



Family Fishing Trip Leads to “One-in-a-Million” Fossil Discovery

September 12, 2025

**EMBARGOED UNTIL
SEPTEMBER 12, 2025**

About The Learning Campus

The Learning Campus is the educational basecamp for Gulf State Park. Constructed in 2019, this sustainably-designed facility provides an opportunity for experiential learning through immersive programming, research, and hands-on education focused on the natural and cultural heritage of Gulf State Park and the coastal region of Alabama.

About The Poarch Creek Indians

The Poarch Creek Indians is the only federally recognized tribe in Alabama. From hospitality to aerospace, we continue to operate in a variety of industries across the World. Read more about our Tribe at www.poarchcreekindians.org.

About McWane Science Center

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MOBILE, AL- A family of four recently discovered the fossilized shell of a 32-million-year-old leatherback sea turtle while fishing along a river in south Alabama. The turtle shell, which is roughly 4 feet long and 3 feet across, represents a new genus and species of leatherback sea turtle and is one of the most complete fossils of its kind found anywhere in the world. The new species, *Ueloca colemanorum* (pronounced “Wee-low-juh kohl-man-or-um”) was named by Tribal Members of the Poarch Creek Indians in collaboration with a team of paleontologists from Alabama and California.

Adam Coleman and his wife Adrienne have spent years taking their two children, Talah and Corey, on regular fishing trips near their home in south Alabama. During these trips, the family occasionally takes breaks from fishing to search for fossils along the riverbank. Fossil hunting is a hobby Adam picked up from his father, and one that he now passes down to his children. “My dad got me into collecting fossils when I was a kid,” said Adam. “Now we look for them every time we’re on the river.”

In the spring of 2021, the family took a fishing trip that would change their lives forever when they came across something extraordinary embedded in a massive limestone boulder. “I’d never seen anything like it,” recalls Adrienne. “We knew it was probably a fossil but there was no telling what kind.” Without knowing what they’d found or who to ask for more information, the Coleman’s decided to keep it a secret. For months, the family regularly visited the bizarre find, often eating lunch in the shade of the cliff that stood just behind the huge, dome-shaped fossil.

More than a year later, Adam happened to see a news article about a paleontologist in south Alabama named Dr. Andrew Gentry. Adam contacted Dr. Gentry and asked if he would be willing to visit the site to try and identify what the family had found. Although skeptical, Gentry agreed. “When I saw the fossil for the first time, it was hard to believe what I was seeing,” said Gentry. “It was absolutely breathtaking.” Gentry, whose research focuses on the fossil turtles of Alabama, realized that the Colemans had uncovered the fossilized shell of an ancient leatherback sea turtle.

According to Gentry, “leatherback sea turtles are unique for having a shell made up of a mosaic of tiny bones called ossicles instead of the broad, flattened plates typical of most turtle shells. When leatherback turtles die, the collagen that holds the ossicles together quickly decays and the mosaic falls apart. This makes intact fossil leatherback shells exceptionally rare.”

Later that day, Gentry reached out to his colleague Jun Ebersole, a paleontologist and the Director of Collections at McWane Science Center in Birmingham, AL, to discuss the significance of the find. Gentry and Ebersole spent the next few months putting together a team of researchers from McWane Science Center, the Geological Survey of Alabama, Dauphin Island Sea Lab, Alabama Aquarium, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Corp to assist in retrieving the fossil. After the recovery



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effort, the enormous fossil was carefully transported to a research lab where Gentry and Ebersole assembled a group of scientists to clean and study the specimen.

The researchers determined that the fossil dated to the early Oligocene Epoch (~32 million years ago), represented a new genus and species of leatherback sea turtle, and was one of the most intact leatherback turtle shells known from the western hemisphere. One of the members of the research team, Kimberly Gregson, is a Tribal Member of Poarch Creek Indians, and because the fossil was recovered from an area that is part of the Creek ancestral homeland, it was decided that this new leatherback turtle should be partly named in the Creek language of Muscogee. First Generation Decedent Samatha Martin with the Poarch Creek Indian's Calvin McGhee Cultural Department, and Dr. Marcus Briggs-Cloud, Mvskoke Speaker, worked with the researchers to create the genus name *Ueloca* (pronounced Wee-low-juh) which comes from a combination of the Muscogee words “Uewa” (pronounced Wee-wah) meaning water and “Locv” (pronounced Low-juh) meaning turtle.

“This is the first fossil to carry a Mvskoke name and it's exciting to see our language recognized in this way. Opportunities like this weave our voice into history and ensure it's never forgotten, said Samatha Martin, Creek Language Coordinator for the Poarch Creek Indians. “I'd like to thank Dr. Gentry for allowing the Tribe to be a part of this unique experience and extend a special thank you to Dr. Marcus Briggs-Cloud for his advice and expertise in the early stages of this project.”

The species name, “*colemanorum*” honors the Coleman family for their initial discovery of this fossil and their subsequent help with its recovery.

“This is truly a one-in-a-million fossil,” said Ebersole. “Specimens like this one are why Alabama is quickly becoming a globally recognized hot-spot for fossil diversity.”

Ueloca not only adds to the incredible fossil record of the region but is also helping scientists piece together the origin story of the modern species of leatherback sea turtle. According to Gentry, “the remarkable preservation of *Ueloca* allowed for a more comprehensive anatomical study than is generally possible with fossil leatherbacks. By comparing *Ueloca* to leatherback fossils from around the world, we see evidence that there may have been at least two distinct groups of leatherback sea turtles that underwent a similar evolution over the last 40 million years.” Despite their similarities, only one of the two groups survived to the present-day. The other appears to have vanished from the fossil record millions of years ago and scientists are unsure about the cause of their disappearance. “*Ueloca* has helped advance our understanding of the history of leatherback sea turtles but there are still unanswered questions,” said Gentry.

The fossil has since been transported to McWane Science Center in Birmingham, Alabama where it is currently on public display. Gentry describes this project as a highlight of his career and a testament to the



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ability of scientific investigations to bring together people from a variety of backgrounds. “It never ceases to amaze me how quickly paleontology can turn a group of complete strangers, each with their own unique perspectives, into a cohesive team,” said Gentry. “There are few things in life more unifying than shared discovery.”

The study titled “*A new leatherback marine turtle from the lower Oligocene of North America and a phylogenetic nomenclature for Dermochelyidae*” was published today in the open access journal *Palaeodiversity* and can be downloaded here: [doi:10.18476/pale.v18.a6](https://doi.org/10.18476/pale.v18.a6).

Media Contact:

Kristin Hellmich, Poarch Band of Creek Indians
Director of External Communications
(251) 368-9136 (x2133)
khellmich@pci-nsn.gov

Andrew Gentry, Learning Campus at Gulf State Park
Senior Education and Research Manager
(256) 694-1949
agentry@learningcampusgsp.com



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