

Fossils Hunters by Dave Lines --- Photos by Rich Simcsak and Dave Lines



It was COLD! Wind chill was around 20 degrees F. But the water temperature of the Chesapeake Bay was a balmy 42 degrees F.

A multiple choice question for you: What's the difference between a Bay fossil and Rich and Dave? A. nothing; B. about 56 degrees F; C. flesh; D. 7 to 20 million years.
Correct answer: It depends. All choices could be correct. Think about it.



We (Rich and Dave) arrived at Matoaka Cabins on the Chesapeake Bay about one mile east of St. Leonard in Calvert County, Maryland on Thursday January 10th at 9 a.m.. It was not early enough --- there were already two other guys ahead of us. I later talked with the first fellow and he was on the beach at 6:15 a.m.! For Pete's sake --- sunrise was 7:20 a.m.. He said it was so dark that he just sat on a log and waited for 30 minutes for it to get light enough to see.

However, he did mention that he had found 5 vertebrae --- proof that the early bird definitely catches the worm – or in this case, finds the best stuff. Oh well --- we were more civilized.

Anyway, after leaving our \$5 access fees at self check-in station at the office door, we made our way down the path to the beach. The wind was still howling from the northwest after blowing hard all the previous day and night. It was clearly a blowout tide. The only trouble was that the tidal levels had been running about 1-1/2 feet *above* normal. Now it was 1 foot *below* normal. So the water of the entire Bay had indeed dropped a full 2-1/2 feet in 24 hours. Impressive wind power.

There were sandbars already showing and predicted low tide was still 2 hours away at 11 a.m.. We headed north where there were freshly exposed cliff falls. Despite the earlier fossil hunters, we began finding small fossil shark's teeth and fossil coral. In about ½ mile in front of the newly eroded cliffs, we started finding large rocks of native ironstone and lots of fossil shells --- particularly *Chesapecten* scallop shells. As the water level dropped a few more inches, the sand bars created a buffer from the waves and it became easier (due calmer water) to spot fossils beneath the water --- which was our best chance to find something good, since the stuff on the bare beach had already been picked over by the others.

Fairly quickly, I found a decent *ecphora* (Maryland's State Fossil) and then Rich found a fossil vertebra about 5 inches long. It was from a porpoise --- pretty large for the species. A nice find. We both found more *ecphora*, giant fossil barnacles, sections of shrimp burrows, moonsnails and even iridescent coal. But no large shark teeth ---- this time. Finding a big meg (megalodon shark tooth) is a matter of luck and time. If you go looking often enough, and for enough years, eventually you will find one. About 10 years ago, a couple from New England found a beautiful five inch meg at Matoaka.



At about 12 noon, we decided we had had enough fun for the day and decided to call it quits. The next day (Friday), we met at my house at 9 a.m. and rode together out to Purse State Park --- now part of Nanjemoy Wildlife Management Area --- on the Potomac River in western Charles County. Predicted low tide there was about 4 p.m., but the NW wind had continued overnight, so blowout conditions were still in place. Hunting fossils in the winter has pluses and

minuses. On the plus side, the tides are generally lower in the winter. The catch this time was that the air temperature was only 25 degrees and the river water temp was much colder. When we arrived at the beach itself, slush ice was already heaped up about one foot high along the shoreline and the beach surface itself was frozen solid. We found a few small shark's teeth on the beach --- but we had to chip some of them out with a rock hammer. We found some nice specimens of Patuxent River Stone (the Maryland State Gem stone) as we hiked along the beach.

We also found some seaglass, fossil oysters and fossil turritella molds which are shaped like cork screws. We found a few chips of quartzite left over from when an ancient native American had made a projectile point or tool. Again, we found no larger *otodus* shark teeth or fossil crocodile teeth, but that depends on the condition of the beach. This time, there was a large amount of fine sand on the beach. Maybe it will be more gravelly next time.



Oh yeah, it was cold --- witness the walls of giant icicles hanging from the cliffs. But it sure beats working. Until next time, get out there and keep looking. Maybe you will find that big meg.

