

The Mammoth Site - Hot Springs, South Dakota (a brief photo tour)

By Dr. Leslie (Les) Eliuk

At Hot Springs, South Dakota, a hot spring sinkhole became a deadly trap for countless mammoths during the Pleistocene Ice Age, primarily Columbian mammoths but also a few Woolly ones. The exact age remains unknown, but this fascinating site holds more than 60 mammoth skeletons—all males (could this highlight the wisdom of matriarchal herd elders?). Alongside these impressive remains, smaller numbers of bones belonging to other creatures, including the formidable short-faced bear, have been unearthed.

Velvet and Les visited this remarkable location back in 2014, snapping plenty of photos and marveling at its history. As the mammoth talk in February 2025 has been rescheduled to November 2025, to hold members over until they get the opportunity to hear from an expert, Les would like share a glimpse of what one can find at the site. Perched atop a hill, the site is the positive erosional remnant of the ancient sinkhole, now protected within a building-sized excavation area roughly the size of a hockey rink. The attached museum showcases an incredible collection of fossil mammal skeletons, including life-size models of extinct mammoths and bears. Fascinating reconstructions can be found, such as shelters crafted from mammoth bones by early humans in Europe—a testament to their ingenuity.

Although it's quite a trek southeast of Calgary, the Mammoth Site in Hot Springs is an extraordinary window into the past that is still being unearthed, piece by massive piece. It offers a less oily alternative to the La Brea Tar Pits in southern California (another distant site which Les would love to hear stories about - if anyone has ever been there, share your experience!).

Brief Biography:

Dr. Leslie Eliuk, comes with decades of experience. Representing GeoTours Consulting Inc., he is a semi-retired former exploration geologist with Shell Canada (1969–1999) and holds a PhD from Dalhousie University, earned in 2016, which focused on the Jurassic-Cretaceous carbonate platform shaped by the major Sable Delta. Trips like these reflect the dedication and time Les devoted to completing his PhD. Nowadays, Les joins Tako Koning on field trips exploring the Cretaceous-Paleogene extinction event (or “Tertiary” to the traditionalists). These excursions take him close to his roots, not far from his first summer job as a student paleontologist—collecting dinosaur shoulder blades near Trochu, Alberta, just north of Three Hills. Like Tako, Les is a graduate of the University of Alberta and is recognized as an Honorary Member of the Canadian Energy Geoscience Association (CEGA, formerly CSPG). Though Les's career and contributions primarily unfolded within Canada, his passion for geological exploration remains unwavering.

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Les & Velvet Eliuk's 2014 visit