

Information about 6th Annual Paleonturology Award (2008) January 9, 2009

Anthony J. Martin, Senior Lecturer, Department of Environmental Studies

Background of the Award:

- The Fundación Conjunto Paleontológico de Teruel-Dinópolis (from now on FCPTD) in Teruel, Spain, established this international award in 2003 for the best paper in paleontology.
- The twofold purpose of the award is to: (1) recognize outstanding paleontological research; and (2) promote this research among teenagers.
- The award is given annually to the best paper (of those submitted for consideration) for the preceding year; among the judges are the winners of the previous year's award.
- The award also includes a cash prize of 4,500 Euros, payment of which is contingent on the winner's completing a publication written for a popular audience on the same topic of the research paper. This publication is a small book printed by the FCPTD, and the main audience is teenagers (particularly in Spain, as the book is also translated into Spanish). This is to help generate excitement in paleontological research among younger people.
- Previous winners were from the Smithsonian Institute, Harvard University, UC-Berkeley, and the University of Chicago, most of which have well-established (and well-funded) paleontology programs. So this was a big deal for us to win – our competition was probably comprised of people from the same institutions!

Award-Winning Paper, 2008:

- Varricchio, D.J., Martin, A. J., and Katsura, Y. 2007. First trace and body fossil evidence of a burrowing, denning dinosaur. *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London, B*, v. 274, n. 1616, p. 1361-1368.

Fun Facts:

- The name of the award ("Paleonturology") is a pun on the name of the city Teruel (Spain), where the FCPTD is located.
- The paper provided fossil evidence for the first known dinosaur in the geologic record, consisting of: an adult dinosaur (*Oryctodromeus cubicularis*, which was also a new species of dinosaur); two juveniles of the same species; a burrow that was probably made by the dinosaur; and a den structure (that connected with the burrow) in which the bones were found.

- The dimensions of the adult dinosaur fit the burrow perfectly, and it had some skeletal adaptations for digging (like an armadillo, only bigger). So this evidence, along with the adult and juveniles actually being in the burrow, was pretty much in the category of “smoking gun.”
- The body fossils (bones) and trace fossils (burrow and den) were in a Cretaceous formation in southwestern Montana, dated to about 95 million years old.
- This was one of the few definitive examples of parental care in dinosaurs: the juveniles were about 55-65% the size of the adult, yet were still in the den with the parent dinosaur. (You may make your jokes about teenagers not changing much for the past 95 million years.)

Coolest Aspects of the Award:

- I very much approve how this is both an international award that recognizes excellence in scientific research, but also involves public outreach in science education.
- From what I’ve read, the FCTPD has a ceremony for the award in Teruel every December. So I’m already thinking of attending it, if for nothing else the great Spanish food and wine. (And I have a little less than one year to practice my Spanish.)