

TRAVEL

Fossil freeway

When the Heartland Expressway is completed, it will offer vacationers a corridor of geologic wonders from Denver to Rapid City, S.D.

By Jane Palmer

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Construction of the Heartland Expressway from Denver to Rapid City, S.D., is paving the way for more vacation opportunities in western Nebraska and South Dakota.

Geologic wonders, including world-class fossil finds, make this a tourist's paleontology corridor from the Wildcat Hills of Gering, Neb., to the Black Hills and Badlands of South Dakota.

Fossils from here go to museum exhibits, and recent finds have helped scientists discover the history of such mammals as horses and dogs.

Travelers from eastern Nebraska can start their discoveries at two landmarks on pioneer trails heading west — Chimney Rock and Scotts Bluff National Monument — and then head north to discover the riches of the planet's ancient past.

There is enough in the corridor to offer at least a week's worth of adventures. Even families who ordinarily rush through western Nebraska to reach the Black Hills and Mount Rushmore can allow an extra day to explore.

Just remember to leave any fossils where you find them. It is against the law to collect vertebrate (animals with backbones) fossils on public lands.

"Nebraska is famous for vertebrate fossils over the last 40 million years," paleontologist Bruce Bailey said. "Many deposits remain because it is so arid."

The fossil collections at Agate Fossil Beds in northwest Nebraska are remarkable because scientists found entire skeletons in one location, Bailey said.

But a fossil site in Wildcat Hills near Gering is probably the richest in terms of diversity. In the remains of an ancient river there, scientists have identified bones of 44 different species, including at least two that are new to science. The two are a large beaver and a gopher.

"There may be others, but we haven't analyzed them enough," Bailey said. "We're hoping to find more."

Bailey says highway construction in Nebraska has helped scientists discover the state's rich fossil heritage. The fossils in Gering, for example, were 20 to 30 feet underground and discovered during construction of the Heartland Expressway.

Bailey is a highway salvage paleontologist based at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He travels the state to protect and excavate fossil sites.



If you go:

Scotts Bluff County Tourism: 1517 Broadway, Suite 104, Scottsbluff, NE 69361; (800) 788-9475 and www.visitscottsbluff.com

Lodging: www.westnebraska.com; www.visitnebraska.org

Here is a sampling of the geologic wonders in western Nebraska and South Dakota.

1 Chimney Rock: The most noted landmark on the Oregon Trail is about 19 miles east of Gering, Neb. Don't miss the attractive visitors center where hands-on activities include the opportunity to load your own covered wagon. Information: (308) 586-2581.

2 Scotts Bluff National Monument: Roads and hiking trails offer scenic views of sandstone bluffs, prairie and vestiges of the Oregon Trail. Museum exhibits cover geological history and pioneer migrations. Located three miles west of Gering, Neb. Information: www.nps.gov/scbl and (308) 436-4340.

3 Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area: Paleontologists describe this area as one of the most significant in the world because an ancient river left fossils of 44 different species. Nature center exhibits cover the natural history of the area. Enjoy hiking, cross-country skiing and scenic vistas of Scotts Bluff National Monument. Located eight miles south of Gering. Information: www.ngpc.state.ne.us/parks/wildcat.html and (308) 436-3777.

4 Trailside Museum: See rare fossils from western Nebraska, including a mammoth, rhino and giant tortoise. Exhibits cover the Cretaceous Period and the Oligocene and Miocene Epochs. The museum is located at Fort Robinson State Park, two miles west of Crawford, Neb. Information: www.museum.unl.edu/trailside and (308) 665-2929.

5 Agate Fossil Beds National Monument: Exceptional displays help visitors visualize this region 20 million years ago when it resembled the Serengeti Plain of Africa. Among the fossil displays is a two-horned rhinoceros, smaller than a Shetland pony, that was as common here as buffalo were in the 1800s. The center also has a magnificent collection of Native American art and artifacts. Located about 56 miles north of Mitchell, Neb. Information: www.nps.gov/agfo/index.htm and (308) 668-2211.

6 Toadstool Geologic Park: Eroded buttes and ridges look like toadstools or mushrooms. Fossils here are important to the study of the Oligocene Epoch about 24 million to 36 million years ago. Footprints made by prehistoric animals that migrated along a

shallow, wide river eons ago are the longest known track-way of that epoch. Located 19 miles northwest of Crawford, Neb. Laws prohibit collection of fossils of any kind here. Information: www.fs.fed.us/r2/nebraska and (308) 432-0300 or (308) 432-4475.

7 Hudson-Meng Bison Bonebed: About 10,000 years ago a sudden event killed several hundred bison. Researchers are excavating the site to discover if the beasts were victims of Paleolithic hunters or natural causes. The bonebed is near Chadron, Neb., in Nebraska National Forest. A three-mile hiking trail connects the bonebed with Toadstool Geologic Park. The best time to hike it is spring or fall. Information: www.fs.fed.us/r2/nebraska/units/prd/hm/hudsonmeng.html and (308) 432-0300.

8 Mammoth Site of Hot Springs, S.D.: A 20,000-square-foot visitors center covers this working paleontological site. Scientists believe as many as 100 Ice Age mammoths died here about 26,000 years ago. Information: www.mammothsite.com and (605) 745-6017.

9 Museum of Geology, S.D. School of Mines and Technology: Skeletons of immense dinosaurs and sea lizards captivate visitors. There are also displays of minerals and fossils of ancient camels and horses. The museum has hands-on exhibits for children. Information: <http://museum.sdsmt.edu/> (605) 394-2467.

10 Badlands National Park: The world's richest Oligocene Epoch fossil beds are 23 million to 35 million years old and provide scientists with information on the evolution of such mammals as the horse, sheep, rhinoceros and pig. The park near Wall, S.D., covers 244,000 acres of sharply eroded buttes, pinnacles and spires. Information: www.nps.gov/badl and (605) 433-5361.

11 Black Hills Petrified Forest: This is a privately owned museum, near Rapid City, S.D., with hundreds of specimens on a sandstone trail. The wood was petrified into stone more than 100 million years ago. Information: www.elkoreek.org/forest/index.html and (605) 787-4884.



Agate Fossil Beds National Monument