

Stanford agrees to take me tracking on the condition that I do not reveal where we go.

“I would want neither some Tom, Dick, or Harry, nor any Jane, Mary, or Carrie prowling around important sites taking, breaking, or carrying off for the kiddies any items that might otherwise – *in proper hands* – inform science (and ultimately the world-at-large) about the flora, fauna, and environment of Early Cretaceous Maryland,” he emails.

After a burst of publicity last September surrounding his baby nodosaur, Stanford noticed an uptick in the wrong kind of footprints along the streams of College Park. “Everybody and their dog was out there,” he said. “They don’t know what they’re looking at.”

None of them are Ray Stanford.

Stanford never asks permission for his prospecting; nor does he need any on public property, said Larry Quarrick, chief of park planning and development for Prince George’s County. As long as Stanford is not “tearing up streambeds in a Bobcat,” he’s free to prospect.

But secrecy comes with a price.

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In late January, Stanford emails me, distraught. Backhoes and bulldozers have chewed up one of his treasured tracking spots.

It’s a place we visited last fall, a half-mile S-curve of Paint Branch Creek behind Route 1. We had bushwhacked through thick shrubs and skittered down a steep creek bank. Stanford has been here hundreds of times; today he can barely get his bearings.

The widened creek now sits exposed, the formerly steep banks chewed up and smoothed into gentle slopes covered with hay.

There are still big tracks here, but of entirely the wrong kind: Made by two yellow bulldozers and a backhoe parked next to the creek. A multimillion-dollar “stream restoration” project, ordered by the county and executed by the Army Corps of Engineers, is bulldozing these rich tracking grounds.

When Stanford discovered the destruction, he went home and cried.

Quarrick said the county had no record of any fossils turning up in Paint Branch Creek. “There was no reason to think there were any issues there,” he said.

Stanford points across the creek. That’s where he spotted the Cretaceous roadkill, the baby nodosaur.

We drive back across the creek and up to the Taco Bell. Ray and Sheila ate there one evening more than 15 years ago. Stanford remembers standing in the parking lot and looking at the creek, thinking, “Man, I can smell tracks here.”

A Cretaceous wonderland, just a short slide down from the Taco Bell dumpster. Welcome to Ray’s universe.

“Life is both strange and wonderful,” he often signs his emails.

One section of creek has escaped the machines; pebbles crunch wetly as we tread. Head down, scanning as always, Stanford stops and scrapes at something. A rounded, corrugated surface appears. After a minute, he pulls out a foot-long tree branch, fossilized, gray with streaks of light blue. Stanford rinses it in the creek and says, “That’s a nice specimen.”

Not all of the fossils are gone.

Still, the spell is broken. Stanford is disgusted.

But it’s too late.

Besides, Stanford has a bead on new tracking grounds. It’s in Cecil County in far northeastern Maryland. Rocks up there, called the Magothy Formation, are millions of years younger than those in College Park. A whole new menagerie of ghost dinosaurs may await discovery.

Still on the edge of the creek, Stanford sweeps his arm toward the adjacent soccer field. “Imagine all these nesting dinosaurs living in here,” he says. He pauses, picturing it.

He picks up a small, sharp-edged piece of rusty float. He angles it in the noon light this way and that.

That could be a toe print. Something reptilian possibly pressed its pinky down in the mud *right there* an impossibly long time ago. But the mark is shallow, indistinct.

“That’s a maybe,” Stanford says.

He keeps it anyway.