



Gobi Desert: Great dino cemetery (图)

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It is better to be born a bull in the mountains of Khangai, than a man in the Gobi Desert, says a popular Mongolian expression about the hardships of living in the desert.

Winds never abate here. Strong winds and storms carry sand across thousands of kilometers. Temperature changes drastically within a fortnight, sometimes from plus 30 in the day time to minus 10 at night. Average temperature in July is plus 37.5, while in January it drops below to minus 26.5.

After American paleontologist Roy Andrews Chapman (see accompanying story) discovered the first remains of dinosaurs here in the early 1920s, the Gobi Desert acquired a glory of being an enormous natural dinosaur cemetery, fascinating paleontologists from all over the world.

However, for over half a century, access to the riches of the Gobi Desert was only allowed to Soviet scholars. When Mongolia finally opened its borders to the outside world, after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1990, American and Japanese explorers were the first to arrive.

The harsh climate and remoteness of the desert have naturally conserved the relics of prehistoric life, and the discoveries found here are shedding light on the life of millions of strange creatures that used to roam up to 165 million years ago.

Findings have been unique, including two huge, fully preserved skeletons of Tarbozaurus, the largest dinosaur ever known and dinosaur eggs with the exposed embryo inside.

A recovered dinosaur skeleton with feathers may fill a missing link about the evolution of birds. Skeletons of two dinosaurs intertwined in the last battle, one predator and another a herbivore, are proof of a fierce struggle for survival.

It is hard to accept that more than 70 million years have passed since their death. Nature has perfectly preserved the evidence of primordial life in its variety and richness.

Not only the dinosaurs are amazing but also the remains of zillions of insects and flora of that time can also be studied in detail.

Presently, two joint Mongolian-Japanese and Mongolian- American expeditions are working in the Gobi desert. Their goal is to re-create the entire ecosystem of the primordial world that flourished some 100 million years ago, to uncover the evolution of dinosaurs and find clues to their sudden extinction - the secret haunting paleontologists all over the world.

Each discovery made by these expeditions holds a promise of finding new clues. Some of the findings are very unusual, like that made a few years ago by Dr. P. Narmandakh, who is now working in the joint Mongolian-Japanese expedition.

The main subject of her research is the turtle that once migrated in the thousands across huge lakes and seas. She is one of few female paleontologists with more than 30 years experience of fieldwork in the Gobi Desert.

Her colleagues acknowledge, with a slight envy, that she is one of most lucky researchers today. During her career she has discovered and described 52 kinds of sea turtles, and three findings of global significance. The latest was that of a dinosaur nest.

"It was a sheer luck. Usually I totally concentrate while scouting the terrain for possible findings. But that time I was hurrying to the site we already working on, so I did not look around much.

"Just a few yards from our camp I suddenly felt that I stepped on something small and round that gave under my feet.

"Snake!" flashed first in my mind," recalls Dr. Narmandakh. "But looking down I spotted a fragment of a bone."

She immediately began to clear off sand around it. With each wave of a brush, more bones were exposed and soon it was clear that these were baby Protoceratops dinosaurs. After finding seven, she was so excited that she rushed to the camp.

"Tugrugiin Shire locality is one of richest sites for dinosaur remains. Every day we made a new discovery. Even the drivers could not resist the temptation and also went out scouting the terrain. So there were only two cooks to share in my joy," says Narmandakh.

By sheer coincidence, Ishii-san, the head of the expedition, happened to drive into the camp at that moment.

"I just ran to him holding out seven fingers. 'Baby dinosaurs.... baby dinosaurs....' I kept saying in English.

Somehow Ishii-san understood and said in Russian "O'chien kharasho." Later on everybody was joking that the two of us suddenly discovered our linguistic talents along with dinos," recalls Dr. Narmandakh, laughing

"It is rather difficult to pinpoint the reason for the death of these 16 baby dinosaurs," she says. "They all laid their heads in one direction

n as if trying to climb out of the nest. Perhaps a sand storm erupted filling their nest with sand and they tried to escape,” concludes Dr. Nar
madakh.

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