

Dr. Phil Currie talks about his career in paleontology

by Sheila J. Nevinczenko

At a recent book signing at the Rocky Mountain Dinosaur Resource Center Dr. Phil Currie was gracious enough to answer some questions about his career.

One could say that Dr. Currie's career began at the age of six when he found his first dinosaur – in a box of cereal. At the age of 11 he read a book by Roy Chapman Andrews entitled “All About Dinosaurs” which told about being a paleontologist. It was then that Phil Currie decided upon his career.

Dr. Currie serves as the Curator of Dinosaurs at the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Paleontology and is Adjunct Associate Professor at University of Calgary.

He has published over 61 scientific articles and 80 popular articles. He is the author of ten books. He started writing his first book in 1988 with Kenneth Carpenter and was published in 1990 entitled “Dinosaur Systematics: Approaches and Perspectives.” He has given more than 200 lectures around the world and has been cited in more than 600 newspaper and magazine articles, radio, film and television programs.

When asked how he divides his time between writing, fieldwork, curation, and teaching Dr. Currie answered, “It's almost unpredictable ... except for field work which is planned a year in advance. Research is the priority.” He also schedules two talks per month on average.

Dr. Currie said the favorite aspects of his job are both fieldwork and research. He explained that after being in the field for awhile he looks forward to getting back to the lab and research. Conversely, after doing research for a while, he is eager to get back in the field. He has done fieldwork all over the world from Antarctica, Argentina, Australia, China, and Mongolia, and of course, extensively in his native Canada.

He is currently researching dinosaur footprints, bird origins, Centrosaurus, pterosaurs, and theropods. His favorite area of research is theropod dinosaurs and systematics (dinosaur anatomy and relationships).

Dr. Currie said many of the most exciting new discoveries in paleontology are happening in China. New sites are found almost every month as a result of a large population and a lot of badlands. There are also interesting new discoveries in Argentina and Africa.

□ Dr. Currie's favorite dinosaur is Troodon – the largest brained dinosaur with huge eyes and stereoscopic vision.

As an icon in the field of paleontology, Dr. Currie's advice to aspiring paleontologists and paleo artists is of great interest. Addressing a common concern, he said the number of paleontology jobs is higher now than ever. He also said that although a Ph.D. is not necessary to work in paleontology, it helps. He advises, “Keep your interest up by going to museums, participating in digs ... people are willing to help. Be persistent. Be enthusiastic. It'll work out.” His advice to aspiring paleo artists: “Don't be afraid of criticism. Work with scientists. Work hard to get the anatomy right.” Many people are torn between a love for science and a love for art and feel the pressure to make a decision of which path to pursue. There are some who have successfully pursued both paths. Dr. Currie said one could be a scientist and still do art and one could be an artist and still work on research.