

## ACCESS TO FOSSIL COLLECTING SITES IN WEST VIRGINIA

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West Virginia is a state rich in fossils. Although West Virginia lacks spectacular Mesozoic vertebrate fossils such as dinosaurs it does have a wide variety of Paleozoic plants and invertebrates along with some Paleozoic vertebrates. It also has Holocene plants and vertebrates. In spite of the large number of localities where fossils can be found access to collect fossils can be a problem.

Most land in West Virginia is privately owned and contact with the landowner for permission to enter the land and collect fossils seems to be the most common means of gaining access to the fossils. Members of the West Virginia Fossil Club (organized amateurs in the north central part of the state) report that personal contacts with people who have fossils on their land is their primary access. These contacts are gained largely through exhibits and "rock shows". Many West Virginians act very negatively, even violently, towards trespassers so permission to enter and collect is very important.

The surface mining of coal is richly productive of plant fossils. Access to these surface mines has become more difficult in recent years due to increasingly stringent requirements of mine safety laws. Sometimes these safety requirements work to shut fossil collectors out since the coal operator is responsible for the safety of those in the surface mine and the operator may not wish to take on this responsibility for collectors who may not be aware of the regulations or may be unwilling to follow them.

Collecting on highway rights-of-way which is common in some eastern areas is not encouraged in West Virginia. The prohibition against non-emergency stopping along Interstate highways (which have many good exposures) is being increasingly strictly enforced.

Access to other government owned land seems to vary with the classification of the landholding and with the status of the collector.