

Prehistoric mammoth remains found at Ano Nuevo Beach

ANO NUEVO BEACH — A geologist studying erosion on the north coast discovered the remains of a prehistoric mammoth last week, one of only a handful of such finds on the central coast.

Geologist Gerald Weber was studying the erosion at Ano Nuevo State Preserve after the recent high tides and storms, and found the waves had uncovered seven-foot tusk and bones of a woolly mammoth between 12 and 20,000 years old.

Weber, city museum paleontologist Frank Perry and park rangers pulled the tusk, a tooth and several bones from the ground Monday afternoon and Tuesday morning. The soft, fragile remains had to be packed partially in plaster of Paris to prevent damaging them, and large portions of rock were taken out with the fossils.

Perry said the find was unusual. Most fossil finds along the coast are marine animals left from the ages when the sea covered the coast here.

But Perry said that 10,000 to 20,000 years ago, the area at Ano Nuevo was about four miles inland and a mix of rolling grassland and forest.

Mammoths, ancient relatives of modern-day elephants, were grazing animals that stood about 11 feet high at the shoulder, Perry said. "They go back about 1.5 million years, so this one, if it's as old as the carbon dating of the sediment tells us it is, would be from the period they were about to die out," he said.

Why they did die out "is something of a mystery," he said. "Several large animals, including the sabertooth cats, the large-horned bison and the ground sloth died out during that period. One theory is a climactic change caused their extinction. And another theory is since they became extinct about the time Indians arrived in North America, some people believe they hunted them to extinction.

"Other fossils have been found in other parts of the country with spear points actually imbedded in them, so we know that Indians did hunt them."

The bones will be dried out, cleaned up and put on display at Ano Nuevo, perhaps by next year, Perry said.

"We're going to continue to keep our eye on the area to see if the waves continue to uncover fossils," he said.

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