

Ucon 4th grade class gets involved, pushes for state dinosaur designation

By Ileana Hunter, Post Register | Published February 25, 2023 and Updated March 13, 2023

From the mountain bluebird to the huckleberry, syringa, monarch butterfly and even the giant salamander, the state of Idaho has chosen several different emblems or symbols that set the state apart from the rest.

A fourth-grade class from Ucon Elementary School in Bonneville Joint School District 93 is hoping to add a state dinosaur to the list, and the students have proposed the *Oryctodromeus* for the designation.

While nearly every state in the United States has found dinosaur fossils in their soil, only 14 have officially adopted a state dinosaur. Joel Walton, a fourth-grade teacher at the school, and his class want Idaho to be number 15.

“Our fourth-grade Idaho history textbook starts with states and their symbols and sometimes it will list one and say something like, ‘in 1984, Greenwood Elementary School students wrote to the Legislature and suggested that the potato be our state vegetable,’ so we thought to ourselves, if they can do it, we can too,” Walton said.

Because Walton didn’t know much about the dinosaurs found in the state, he and his students contacted officials from Idaho State University and asked them if they had a preference for what the state dinosaur should be.

“They most definitely had a preference and knew right away that it just had to be the *Oryctodromeus*,” Walton said.

The process was started by Walton’s class last year. They began by writing letters to state Sen. Kevin Cook, R-Idaho Falls, who is currently preparing to introduce a bill to adopt the *Oryctodromeus* as the official Idaho dinosaur.

“We put the hand-written notes in with pictures and information about the dinosaur and before we knew it, Sen. Kevin Cook and (Rep.) Wendy Horman were in our classroom,” Walton said. “They told us it was a great idea and they were so excited to make it happen. They were really excited about the opportunity to display civics and government processes to Idaho students.”

College of Eastern Idaho professor L.J. Krumenacker, who’s also an adjunct professor at Idaho State University and a research affiliate at the Idaho Museum of Natural History, was one of the first discoverers of the *Oryctodromeus*. He said that the possibility of having a new state dinosaur was an exciting and rare opportunity for the state.

“Not everyone has found fossils and even less have a dedicated state dinosaur,” Krumenacker said. “Having a state dinosaur gives us another symbol to show that we are encouraging education and science in the state. There is nothing wrong with loving science and a lot of kids start that with a love of dinosaurs. It’s a stepping stone that helps us support scientific development in the state as well as Idaho resources and history.”

The first bits and pieces of dinosaur bones in the state were found in the 1980s by John Dorr, a paleontologist from Michigan. Many discoveries have been made since then, with Krumenacker on many of those excavation teams.

Paleontologists in the state have found hundreds of fossils, including the thigh bone of a close relative to the Tyrannosaurus Rex. Krumenacker recently helped in the discovery of an armored dinosaur that has yet to be cleaned and named, as well as some new species of crocodiles, proving that discoveries in the state are constant and far from over.

Krumenacker, accompanied by some of his mentors, helped find the state's first *Oryctodromeus*, otherwise known as the digging runner.

The reason scientists call the *Oryctodromeus* the "digging runner" is because it is the first dinosaur known that burrowed underground. Adult fossils of the dinosaur are also commonly found with smaller fossils, Krumenacker said, showing the dinosaur took care of its children and lived close together as families.

The *Oryctodromeus* is mainly found in Idaho, with more than 10 *Oryctodromeus* skeletons being found in the state and only a few bones found in the southernmost part of Montana.

Walton's fourth-grade students are ecstatic about the dinosaur and have written essays, done research and spoken with several state officials about it all.

"We would love if the *Oryctodromeus* could be our state dinosaur," student Lilian Randall said. "It's the size of a golden retriever which is so cute and it takes care of its family, just like we all do."

Another student said that she's worked harder in this class than she felt she had in many others because she was so excited about the project.

"We've worked really hard to get this done and it would just be awesome if it happened," student Ella Hull said. "Mr. Walton's class has been working on this for two years now and we can't wait."

In a previous Post Register interview Krumenacker said that being a dinosaur hunter was a dream he'd had since he was a child. As an adult he's excited to see the students' efforts and fascination with paleontology and hopes it will continue to inspire them throughout their lives, even convincing a few that maybe paleontology is in their future.

"That's why I do what I do," Krumenacker said. "I go out to schools and I talk to students because I want to inspire kids to make scientific discoveries. If I can encourage even one student to go into science, the world is better off for it."

With senators, representatives, the state directors of commerce and tourism all on board with the state dinosaur effort, Walton said he expects that Idahoans could begin seeing the new dinosaur presented as the state's official dinosaur as soon as this year in tourist guides, publications and public relations materials for the state.

"It's really, really exciting," Walton said. "Stuff like this starts on a whim sometimes and you don't always know if it's going to come to fruition but it's been so fun to watch this progress and watch the students be so stoked about it."