

## Lifestyle | Features

## In the footsteps of a woolly mammoth, 17,000 years ago

Walking the equivalent of twice around the world during a life lasting 28 years, one woolly mammoth whose steps have been traced by researchers has proven the huge beast was a long-distance wanderer. The findings, published Thursday in the prestigious journal *Science*, could shed light on theories about why the mammoth, whose teeth were bigger than the human fist, became extinct.

"In all popular culture - for example if you watch (the cartoon) 'Ice Age' - there are always mammoths who move around a lot," said Clement Bataille, assistant professor at the University of Ottawa and one of the lead authors of the study. But there is no clear reason why mammoths should have trekked great distances "because it is such an enormous animal that moving around uses a lot of energy," he told AFP.

The researchers were amazed by the results: the mammoth they studied probably walked around 70,000 km, and did not stay just on the plains of Alaska as they expected. "We see that it traveled throughout Alaska, so an immense territory," said Bataille. "It was really a surprise."

## Readings on a tusk

For their study, the researchers selected the tusks of a male woolly mammoth who lived at the end of the last ice age. The animal - named "Kik" after a local river - lived relatively close to the time of the extinction of the species, around 13,000 years ago. One of the two tusks was cut in half to take readings of strontium isotope ratios.

Strontium is a chemical element similar to limestone and is present in soil. It is transmitted to vegetation and, when eaten, is deposited in bones, teeth... or tusks. The tusks grow throughout a mammal's life, with the tip reflecting the first years of life, and the base representing the final years. Isotope ratios are different depending on geology, and Bataille developed an isotopic map of the region.

By comparing it with the data from the tusks, it was possible to track when and where the mammoth had been. At the time, glaciers covered all of the Brooks Range of mountains in the north and the Alaska Range in the south, with the plain of the Yukon River in the center. The animal returned regularly to some areas, where it could stay for several years. But his movements also changed greatly depending on his age, before he eventually died of hunger.

During the first two years of his life, researchers were even able to observe



Mat Wooller, director of the Alaska Stable Isotope Facility, kneels among a collection of mammoth tusks at the University of Alaska Museum of the North. — AFP photos

signs of breastfeeding. "What was really surprising was that after the teenage years, the isotopic variations start to be much more important," said Bataille. The mammoth has "three or four times in its life, made an immense journey of 500, 600 even 700 kilometers, in a few months". Scientists say the male may have been solitary, and moving from herd to herd to reproduce. Or he could have been facing a drought or a harsh winter, forcing him to seek a new area where food was more plentiful.

## Lessons for today?

Whether for genetic diversity, or due to scarce resources, it is "clear that this species needed an extremely large area to live," said Bataille. But, at the time of the transition from the ice age to the interglacial period - when they were extinct - "the area shrank because more forests grew" and "humans put quite a lot of pressure on southern Alaska, where mammoths probably moved much less."

Understanding factors that led to the disappearance of mammoths may help protect other threatened megafauna species, such as caribou or elephants. With today's climate changing, and humans often restricting big species to parks and reserves, Bataille said, "do we want our children 1,000 years from now to view elephants the same way we view mammoths today?" — AFP

## World-first footage reveals secret life of a dingo

A camera fitted to a dingo in Australia captured the wild dog's life on Fraser Island for the first time, as authorities work to protect the animal and people in the tourist hotspot. From posing for snap-happy onlookers to scavenging on the pristine sand of the world heritage site off Queensland's coast, the collar camera captured the daily life of the dog, whose species is also known as wongari, in close-up detail, according to the Queensland Department of Environment and Science.

"This is superb footage and shows us where the wongari goes, how and where he finds food and water and gives us an intimate view of the time he spends with his mate," Ranger in Charge Linda Behrendorff said. "We have never seen anything like this before, and it shows that wongari are opportunistic feeders, taking advantage of any food source they find."

The collar camera revealed the "secret life" of the dog over a month, following the animal across hundreds of kilometres in



This undated handout photo shows a close-up view of a split mammoth tusk, with the blue stain used to reveal growth lines, as samples were taken along the tusk using lasers and other techniques, allowing isotope analysis that provided a record of the mammoth's life.

the island's north, Behrendorff said. "Tracking collars are one of a number of management techniques we use to monitor wongari after increased risks of negative interactions or incidents with residents or visitors to the island," she said.

The program is part of increased efforts to track and manage dingoes after several children were bitten on the island in separate incidents earlier this year. Queensland's government in May announced it would install a new fence to prevent the animals from entering the biggest township, with authorities warning that some dogs on the island had lost a natural fear of humans after being fed or eating food scraps.

Fraser Island is also known as K'gari, which means "paradise" in the local Butchulla people's language, and is listed as a world heritage site for its rainforests, freshwater dune lakes and complex system of dunes that are still evolving. Native to Australia, dingoes drew international attention with the disappearance of baby Azaria Chamberlain at Uluru in 1980.

Although the baby's mother Lindy was convicted of murder and her father, Michael, as an accessory over the disappearance, the chance discovery of a piece of Azaria's clothing outside a dingo lair led their conviction to be overturned in 1988. A court ruling in 2012 found that a dingo snatched the baby from a tent. — AFP

## Gorillas in our midst: DRC park fetes rare birth

DRC Congo's Kahuzi-Biega National Park is celebrating the birth of an eastern lowland gorilla, one of the world's most endangered species. "We have the pleasure of announcing the birth of a baby to the female Mwinja," the park announced on Facebook on Friday. "Our rangers were there and captured this moment of intimacy, on Saturday August 7. She seemed happy to be showing off her baby. Both are in very good healthy." The birth is "a sign of hope," the park's spokesman, Hubert Mulongoy, told AFP.

The park, located in a deeply troubled part of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, said the birth brought its tally of the apes - Gorilla beringei graueri - from 171 to 172. Mwinja has already had offspring but this is the first she has had with a well-known male called Nabiremo. The park's gorilla population includes two tribes who live in so-called habituation, meaning that they are used to human presence nearby.

Kahuzi-Biega covers around 6,000 sq km of mountains and rainforests near the western banks of Lake Kivu and the Rwandan border. It is a magnet for intrepid ecotourists, who are drawn to its unique landscape and rare species. The park is listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage site in danger because of the presence of armed groups and settlers, poaching and deforestation. — AFP

## Mine's a barkarita: London bar for pampered pooches

The "After Bark" bar and cafe looks like any trendy watering hole in east London, with its neon sign and tables made of repurposed barrels and cable reels. But the menu is divided into "hounds" and "humans", with cocktails for regulars and "puptails" for their four-legged friends. The doggie drinks, specially made and placed on the floor, are made of natural, healthy ingredients but go by racy names such as "Sex on the b\*\*\*\*h".

"The 'puptails' that we have here on the menu, they are made out of raw beets, raw carrots, teas made with dandelions and burdock," says founder and owner Jamie Swan. "Things that basically we would put in refreshing teas that are good for us, ginseng for instance, but that are also really good for them."

Meanwhile dog owners sitting at tables can order cocktails such as a "Barkarita" or a "Bloodhound Mary". Dogs mingle with one another and Mochi, a terrier in a mauve hooded top, clambers onto a table to take a snack from her owners, Rhema Moses and Jordan Barnes. "We've been to other dog-friendly places but none that we've let our dog run this freely everywhere, so it's new for us," says Moses.

At a year-old, Mochi missed out on puppy classes and early socialization during the coronavirus lockdown, says Barnes. "This has turned into a really cool place, just where she can meet other dogs, and interact with other humans as well." On the floor, dogs sample a £10 (\$14) taster menu of four pup-tails, served in glasses on a wooden stand. A cocker spaniel immediately snaffles the "lick and mix" snacks, while eying the drinks more warily.

Swan describes the venue as a "dogs and humans community center", offering both a chance to socialize in a relaxed way. "Especially in lockdown, there are a lot of dog owners that feel like they're by themselves," says the bar's dog daycare leader Bella Ryan. The bar allows people to meet each other and "just let their dogs run around and socialize in a more chilled setting, over a drink as well," she adds. — AFP

## Volunteer vets tend to Greece's fire-hit pets

With balm and bandages for scorched paws, volunteers at a makeshift animal shelter north of Athens are doing what they can for cats and dogs, whether strays or left behind as their owners fled advancing wildfires. The volunteer vets have organized an "intensive care" area to monitor severely burnt animals under a tarpaulin in an abandoned quarry on the outskirts of the capital. "So far we have taken in 233 animals," Yannis Batsas, president of Action Volunteers Greek Veterinarians, told AFP.

And the animals keep coming. "We receive about 20 every day." The less severely affected four-legged survivors get baths every two to three hours to cool their burns. "It's time for a bath," one young volunteer said as she took hold of two small puppies, easing them into a small basin of water.



A picture taken on Aug 12, 2021 shows a dog recovering in a cage at a makeshift shelter where the animals injured in the wildfires are treated in Athens. — AFP

## First victims

Many in the Athens area were evacuated at the start of August as advancing wildfires ravaged pine forests and homes some 30 km north of the capital. Along roads lined with the charred husks of pine trees, AFP reporters met groups of volunteers collecting abandoned animals in Efnides and other affected villages.

With strays common in the area, the animals are the first victims of the fires, the vets say, not to mention the many domesticated animals left in gardens as their owners fled.

The volunteers at the shelter do what they can to comfort the animals, circulating among cages where dogs with bandaged paws await their owners. In a cacophony of barking, the dogs, burnt on their paws or on their bodies, joyfully welcome the volunteers whenever they approach. Settled on sheets filled with ice cubes, about 20 of the canines are waiting for their owners to come and reclaim them or, failing that, a family to adopt them.

So far, nearly 90 animals have found their families, said Elena Dede, founder of nonprofit organization Dogs' Voice. Dede said more than 2,000 people showed up to volunteer, many agreeing to take dogs home for a couple of weeks to ease pressure at the shelter. "Instead of having 200 animals all in one place, you'll never have more than about 50, and that's because of the shelters and adoptions," said Batsas.

## Outpouring of solidarity

Dede said the group had received donations amounting to about 10 tons of dog and cat food. "That will be distributed all over Attica, in areas affected by the fires and here of course," she said. The outpouring of solidarity in Athens is encouraging volunteers to open another center on the island of Evia, where wildfires continued to rage on Thursday.

"A team left for Evia to go and see the farms, the goats, the sheep that were burnt," said Batsas. "Evia is a different story. We have to be sure that we'll have the capacity to respond with the same efficiency that we have here," said Dede. Evacuating injured animals from Greece's second largest island is complicated. "They have to be transported by boat, which lengthens the journeys," said Irini Tapouti, director of the Chalkida veterinary clinic on Evia.

On the beach at Pefki, where deckchairs are now covered with ash, Roula Papadimitri and her daughter Eva are bringing first aid and comfort to a dozen dogs they saved from the flames. They were forced to abandon their house in the adjoining village of Artemisia on foot. "There is no way I'm leaving without them," Eva said. "How can you abandon dogs," asked her mother, incredulous. — AFP



Beekeeper Vakos Antonis checks his beehives near Voutas village on Aug 11, 2021 on the Greek island of Evia.

## Greek beekeepers lament tradition lost to fire

On the scorched earth, dozens of blackened rings mark all that remains of beehives that dotted the once verdant hillsides outside the village of Voutas on Greece's Evia island. Pine, walnut and fig trees were among the rich plant life sustaining the bees in a region that produces 40 percent of Greece's honey. And those industrious workers were, in turn, a cornerstone of the local ecosystem, pollinating local farmers' crops.

"It's a whole way of life that we lost along with the forest," says Babis, 53, whose main source of income was his hives. "What are we going to find here next year? It's over. We've gone from heaven to hell." Bee colonies that have been bred over decades, with skills passed down through generations, have been wiped out in a fury of wild fires billowed by the forces of climate change.

## 'Too late for change'

Greece - along with Turkey, Italy, Spain and Algeria - has been hit by a savage fire season that Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis described as the "greatest ecological disaster in decades". "The climate crisis is a harsh reality and shows us that forests will become increasingly vulnerable and increasingly valuable for what they provide," says Dimitris Karavellas, managing director for WWF Greece. "The climate crisis is not an excuse to fail but must be a wake-up call for change."

But for the beekeepers of Evia, it's too late for change. "We lost our hives because we were running to save our villages," says Adonis Vakos, his cap pulled