

DINOSAUR COVE - THE FINALE

The 1993 field season at Dinosaur Cove was meant to be the last dig at this locality. Tom planned an "Extinction Party", inviting all previous volunteers and organising helicopter rides into and out of Dinosaur Cove. The main aims of the final dig were to remove the Pillar at the front of the Slippery Rock site and excavate beneath it, as well as finish excavations at Dinosaur Cove East, nicknamed "Lake Copco". Coring at Dinosaur Cove East in 1991 indicated that the fossil layer pinched out to the north, but instead of getting thinner, the fossil layer got thicker; up to one metre thick at the bottom of the excavations. The thickening of the layer, plus the discovery of a number of possibly associated bones prompted Tom Rich to decide not to abandon the site as planned.

It was decided to conduct two dinosaur digs in the Australian summer of 1994. Nina Herrmann, a volunteer from the 1993 Dinosaur Cove expedition led a group of volunteers to continue excavations at the Lake Copco site. Concurrently, Lesley Kool led another group of volunteers in excavations at the newly discovered Flat Rocks site, near Inverloch, south-east of Melbourne.

Nina and her group encountered great technical difficulties at the Lake Copco site. Not only were they excavating at a depth of nearly three metres below the level of the shore platform, but the sandstone was extremely hard and cracks in the rock caused a constant inflow of water even at low tide. The excavation area filled with water with each incoming high tide, necessitating the use of pumps to remove the water at the start of each day. This could sometimes take up to two hours of pumping, plus additional use of the pumps to remove the water pouring in through cracks during excavations. All in all, a most unpleasant environment in which to work. In his annual report Tom wrote:

"In the end, about 250 specimens were collected at Dinosaur Cove East, the same yield as had previously been recovered in former years at this site from similar areas of rock exposed. However, because of the greater depth to the bottom of the fossiliferous layer, about ten times as much effort was required to recover each specimen. As the quality of the specimens was no better than in previous years and the effort to obtain them so much greater, the decision was easily made to shut down large scale operations at Dinosaur Cove permanently."

Excavations at the Dinosaur Cove site took place between 1984 and 1994. More than 700 volunteers took part in the annual digs and thousands of fossil bones and teeth were recovered. Three dinosaurs have been named from the site: *Leaellynasaura amicagraphica*, *Atlascopcosaurus loadsi* and *Timimus hermanni*. Victoria's first Mesozoic mammal - *Kryorycyes cadburyi* and Australia's oldest freshwater turtle to date - *Otwayemys cunicularius* also made their presence known at Dinosaur Cove.

In 1994 the Dinosaur Dreaming crew moved over to the Flat Rocks site in the Strzelecki Group, which Tom referred to as the "geriatric dig" as there was no 90 metre cliff to scale, only a modest climb down to the beach. But Dinosaur Cove and the Otway coastline was never far from the researchers' minds. The discovery of a partial dinosaur skeleton in 2005 at Eric the Red West, not far from Dinosaur Cove, lured the team back to the Otways in 2013 and the third annual dinosaur dig has just ended with more than 400 specimens collected. Among them is yet another mammal jaw, which will keep Tom Rich happy, as well as many other exciting and hopefully new to science specimens. The hunt continues ...

For more information on Dinosaur Cove:

"Dinosaurs of Darkness" by Thomas. H. Rich and Patricia. Vickers-Rich. Indiana University Press 2000.



Scaling the cliff out of Dinosaur Cove. Photographer: Lesley Kool



View of "Lake Copco" at Dinosaur Cove in 1993. Photographer unknown.