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Hunting for Dinosaur Fossils

By Sharon Fabian

As they pack up to go out on a dig, it looks like they are getting ready for a camping vacation. Fossil hunters pack camping supplies, since their work takes them far out into the countryside. Their gear might include a tent and maybe even a raft. They pack hats, sunglasses, sunscreen, gloves, kneepads, lots of water, and food.

Fossil hunters pack a few tools including a pick and dental tools for delicate work around tiny fossils, and they may carry a bucket and some plaster of Paris. They take paper, pencils, and a camera to record their field notes.

Before they began packing, the fossil hunters would have already made a lot of important decisions about their trip. The main ones might have included where to go, when to go, and what to look for. One favorite location is the area known as the badlands that stretches from Alberta, Canada to Wyoming, USA. This whole area is a good one for fossil hunting, because, back in the time of the dinosaurs, it was a wetland area that was home to many types of dinosaurs and other animals, and now it is dry land that preserves fossils well. When to hunt fossils depends mainly on the weather; fossil hunters pack gear for all types of weather, but usually finish up their outdoor work before winter really sets in.

Fossil hunters have to know what they are looking for. The more they can learn before they go out on a dig, the better chance they will have of recognizing important finds. Fossil hunters, also called paleontologists, may have studied about dinosaurs in college. They may work for a museum, or go to a museum to study what has already been discovered about the type of dinosaurs they hope to find. They may look at fossils or pictures of fossils from previous digs.

Once they arrive at their site, paleontologists sometimes map out their area in one-meter squares. This way they can record the patterns of where the bones are found. They use picks to break through the matrix, which just means the stone that the fossils are stuck in. Once they have found a fossil, they often use tiny dental tools to work slowly and carefully so that they will not damage a fossil. Now their

gloves and kneepads come in handy as they work all day out on the rocks. The sun screen and water come in handy now too. Sometimes they use their bucket to carry tools or fossils. Sometimes they use it to mix up a batch of plaster of Paris, which is used to preserve fossils when they have to be left out over the winter.

Fossil hunters also take field notes. These notes are writing and pictures that record as much information as possible about the fossils that they find. They might record whether one fossil was found next to other fossils, or how deep in the rock it was buried. Later, when they are back from the dig, they will have time to read all of the notes, look at the pictures and the fossils, and see what conclusions they can draw about the lives of the dinosaurs.

Paleontologists have found over 800 different types of dinosaurs, and it is a big part of their job to keep all of their dinosaur information organized. Like other scientists who study plants or animals, paleontologists use classification to organize their information. They learn to recognize which bones and teeth are from dinosaurs, and which type of dinosaur they came from. One of the main bones used to identify dinosaurs is their hip bone, but the more bones they find, the more they can tell about a dinosaur. From a few bones, a paleontologist can often tell how big the dinosaur was, whether it was a plant-eater or a meat-eater, and whether it was an adult or a young dinosaur. Just by looking at a few bones, they can sometimes say: at one time this was a fierce, carnivorous T-rex. Paleontologists can enjoy camping and digging for fossils, and they can also enjoy using their imaginations to picture what a dinosaur's life was once like.

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Questions

- _____ 1. Fossil hunters should learn a lot of information about the type of dinosaur they are hunting for, before they go out on a dig.
- A. true
B. false
- _____ 2. Fossil hunters need to get a lot of specialized high tech equipment before they go out on a dig.
- A. true
B. false



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- _____ 3. *Paleontologist* is another word for _____.
- A. fossil hunter
 - B. dinosaur
 - C. scientist
 - D. fossil
- _____ 4. In this article, the word *matrix* means _____.
- A. fossil
 - B. the stone a fossil is in
 - C. a fossil hunting game
 - D. virtual reality
- _____ 5. The fossil hunting area mentioned in this article is located in _____.
- A. the east coast of Canada and the USA
 - B. southern Canada and northern USA
 - C. northern Canada and southern USA
 - D. California
- _____ 6. Which skills does a good paleontologist need?
- A. physical strength and good health
 - B. knowledge of science
 - C. organizational skills
 - D. all of the above
- _____ 7. Field notes are _____.
- A. notes that a paleontologist writes after he has returned and has had time to research about his dinosaur
 - B. notes in a text book about a particular type of dinosaur
 - C. notes that a paleontologist takes while he is out on a dig
 - D. notes a paleontologist reads to learn about a place he will soon visit

- _____ 8. Which happens first?
- A. Fossil hunters learn background information about the dinosaurs they will be looking for
 - B. fossil hunters dig for bones and teeth
 - C. fossil hunters preserve fossils with plaster of Paris
 - D. fossil hunters write field notes