

Paleo Lands Field Center greets visitors in Fossil

By Terry Richard, The Oregonian

August 13, 2009, 3:00AM

Fossil has a new visitor attraction.

The seat of Oregon's least populous county (Wheeler, 1,570 residents), Fossil is an out-of-the-way town in the John Day River country.

Most people don't wind up in Fossil, unless they really want to. But yes, some people really do want to, because Fossil offers a big dose of Western scenery and hospitality is its few **small inns** and **guest ranch**.

The newest visitor facility is the **Oregon Paleo Lands Institute Field Center**, which greeted the public with an open house over the Fourth of July and is planning a formal dedication on Saturday, Sept. 12.

The new 1,400-square foot home of the Oregon Paleo Lands Institute is designed as a hub for hands-on natural history education, exploration and ecotourism in Oregon's John Day Fossil Beds region.

It complements the National Park Service's Thomas Condon Paleontology Center near Kimberly, whose focus is the Age of Mammals and fossil research.

The building is on the southwest corner of Fourth and Adams in Fossil, across from the historic Wheeler County Courthouse, two blocks west of the tiny downtown business district.

Oregon Paleo Lands Institute, supported by Wheeler County and a coalition of 15 federal, state and local partners, has worked since 2005 under an Oregon Solutions agreement, to develop a regional "Paleo Project".

The Institute, with local communities and businesses, is building low-impact eco-tourism as a new niche in the region's economy. In 2006, the Institute launched its new Oregon Adventures education programs for all ages, with assistance from a major \$180,000 grant from the Meyer Memorial Trust, and other grants and donors.

In 2008, Wheeler County granted the Paleo Lands Institute a 99-year lease for the field center site. The field center, its bookstore, gift shop and Web site all help travelers and residents explore and understand the Paleo Lands region and the John Day Basin.

Anne Mitchell of Portland has been hired as the institute's executive director. A long-time "desert rat" with extensive involvement with the High Desert Committee of the Portland chapter of the Sierra Club, she had been working a development director of the Architectural Heritage Center.

The field center's schedule and programs are evolving, but for now expect it to be open 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Tuesday-Friday and 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Saturday. Winter hours will change, though the center and staff will stay busy because teaching local school children about the region's fossil history is one of its most important missions.

For the general public, the field center offers a natural history oriented gift shop, an exhibit on the landscape of eastern Oregon geology and a coming display of a 12-foot, half-scale replica of a plesiosaur (a carnivorous aquatic reptile) that was uncovered nearby in the Mitchell area.

The Institute also leads field tours throughout the region. Check its Web site (paleolands.org) or call 541-763-4480.

This blog post is part of my **"Send Terry on the road"** summer series, in conjunction with **visitcentraloregon.com** and **www.traveloregon.com**, which is also running a promotion called the **Oregon 150 Challenge**.

-- Terry Richard; terryrichard@news.oregonian.com



Terry Richard/The Oregonian

The Paleo Lands Field Center in Fossil plans a Sept. 12 dedication.

