



MUSEUM FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

"We know almost nothing about what the Rockies were like during the Ice Age. We have our first clear window into it," museum curator Kirk Johnson said. "It is one of the most amazing finds in North America."

Scientists believe they can recover well-preserved DNA from these bones. And they are planning to go back to Ziegler Reservoir to retrieve more in the spring.

Johnson said the site holds answers about many different species living at the end of the last Ice Age, a time of ancient global warming, Johnson said.

It is relevant today because "we live in a warming world right now," he said.

The fossils were found because of expansion of Ziegler Reservoir for a greater supply of snowmaking water for the nearby ski area. On Oct. 14 bulldozer driver Jesse Steele discovered the bones of a juvenile female mammoth and was "fossil-savvy" enough, Johnson said, to realize it was a eureka moment.

"They never thought they'd unearth an Ice Age menagerie," Johnson said.

In one of the last days on the dig scientists found "a bone bed," a debris slide with more than 80 bones.

Fossil and reservoir excavations are both expected to wrap up October 2011.

Now it's time for analysis, preservation and some early exhibition, Johnson said.

The museum will host "Mammoth and Mastodon Madness" 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday, and museum spokeswoman Laura Holtman said experts will be on hand to show off some fossils.

Dr. Steve Holen, curator of archaeology at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science, shows the teeth of a one of the Columbian mammoths found at the Snowmass Village site.

Helen H. Richardson The Denver Post

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Scientists have in house 15 tusks of mammoths and mastodons — one still bone white — plus two tusk tips and 14 bags of tusk fragments.

One tusk is 8 feet long. These distant ancestors of elephants were massive, with Columbian mammoths standing 12-14 feet at the shoulder and American mastodons 10 feet at the shoulder, museum curator of paleontology Ian Miller said. Both species weighed 8 to 12 tons as adults.

The sloth, described as the most surprising find of the site, was the size of a full-grown grizzly.

Museum education expert Samantha Sands already has spoken to 8,500 schoolchildren in the fossils' home territory, the Roaring Fork Valley, and 3,500 people turned up last weekend at Snowmass Village for "Mammoth and Mastodon Madness."

Next fall the museum breaks ground on its new 60,000-square-foot, climate-controlled facility, already in the works before this treasure trove was raised.

It's looking like even a smarter idea now, Sparks said.