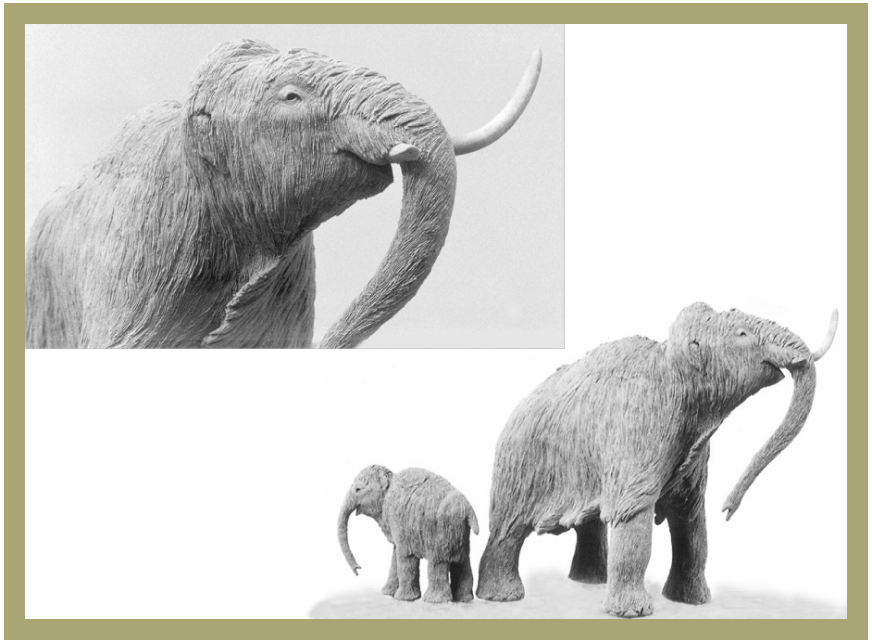

Figure 4: Scale (1/12) models of the Whitestone Mammoth with a baby male. Insert shows details of head and broken right tusk. Life-size sculptures of this adult female, the baby and an adult male (not shown here, but a copy may be seen at the Yukon Beringia Interpretive Centre, Whitehorse) are displayed outside the Victoria Memorial Museum Building in downtown Ottawa.

to life size and displayed with life-size, life-like sculptures of an adult male and baby woolly mammoth. They can be seen on the grounds of the Victoria Memorial Museum Building in downtown Ottawa and a copy of the adult male is displayed at the Beringia Interpretive Centre in Whitehorse, Yukon.

C.R. Harington
December, 2008

Additional Reading

Bélanger, N. 1988. The Whitestone Mammoth. BIOME 8(3):3. (An article based on C.R. Harington's background notes for a display).

Harington, C.R. 1980. Pleistocene mammals from Lost Chicken Creek, Alaska. Canadian Journal of Earth Sciences 17:168-198.

Harington, C.R. 1996. Woolly mammoth. Beringian Research Notes No. 2:1-4.

Harington, C.R. (editor). 2003. Annotated Bibliography of Quaternary Vertebrates of Northern North America – with Radiocarbon Dates. University of Toronto Press, Toronto.

Yukon
Tourism and Culture

The Yukon Palaeontology Program's Beringian Research Notes series presents vignettes of life in the Yukon during the last Ice Age.

Beringian Research Notes

2008 No. 21

Figure 1: Complete lower jaw of the Whitestone Mammoth (Mammuthus primigenius) – a partial skeleton that was radiocarbon dated to about 30,000 years ago.

Legend to Reality: the Story of the Whitestone Mammoth

In early July 1967, while sitting on a bench overlooking the Porcupine River at the village of Old Crow in the northern Yukon, I heard a strange and fascinating story. This story was told by Joe Kay (his proper Gwitchin name is Joe Kyikavichik), an elder of the community, to my field assistant Peter Lord and me following a fossil collecting trip on Old Crow River. I assumed the story had been handed down to the people of Old Crow. The tale involved a "monster" that had broken out of a lake bed near the upper Porcupine River, trudged up that river and died under a bank on Whitestone River, a tributary of Porcupine River.

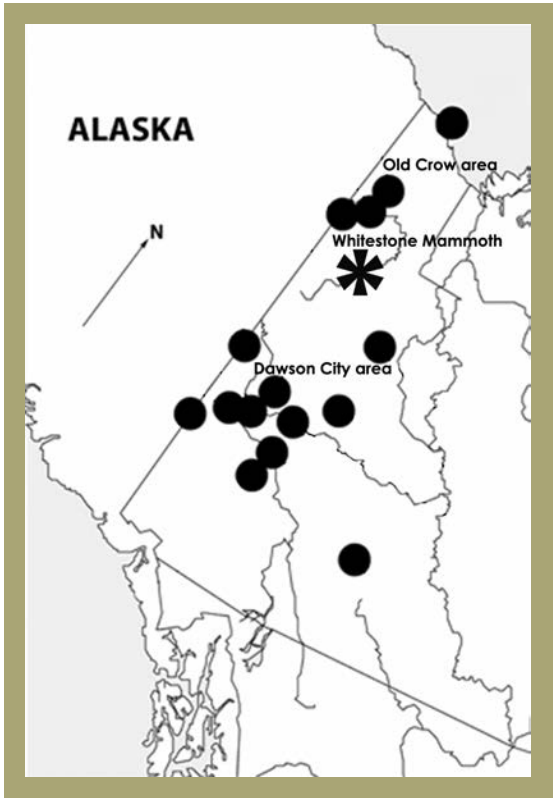

Figure 2: Map showing the Whitestone Mammoth locality (asterisk) in relation to Old Crow Basin and Dawson City areas, as well as other Yukon ice age faunal sites (black dots).

Bearing in mind that such legends may have a core of truth to them (in this case one that could relate to large ice age animals), and wanting to survey drainage basins associated with the upper Porcupine River for additional fossil localities, I decided to investigate. Peter Lord and I left Old Crow on July 27 for Whitestone River. We traveled upstream in a long, narrow river boat in frigid weather, with rapidly dropping water levels. We examined several bluffs and sand bars for fossil bones on the way upstream, but found little of interest.

On July 31 after stopping briefly at Johnson Village, an abandoned Gwitchin settlement, we checked the base of a peat-capped bluff on the next bend up the river with little success. Finally, there was no use proceeding farther because the stream was too shallow and we were up on the tundra level with no more bluffs in sight. On August 4 we camped on an extensive gravel bar where I collected plants for the national museum.

We turned back the next day. Perhaps the sighting of a rare Bald Eagle was a portent of success. I recalled that we had not examined the upstream part of the bluff near Johnson Village, so we went ashore there. While I was securing the boat, Peter, who was walking downstream let out a great cry and pointed toward the river. While running toward him, I noticed a complete mammoth jaw with teeth embedded in sand at the water's edge and then saw the upturned part of a mammoth skull farther out in the water. The rest of the day was spent excavating the skeleton associated with the skull—first the lower jaw (Figure 1), the cranium and broken right tusk, forelimbs, a series of vertebrae and ribs and the pelvis. The hindlimbs were missing, and may have been washed downstream years earlier. Our investigation of Whitestone River (Figure 2) led us to the "monster" that Joe Kay told us about.

The last and most difficult job was releasing the complete left tusk, which was almost vertically lodged in the river bottom. We worked with shovels,

Figure 3: Peter Lord beside skeletal remains of the adult female Whitestone Mammoth laid out on the river bank on August 5, 1967.

thigh-deep in swift, freezing water, but could not make much headway, for as fast as the gravel was scooped away, it was washed back in by the current. In desperation, Peter got on one side of the base of the tusk with me on the other. We heaved it back and forth until the suction was released and we tumbled into the water with a complete, beautifully preserved tusk on top of us. We laid the bones on the stream bank nearby the way they had been found in the water, and I photographed them (Figure 3). Later examination of the skull showed that most of the right tusk had been broken off before the animal died—a situation not uncommon in living elephants. It was the end of an exciting quest. The monster legend was partly true.

I later speculated that the tale had been an attempt to explain two unusual and startling phenomena: the discovery of bones of an unknown, gigantic animal (the "monster") once seen near the base of a bluff on Whitestone River – perhaps by early occupants of Johnson Village whose descendants had later moved to Old Crow; and the observation of a lake suddenly and violently flushing its turbid water into the Porcupine River farther south—which happens on rare occasions when the river cuts back to the edge of a lake near its margin (the part of the tale involving the "monster" breaking out of a lake bed).

A radiocarbon date on one of the ribs indicates that this adult female woolly mammoth (*Mammuthus primigenius*) died about 30,000 years ago during a relatively warm interval before the cold peak of the last glaciation. Discoveries such as that of the Whitestone Mammoth provide invaluable information about the ice age fauna that survived in unglaciated, grassy areas hemmed in by ice sheets in what are now Alaska, Yukon and adjacent Northwest Territories.

Many of the best specimens in the Canadian Museum of Nature collections are used in displays, the Whitestone Mammoth being a prime example. I worked with artist/modeller Doug Watson to produce a small model (one-twelfth scale) incorporating the skeletal dimensions and characters (including the broken right tusk) of the Whitestone Mammoth (Figure 4). This was later scaled up