

If “Pigs” Could Fly

Have you ever wondered if pigs could fly? On a bright sunny day in late September of 2007, a pig did indeed “fly” in Eastern Oregon, perhaps marking a moment in history...

Logan Butte is a landscape feature located amidst the Cenozoic era geology of central Oregon. It is a landscape that is timeless and beautiful, quiet and stark. The Butte is designated as an “Area of Critical Environmental Concern” that is dedicated to the study of fossil mammals from 30 million years ago. In the 1990’s, a paleontology researcher working at Logan Butte discovered the remains of a nearly complete “oreodont”, or prehistoric sheep-like critter, high on a steep slope. Nearly complete specimens such as the found oreodont are rare and provide science with the opportunity for analysis and perhaps, new knowledge.

Because of its size and the inaccessible location of the oreodont, it took a long time for Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument employees to prepare the specimen for removal. By the time it was ready to be moved, the specimen was wrapped in a plaster cast measuring 3ft X 2ft X 2ft in size and weighing close to 600 pounds. At this weight and given its location, there was no way the fossil could be removed manually.

So, on September 24, 2007, John K. Zancanella, Paleontology Program Coordinator for Oregon & Washington BLM, met with the Central Oregon Helitack Crew at Logan Butte. After the crew received a brief orientation to Logan Butte and fully understood the importance of the find and what they were there to accomplish, they walked to where “the pig” was located. The cast was gently rolled into the cargo net and prepared for the lift. It took the helicopter pilot only a few moments to maneuver the short ¼ mile distance from the landing area to the site of the specimen. Suspended in a stationary position, the pilot gently lowered the loosely dangling long-line to the waiting lift crew. A snap of the hook and a wave of the hand and the specimen was ready for flight. Slowly, the helicopter raised the specimen and headed for the landing area. Within five minutes the helicopter had taken off, collected the specimen, and safely deposited it at the landing site where it was placed into a pickup for transport.

Under agreement between the BLM and the National Park Service, the specimen will be delivered to the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument for curation, preparation and, eventually, study by researchers and interpretation for the public. Collaboration of this sort demonstrates what can be achieved when different programs or agencies work together towards common objectives. It also demonstrates that the idea of flying pigs isn’t quite so absurd as it seems.