

Blacksoil

Mick the Sauropod

Last year in 'Blacksoil', we introduced Mick, a huge sauropod discovered near Winton by local earth-moving contractor and part-time opal miner, Mick Washington. Here now, is his story and an update on what the bones represent and how they compare to Elliot, Australia's largest known dinosaur.

Mick found his namesake in the late 1990s and although he had never seen anything like it before, he immediately knew he had stumbled on to something good.

"It was just off the side of an ironstone ridge," he told me on an April morning in 2003 as we congregated around the back of his shed. "I knew straight away that it was bone and I reckoned it had to be a dinosaur!" Mick explained how he and his wife Ally had gone back to the site and collected all the bits they could find. "We put a few of the biggest chunks in the garden for a while, but it eventually all ended up out here in the shed," he said, as we sorted through several large boxes of bone fragments.

There was no doubt that Mick's identification was spot on and a quick inspection of the bones showed that they belonged to a sauropod, and a big one at that! The sauropods are extremely easy to identify if there are bone fragments from their back or neck present, as they had a unique weight-saving feature – their vertebrae were virtually hollow. Dubbed spaghetti bone (imagine a can of spaghetti, where the tomato sauce is bone and the spaghetti is air space), this texture is found only in the vertebrae of the sauropods and the boxes laid out on the ground in front of us were full of it.

Mick had just donated his fantastic collection of dinosaur bone to the Australian Age of Dinosaurs museum, a tremendous asset to add to Winton's rapidly growing fossil collection and a huge vote of confidence in our fledging organisation. "I was very much against it leaving the district and never being seen or heard of again," he said as we loaded the boxes onto the back of our utility. Mick went on to tell me that he had got to the stage that he didn't know what to do with it.

"I gave a couple of bits away and even had a go at polishing a piece," he said, adding, "It came up real nice too and I said to Ally, 'You know, this'd make beaut knife and fork handles; we could sell 'em in America or somewhere and make a fortune!'" Fortunately for dinosaur enthusiasts all over Australia, Mick never did quite get around to that!

Nearly 12 months have passed since that day and the contents of the boxes have slowly but surely changed from a



The Washington family of Winton: Ally, baby Max, Mick and Patrick with three giant neck vertebrae from Mick the sauropod (left). Discovered by Mick Washington in the late 1990s, these exceptionally well preserved bones can lay claim to belonging to one of Australia's largest known dinosaurs and are the most comprehensive collection of bones from a single animal of this size. The only other Australian dinosaurs of comparable size are Elliot, known from a single thigh bone, and the Hughenden sauropod known from a partial neck vertebra. The importance of his father's find is probably still lost on young Patrick Washington who is busily honing his earthmoving skills to follow in his father's footsteps (inset).

Photos, Judy Elliott

large assortment of fragments to several fairly respectable dinosaur bones. While it's by no means complete, we have nevertheless managed to piece together close to 75 per cent of the broken pieces to reveal some very interesting parts of Mick's massive frame.

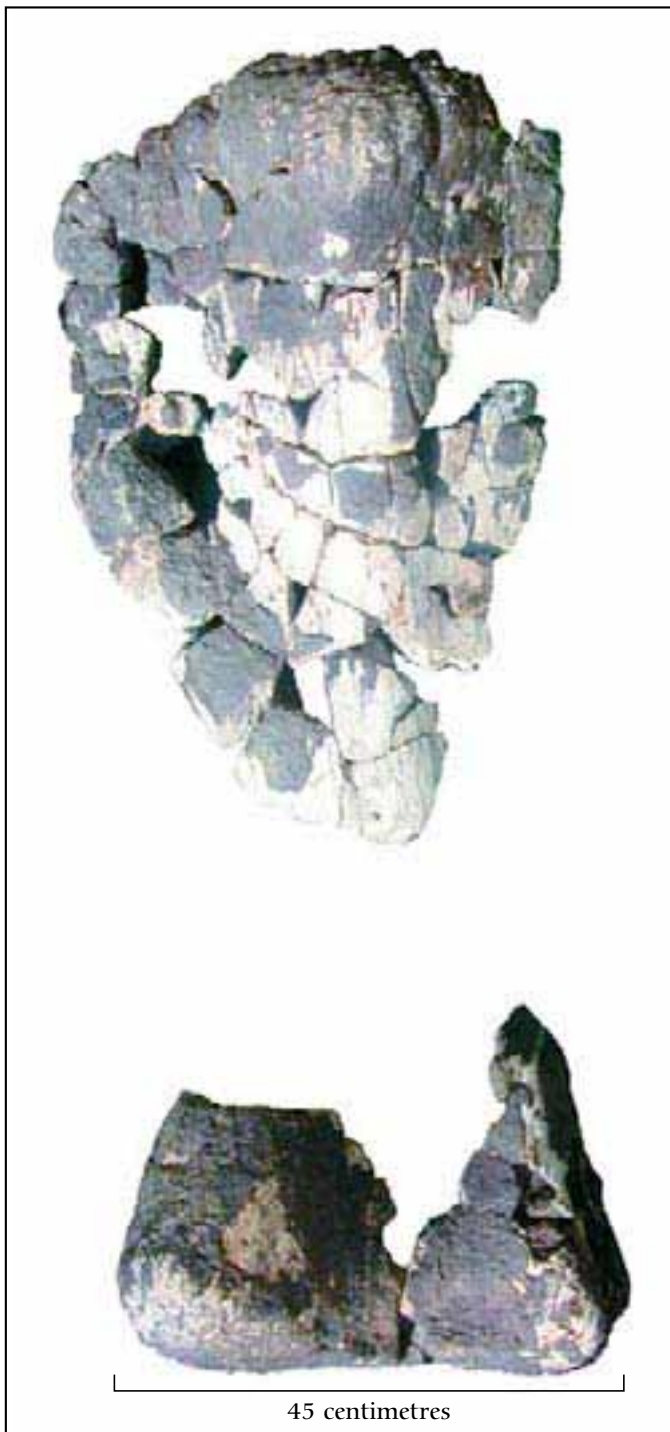
Typically, like every other sauropod thus far discovered in Australia, Mick's fossilised remains are like a bony fruit salad consisting of 10 tail vertebrae from several different sections of his tail, three very large neck vertebrae all from different areas of the neck, two large parts of the humerus (upper arm bone) and what appears to be a very fragment-

ed pelvis or shoulder bone. The good news is that very little material from the neck and pelvic regions of a sauropod has been discovered in Australia, so Mick may play a very important part in furthering our knowledge of these giants of yesteryear.

And the question everyone is asking: Is he as big as Elliot? Is he bigger? Unfortunately, we still don't know. In fact, we don't even know if they are the same type of sauropod! Elliot is at least a few million years older than Mick, coming from a deposit north-east of Winton which is about 97 million years old. Mick, on the other hand, is from deposits southwest of Winton, which vary from 93 to 95 million years old.

Until a comparable bone from Elliot (such as a neck vertebra) is forthcoming, it will remain undetermined as to which dinosaur holds the heavyweight title. So in the meantime, Elliot remains on his pedestal, but ... the clock is ticking!

David Elliott



Now housed in the Australian Age of Dinosaurs fossil museum in Winton, these tail vertebrae (above) provide a very descriptive interpretation of this dinosaur's anatomy. Several other bones belonging to Mick have also been partially restored, including this suspected humerus (upper arm bone) (left). Measuring 45cm across, the distal (bottom) end of this bone would have constituted a massive elbow joint.

Photos, David and Judy Elliott