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26,000-Year-Old Yukon Horse Exhibit Opens at the Yukon Beringia Interpretive Centre

WHITEHORSE – In September 1993, placer miners working a claim in the Klondike found a fossil that has been radiocarbon dated and identified as a 26,000-year-old Yukon horse that once roamed the plains of Eastern Beringia.

Discovered by Sam and Lee Olynyk and Ron Toews, the Yukon horse is the best preserved specimen of a mummified, extinct large mammal ever found in Canada. Following scientific analysis on the carcass and hide restoration, the Yukon horse has become the newest member in an impressive collection of exhibits belonging to the Yukon Beringia Interpretive Centre.

“The Yukon Horse exhibit adds an important piece of Beringia history to an already impressive list of recent scientific discoveries in the Yukon,” Elaine Taylor, Tourism and Culture Minister said. “We are proud of the work done to date to learn from this wonderful artifact and the collaboration among industry, governments and the scientific world, which is helping to ensure special discoveries like the Yukon Horse are preserved and shared for today and future generations.”

The three miners who discovered the rare fossil contacted the Yukon government who in turn contacted C.R. (Dick) Harington at Ottawa’s Canadian Museum of Nature. Scientists in Ottawa began treatment of the hide and soft tissue, analyzed the animal’s intestinal contents as well as radiocarbon dated a bone sample. The results of these tests have substantially changed the scientific view about the Yukon horse. The hide showed that the animal looked something like Przewalskii’s horse which still survives today in Mongolia.

“The Yukon horse, a relatively small horse closely related to the modern horse occupied the steppe-like grasslands of Eastern Beringia,” Harington said. “It was one of the commonest species known from that region, along with steppe bison, woolly mammoths and caribou. We are grateful to local placer miners for their magnificent cooperation with scientists in helping to establish our knowledge of this important, now extinct, species.”

While horses originated in North America around 55 million years ago, genetic studies suggest that a single Late Pleistocene horse species ranged from western Europe to Eastern Beringia, with Yukon horses becoming extinct about 12,000 years ago. Modern horses were re-introduced to North America by European settlers in the 1500s.

The Yukon horse exhibit is displayed at the Yukon Beringia Interpretive Centre located on the Alaska Highway in Whitehorse, Yukon. To learn more about this centre and the exhibit visit www.beringia.com.

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Attachment: Art image of a Yukon horse and other Beringia animals

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Art Image of a Yukon Horse and Other Beringia Animals



Yukon horse depicted with short-faced bear, mammoth, caribou and badger at Last Chance Creek, Klondike goldfields in Yukon.

Image: *Yukon Beringia, 20,000 B.C.* by George "Rinaldino" Teichmann (copyright Government of Yukon)