey, 550 Jurassic Court, Fruita, CO. Mail c/o Museum of Western Colorado, P.O. Box 20000, Grand Junction CO 81502-5020. 1-888-488-DINO (3466) or 970-242-0971; www.dinosaurjourney.org. Open 9 a.m.-5 p.m. daily. Admission: adults, \$7; ages 3-12, \$4. One-day digs (ages 5 and over, 16 and under must be accompanied by an adult), \$99 per person; www.dinodigs.org.

Dinosaur National Monument, 4545 E. Highway 40, Dinosaur, CO 81610-9724; Phone 970-374-3000, visitor info 970-374-3000; www.nps.gov/dino/. Quarry Visitor Center hours: 9 a.m.-6 p.m. daily, Memorial Day-Labor day; Labor Day-Memorial Day, 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Admission: \$10, family vehicle for 7 days, including Fossil Bone Quarry area accessed from Vernal, UT.

Morrison Natural History Museum, 501 Colorado Hwy. 8, Morrison, CO 80465; 303-697-1873; <http://town.morrison.co.us/mnhm/hours.php>. Open 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Saturday, noon-5 p.m. Memorial Day-Labor Day; 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday, Memorial Day to Labor Day. Closes at 4 p.m. daily, Labor Day-Memorial Day. Admission: adults, \$4; ages 2-15. \$2.

Rocky Mountain Dinosaur Resource Center, 201 Fairview (at U.S. 24), Woodland Park, CO 719-686-1820; www.rmdrc.com. Open 9 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 9 a.m.-8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday through October; 9 a.m.-6 p.m. daily except Sunday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. November-March. Admission: adults, \$9.50; ages 5-12, \$5.75; under 5, \$3.50.

MONTANA

Makoshika Dinosaur Museum, 111 W. Bell St., Glendive, MT 59330; 406-377-1637. Open 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday, noon-5 p.m. Sunday. Admission: free.

Museum of the Rockies, 600 W. Kagy Blvd., Bozeman, MT 59717-2730; 406-994-2251, recorded info 406-994-DINO 406-994-3466); www.montana.edu/wwwmor/. Open 8 a.m.-8 p.m. daily. Admission: adults, \$9.50; ages 5-18, \$6.50; 4 and under, free.

Phillips County Museum & Judith River Dinosaur Institute, Hwy. 2 East, P.O. Box 1489, Malta, MT 59539; 406-654-1037; www.maltachamber.com/museum/. Open 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Saturday, mid-May to mid-September. Admission: adults, \$3; ages 5-12, \$1.

Two Medicine Dinosaur Center, 120 2nd Ave. South, Bynum, MT 59419; 800-238-6873 or 406-469-2211. Open 9 a.m.-5 p.m. daily through Labor Day; 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Labor Day to Memorial Day. Admission: adults, \$3; ages 12 and under and 55-plus, \$2. How-to programs: three-hour basic (fossil recognition, area history and on-site geology), adult, \$35; 12 and under, \$25; One-day, includes intro and digging at an active site, \$100 per person.

NEW MEXICO

Mesalands College Dinosaur Museum, 222 East Laughlin St., Tucumcari, NM 88401; 505-461-3466; www.mesalands.edu/Museum/Museum.htm. Open 10 a.m. - 6 p.m. daily except Sunday and Monday through Labor Day; noon-5 p.m. through Feb. 28. Admission: adults, \$5.50; ages 5-11, \$3.

New Mexico Museum of Natural History, 1801 Mountain Rd. NW, Albuquerque NM 87104; 505-841-2800; www.museums.state.nm.us/nmmnh/nmmnh.html. Open 9 a.m.-5 p.m. (closed non-holiday Mondays in September and January). Admission: adults \$6, ages 3-12, \$3, 60-plus, \$4.

NORTH DAKOTA

Dakota Dinosaur Museum, 200 Museum Dr., Dickinson, ND 58601; 701-225-DINO (701-225-3466); www.dakotadino.com. Open 9 a.m.-5 p.m. daily through Labor Day; then closed through April 30. Admission, adults, \$6; ages 3-12, \$3.

SOUTH DAKOTA

Black Hills Institute of Geological Research and Natural History Shoppe, 217 Main St., Hill City, SD 57745; 605-574-4289; www.bhigr.com and www.everythingprehistoric.com. Open 8:30 a.m.-7 p.m. Mon.-Sat., 9 a.m.-5 p.m. through Sept. 15; 9 a.m.-5 p.m. daily except Sundays, Sept. 15-Dec. 24 and May 1-31; 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Tues.- Sat., Jan. 1-April 30. Admission: free.

UTAH

The Dinosaur Museum, 754 South 200 West, Blanding, UT 84511; 435-678-3454; www.dinosaur-museum.org. Open 8 a.m.- 8 p.m. daily except Saturday through Oct. 15; 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Oct. 15-Apr. 15. Admission: adults, \$2; ages 3-12 and 55-plus, \$1.

Dinosaur National Monument, see Colorado listing.

THERMOPOLIS

Getting There

From the south (Denver and Cheyenne): Interstate 25 north to Casper, U.S. 20 west through Shoshoni to Thermopolis. From the north (Montana): Interstate 90 through Sheridan to Buffalo, U.S. 16 west to Worland, U.S. 20/U.S. 16/Wyoming Hwy. 789 south to Thermopolis. From the west (Utah): Interstate 80 east to Rock Springs, U.S. 191 to Farson, Wyoming Hwy. 28 north and east to Lander, Wyoming Hwy. 789 north and east to Riverton, U.S. 26 to Shoshoni, U.S. 20 north to Thermopolis. From Yellowstone National Park's East Entrance (check for possible construction closures): U.S. 14/U.S. 16 east to Cody; Wyoming Hwy. 120 south to Thermopolis. From Yellowstone National Park's South Entrance: U.S. 191/U.S. 89/U.S. 287 south to Moran Junction, U.S. 287/U.S. 26 south and east over Togwotee Pass through Dubois to Riverton, U.S. 16 north and east to Shoshoni, U.S. 20/Wyoming 789 to Thermopolis.

Where to Stay

Holiday Inn of the Waters, 115 E. Park St., Hot Springs State Park, Thermopolis, WY 82443; 307-864-3131 or 800-HOLIDAY; www.thermopolis-hi.com. Rates: \$81-\$139 nightly per room. Children stay and eat free. Off-season couples' packages begin after Labor Day. Fitness room, swimming pool, year-round outdoor mineral Jacuzzi pool. On-site restaurant and lounge. Wildlife display in public spaces

Hot Springs Super 8 Motel, Lane 5, Hwy. 20 South, Thermopolis, WY 82443; 307-864-5515 or 800-800-8000. Rates: \$69.95 nightly for single occupancy, \$5 for each additional person. Indoor pool and spa. Complimentary continental breakfast. Family and couples packages begin after Labor Day.

Quality Inns & Suites Plaza Hotel (Best Western), 116 E. Park St., Hot Springs State Park, Thermopolis, WY 82443; 307-864-2939 or 888-919-9009. Rates: \$109-\$139 Fri. and Sat. nights; \$99-\$129 Sun.-Thurs. nights. Winter Wonderland packages, Nov. 15-Apr. 15. Architectural classic listed on National Register of Historic Places. Built in 1919 and renovated in 1999 with 36 rooms and suites, including eight with fireplaces. Lodgepole furnishings. Small courtyard swimming pool and mineral spa.

Where to Eat

CJ's Roadhouse, 600 Broadway, Thermopolis, WY 82443; 307-864-2321. Casual spot for espresso, sandwiches, soups, an entrée or two for lunch and early dinner.

Granny's Bakery & Ice Cream, 200 N. Sixth St., Thermopolis, WY 82443; 307-864-2809. Good donuts, burgers and ice cream.

Las Fuentes, 530 Arapahoe, Thermopolis, WY 82443; 307-864-2695. Local Mexican hotspot.

Safari Club, Holiday Inn of the Waters, 115 E. Park St., Hot Springs State Park, Thermopolis, WY 82443; 307-864-3131. Breakfast buffet, casual lunches and most

varied and ambitious dinner menu in town. Ranges from hearty cuts of beef and buffalo to some Italian and other Continental specialties.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Thermopolis Chamber of Commerce, Box 768, Thermopolis, WY 82443;
307-864-3192 or 800-577-3555; www.thermopolis.com.

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