

I don't recall exactly when I found my first fossil. I suppose I just wasn't all that impressed. It was just a small seashell...only it really wasn't a shell at all. It was a ghost. An ancient memory. A shadow, but...a shadow you could hold in your hand! Like so many other things, the more you learn about fossils the more interesting they become.



I brought the fossil home and showed my dad. "Ah, a brachiopod. A really good one too." What is a brak-ee-oh-pod, dad? "Look it up, son." Dads are like that. So, out comes the World Book Encyclopedia Volume 'B'. Hmmm...a brachiopod is a shellfish that was common in the ocean several million years ago. Several MILLION?? I found something MILLIONS of years old!!

And so began my interest in fossils.

Fortunately for us, parts of Western Maryland are good fossil grounds. The Appalachian Mountain chain is one of the oldest on the planet. A few hundred million years ago these hills weren't hills at all. They formed the floor of a shallow sea. As layers of sediment piled up over thousands of years, covering dead sea creatures and plants, the stage was set for us to find fossils millions of years later. Wasn't that nice of Mother Nature? When these mountains were pushed skyward by the collision of two continents, all those layers of sediment with billions upon billions of buried critters and plants were deposited high and dry. After many more millions of years of

erosion, earthquakes, floods and other geological events, the Appalachians, once taller than the Rockies, were reduced to the ridges and valleys we inhabit today. The result of all that shakin' and quakin' and rainin' and floodin' was the uncovering of those layers of sediment, with their plants and animals, buried long before these mountains existed!

By the way, did you know that Maryland has a state fossil? It's true. The official fossil shell of Maryland is an extinct snail, or gastropod: 'Ephora gardnerae gardnerae Wilson' and closely resembles modern Conch shells. The snail lived in the waters of the Atlantic continental shelf, areas now occupied by the Chesapeake Bay, parts of Southern Maryland and Eastern Shore. Incidentally, some areas of the Chesapeake Bay shoreline are excellent

fossil sites, particularly for ancient shark teeth.

The really great thing about looking for fossils is that they are so easy to find. All you have to do is look. Where? If you have a rock and gravel driveway, start there. My little girl has found several in our driveway. There are plenty of places to find fossils. Road cuts through hillsides are good. Stream and river banks, particularly where they cut through hillsides and just down stream from there. Places where someone is digging through rocky ground. Along the C&O Canal. Old quarries or spots where fill dirt was taken. Almost anywhere the earth has been disturbed and rocks are exposed, either by digging or erosion, fossils might be found. The key ingredient is shale or rocky shale or other layered rock

Older Than Dirt

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formations like limestone and sandstone. Layers of rock indicate ancient seabed and old seabed means old sea creatures.

Shells are, by far, the most common fossils and, as such, would be your best bet as a novice fossil hound. You don't need much in the way of tools to go fossil hunting. I take a pair of leather gloves and a mesh bag like the bags that oranges come in (so the dirt will fall out and the rocks stay in). A seashell bag like you find at the beach is perfect but any small mesh container will do. I take a garbage bag (so the dirt won't fall in your trunk) and, sometimes, a garden trowel or small putty knife. I also take a small paint brush to dust off a promising looking spot on a rock. A 1/2 or 3/4 inch brush is perfect. That's it. It's not a lot of 'tools' and even these are really more than you need most of the time.

Fossil hunting is a great adult and child bonding exercise. Take the kids. Kids love dirt. Kids get excited about finding things and their excitement is contagious. It is wonderful to hear "I FOUND ONE!! I FOUND ONE!!" and where there is one fossil, there is almost always more. Most importantly, kids see *DETAIL*. They pick out stuff that older folks ignore and see the smallest bump or hole on a rock. They investigate every seam and crack while you're looking at one small area. I guarantee you'll find more fossils with a youngster in tow.

There is one important point I'd like to make clear. Always respect other people's property rights. If you're not sure, ask. Get permission before you go poking around someone's dirt pile or fill dirt dig and, speaking of digging....Don't! Most fossils are there for the taking. Mother nature plucks them out of the hillside and lays

them on the ground to be picked up. Digging is not a good idea. The number of fossils you find by digging is just not worth the hole you create. Of course, this applies to other people's property and public lands. What you do in your own yard is your business. Besides, there are plenty of other opportunities where someone else does the digging for you. Ask construction workers if you can look through the piles of dirt they make. Poke around road construction on the weekends. Just don't fool around with the equipment and don't leave a mess. Pick up the fossils and leave the dirt where it is. Lastly, always park in a safe place and be careful climbing around on piles of loose rock. A sprained ankle or roughed up knee isn't what you're after.

Once you pick your spot, take the time to really look. I find it helps to just sit down and look, thoroughly, through a small area. Pick up rocks and look them over. Once you've examined everything within reach, move to another spot. If you find a fossil look carefully in the same general area. Chances are good you'll find

another...and another. Most common fossils are easy to recognize. A shell looks like a shell or, more correctly, the imprint of a shell. A leaf looks like the imprint of a leaf, and so on. Don't expect to find a dinosaur skeleton though. They are extremely rare in comparison with seashells and not generally found in this area. If you want to find a dinosaur, go to the Dakotas or Montana or southwestern Canada.

As with anything else, if you want to be a serious fossil hound do your research. Read everything you can find. Search the internet. Educate yourself and then get busy. For starters though, all you really have to do is go out and pick up rocks. Have fun and don't forget the kids!



Left page: A variety of fossil plant and animal life.

Below: A brachiopod, similar to today's nautilus.

