



In 2006, fossil hunters found this well-preserved tyrannosaur fossil beside the bones of a plant-eating Triceratops. Now, a museum is studying the unusual fossils to learn more about dinosaurs.

## The 'Dueling Dinosaur' Fossil: Scientists Examine this Mysterious Fossil

*A preserved specimen of a T. rex and Triceratops, who seem to have died while fighting, has been acquired by a North Carolina museum after more than ten years being 'hidden' in a private collection.*

Adapted from National Geographic

For more than 14 years, paleontologists have wondered about a single fossil that preserves skeletons of two of the world's most famous dinosaurs, *Tyrannosaurus rex* and *Triceratops*. Not only are the skeletons almost fully complete, but they seem to show the 2 dinosaurs fighting.

Each specimen is among the best of its kind ever found. Together, the pair—nicknamed the “Dueling Dinosaurs”—present a paleontological mystery: Did the beasts just happen to be fossilized together by chance? Or had they been fighting to the death? Nobody has been able to study the fossil to find out.



The Dueling Dinosaurs fossil may represent a deadly struggle between a Triceratops and a young T. rex, shown here in this artist's reconstruction of prehistoric Montana.

But that's about to change. After many years of arguing, a museum has bought the fossil from a private collector. They plan to examine the fossil, then display it for the public!

The fossil will be housed in a new expansion to the museum, including a state-of-the-art paleontology lab, that will open in 2022. "The Dueling Dinosaurs are really a gem that's been hidden away for more than a decade," says Lindsay Zanno, a paleontologist.

Paleontologists are welcoming the news that the Dueling Dinosaurs fossil has found a home. "There will literally be thousands of studies done on these fossils," says paleontologist Tyler Lyson.

“It’s going to be a very important specimen,” adds paleontologist Kirk Johnson.

## 14 years in the shadows

The story of the Dueling Dinosaurs’ discovery and long journey to the museum is very dramatic.

In 2006, a fossil-hunter named Clayton Phipps made the find of his life. Phipps and his team were surveying a Montana ranch owned by Mary Ann Murray when they found a trail of bone bits that led to a *Triceratops* bone eroding [sticking] out of the hillside. Months of off-and-on digging eventually revealed that the fossil was a *Triceratops*—as well as a tyrannosaur.

After the fossil was recovered, it spent years in storage at different labs, warehouses, and homes. There were many issues with the museum trying to buy the fossil.

In the U.S., fossils found on public land must be given to a museum. But fossils found on private land (like someone’s yard), such as the Dueling Dinosaurs, can be legally bought and sold.

## The controversy of private fossil sales

Not all fossils like the Dueling Dinosaurs make their way into public museums. Sometimes, fossils never get to be studied because they are

bought or sold to individual people, like a *T. Rex* skeleton that was purchased for \$318 million dollars by a wealthy collector.

It is believed that more than 40 *T. rex* fossils—roughly half of all known ones—are outside of science’s reach because they are owned by people or businesses instead of museums.

## A prehistoric duel?

Now that paleontologists can examine and investigate the Dueling Dinosaurs, years of scientific work can begin—including a look at whether they really died fighting.

Other fossils have captured both predator and prey before. First, researchers will need to work out precisely how—and when—each dinosaur died, and whether there is evidence of a fight (ex: tooth marks).

Whether or not dinosaurs really dueled in life, the fossil presents a unique opportunity to study amazing fossils.

The young tyrannosaur, for instance, will shed light how *T. rex* went from small baby to hulking predator. Most experts think the tyrannosaur is a juvenile *T. rex*. But some people think it is an undiscovered, smaller species of *T. rex*.

Paleontologists are very excited to explore these fossils, and to share them with the world. “People are going to get to see them forever. That’s what I’ve always wanted.”

