

Edelman Fossil Park & Museum features full-scale dino sculptures and a fossil dig

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Join the Quarry Dig experience at the Edelman Fossil Park & Museum of Rowan University in New Jersey.
Credit: Edelman Fossil Park & Museum of Rowan University

By Deborah Abrams Kaplan[Special to Newsday](#)

New Jersey is known for many things: the Jersey Shore, Atlantic City and the Sopranos. But it's now becoming known for something else — a hotbed of dinosaur activity.

When an asteroid hit Mexico 66 million years ago, its impact spread globally, with debris hitting dinosaurs, igniting fires, drastically raising air temperatures and blocking the sunlight for years. Within hours, the non-avian dinosaurs went extinct, and the Earth lost three-quarters of its plants and animals. Most marine species then died off.

What does this have to do with New Jersey and dinosaurs? About 350 locations globally show evidence of this asteroid strike — the extinction layer is littered with iridium, shocked quartz and glassified molten rock from the impact. Only six locations have fossils embedded in that layer, says Nick Sena, director of community development and partnerships at the Edelman Fossil Park & Museum of Rowan University, which opened on March 29 in Sewell, New Jersey.

Edelman has the largest cache of the fossilized remains. In the quarry pit outside the museum, more than 100,000 fossils from 100 extinct species have been uncovered.

Birth of a fossil park



A look inside the Edelman Fossil Park & Museum of Rowan University in New Jersey. Credit: Edelman Fossil Park & Museum of Rowan University

A duck-billed Hadrosaurus was unearthed in Haddonfield, New Jersey, in 1858. Just 12 miles from this Mantua museum site, the Hadrosaurus was the first almost-complete dinosaur discovered in modern times. In 1866, a Dryptosaurus was uncovered, a mile from the park.

"In southern New Jersey, if you can find a way to dig roughly 40 feet below the surface, you have a chance of finding these types of fossils," Sena said. He's referring more to marine fossils than dinosaur bones, as "most of the fossils we pull out are marine creatures." In the Cretaceous era (145 million years until 66 million years ago) southern New Jersey was under water; the coastline was near Philadelphia. "If you lived in the ocean, you were not a dinosaur."

Dinosaur fossils are found here. The museum tells the dinosaur story — both avian and non-avian — using full-scale sculptures (not mounted bones). While this museum covers the Cretaceous Period, the dinosaur era spanned 171 million years. Most dinosaurs did not live at the same time — they continually evolved. Humans are closer in time to the Tyrannosaurus rex (66 million years), than the T. rex was to the Stegosaurus (79 million years apart).

Marine life and extinction



The Edelman Fossil Park & Museum features hands-on exhibits and full-scale dinosaur sculptures.
Credit: Edelman Fossil Park & Museum of Rowan University

Everything in the marine life exhibit was found on site, from sea turtles to shark teeth to a hadrosaurid femur showing shark bite evidence. Hanging from the ceiling is a recreated mosasaur, a 55-foot-long, 44-ton sea reptile that could accelerate from 0 to 30 mph in less than a second.

The Hall of Extinction and Hope shares asteroid details and the aftermath, using a video illustration to microscopes showing iridium evidence. The last gallery on that floor highlights the sixth extinction, i.e. now, giving life to the museum motto: "Discover the past, protect the future."

"Staff wasn't expecting how impactful that message has been to our younger patrons. We're telling folks you have to fall in love with your planet and protect nature," Sena said.

Don't-miss experiences



Visitors can take home ancient treasures that are discovered in the Quarry Dig experience. Credit: Edelman Fossil Park & Museum of Rowan University

Downstairs, the museum's Critter Cove has a touch tank and up-close animal explorations opening over the summer as the creatures acclimate. Next to it, peer into a wall-sized observation window, watching paleontologists and students conserving fossilized findings. For the younger set, the Discovery Forest has pullout drawers to investigate, a movie, and space to run around. Lastly, an add-on free-roaming virtual reality experience is open to those 56 inches and taller, immersing visitors into the Cretaceous ecosystem.

Leave time to explore the grounds' 1.2-mile nature trail and a free Pterosaur playground. The gardens are planted with 27 of 38 species of plants that are similar to those from the Cretaceous Period.

From May to October, sign up for the 75-minute quarry dig experience, where visitors become paleontologists, digging for (and keeping) fossils they find, like sponges, shells and shark teeth. While most active diggers will find an ancient souvenir, the staff has extras available just in case.

The Edelman Fossil Park & Museum, 66 Million Mosasaur Way, Sewell, New Jersey, 856-284-3466, efm.org; Cost: \$29, \$24 for ages 3-12. The quarry dig is \$25 and the VR experience is \$25; both require museum admission. Reservations for the museum and experiences are recommended, as they can sell out.