Outback bone pit set to solve mystery of Aussie-style T. rex

TREASURE trove … Kylie Piper surveys the dinosaur hotspot near Winton. “We’re hoping to find a whole lot more something-osaurs,” she says.

Dinosaur bonanza

Exclusive

Michael Wray

BONES that could be the first skeletal evidence of Australia’s answer to the ferocious Tyrannosaurus rex have been found in outback Queensland.

Scientists digging at a secret location in central western Queensland found the fossils about two weeks ago, although it could be years before the bones are positively identified.

Queensland Museum curator of geosciences Scott Hocknull said the 1.5m-deep pit outside Winton held one of the most dense concentrations of dinosaur bones in Australia.

“All of the dinosaurs and all of the fossils we’re finding out there are completely new to science, so everything we find out there has yet to be scientifically described,” he said.

“That’s really exciting from my point of view because we’re looking at an environment that has had very little scientific research done on it. Having such a concentration of bones means we’ll have many surprises along the way.”

One of the biggest mysteries in the area surrounds a huge carnivorous dinosaur that left footprints on a muddy shore as it chased smaller dinosaurs about 98 million years ago.

The footprints were preserved at Lark Quarry, 110km south of Winton, but no bones matching the 3.5m tall, 9m long meat-eating dinosaur have ever been found.

Mr Hocknull said scientists knew the dinosaur roamed western Queensland and were hopeful the missing link could be among 150 fossils excavated from the pit this year.

University of Queensland dinosaur expert Steve Salisbury, who was not on the dig, said finding fossilised bones of a large theropod – a carnivorous dinosaur – would be a major breakthrough in understanding Australian and Southern Hemisphere dinosaurs.

“The trackways (at Lark Quarry) don’t mean that there was a tyrannosaurus here, but there was an animal that made a footprint very similar to one that has previously been called tyrannosauropus, or the foot of tyrannosaurus,” Dr Salisbury said.

“I guess the perfect preserved skeleton of a big thing like this is yet to have emerged so if they’ve got something like that up at Winton it would be really good.”

Footprints of smaller carnivores called coelurosaurids, which were about the size of chickens, and larger plant-eating ornithopods, some of them as large as emus, have also been found in Winton.

Mr Hocknull said the outback town was in the middle of a “dinosaur rush” which was leading Australia’s push to create a national dinosaur collection.

“It’s our best crack at understanding what life was here before Australia became an island and that has huge implications for understanding how life has evolved in Australia as an island,” he said.

He said the bones seemed to be deposited on the edge of a 98 million-year-old billabong formed in the same way as modern billabongs.

“That whole process has been under way for at least 98 million years and still happens out there, but instead of dinosaurs there are sheep and cow (bones being deposited),” he said.

Kylie Piper, of the Australian Age of Dinosaurs organisation that ran the dig with the Queensland Museum, said new finds were confirming the diversity of Australia’s dinosaur history. “Were hoping to find a whole lot more something-osaurs,” she said.
DINO detectives ... Naomi Calleja works on bones unearthed at the Winton site where the Tyrannosaurus rex look-alike left this footprint at Lark Quarry.

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