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BY BRIAN VASTAG

With the coiled energy of a stalking cat, Ray Stanford splashes out of the stream and onto a rocky sandbar, his knee-high hunter green boots pressing shallow heelprints that fill with water and begin to melt. Crouched, Stanford scans, head down, wavy silver hair dappled in the October sunshine. Birds tweet. Water rustles. It's 3:30 p.m., the sun at mid-angle, throwing good shadows. Stanford picks up a flat slice of pale yellow rock, a rough triangle the size of his hand. He rubs it with his thumb, tilts it this way and that.

"You see that?" he asks. A splayed mark etches the rock's surface. "It looks like a little three-toed dinosaur was here."

Stanford and I have been splashing around for all of two minutes. Already, the dinosaur king of College Park has scored.

A few minutes later, Stanford picks up a bigger brown slice of rock. He thumbs mud out of an impression the length of his index finger. "I can guarantee that's a toe," he says. The mark is smeared, indistinct. I'm not sure I believe him. But Stanford has a special visual talent. He sees things other people don't.

A week later, Stanford emails. After further inspection, he has decided that this seemingly unspectacular find is "a WONDERFUL specimen of a *running*, turning-left-at-high-speed dromeosaurid footprint."

Popularly known as raptors – and made famous by *Jurassic Park*– little dromeosaurids darted about on two feet, arms tucked, slender tails bobbing.

Here, in the desultory woods behind a Prince George's County high school, along a creek bed littered with dented Coors Light cans and bent cafeteria spoons and spent Doritos bags, one of these knee-high speedsters hung a quick left 112 million years ago, during the early Cretaceous era.

It was fleeing a snapping meat eater! It was chasing a fish! Or maybe it was just out for a run.

Stanford's imagination fills in the blanks. It's what he does.

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Wiry, voluble, way too energetic for a 73-year-old, Ray Stanford could almost pass for a paleontologist. But his hair is a little too short, his beard too trim, his button-down shirt too tucked. And he talks too fast. This Texan is an amateur, although he disdains that term. He's self-taught, a gentleman naturalist.

And now he's leading me to the Stanford Museum: his living room. Worried about thieves, Stanford asks me not to disclose the location of the rambling, white, three-story farmhouse, circa 1870, that he shares with his wife, Sheila. Just say it's somewhere in College Park, he says.

In we go, through a dim foyer.

Boom! It's like a rock quarry exploded, threw up a great whirling cyclone of stone, flat pieces, round ones, some smaller than a coaster, some bigger than a dinner plate, smooth pieces and jagged ones, triangles, rectangles, crazy irregular shapes, dun, gray, tan, ochre, charcoal, splashes of purple and streaks of yellow, and deposited the whole shebang into a great flowing river of rock.

The river bears left from the door, growing higher, overtaking a wooden chair, then up onto the radiator and back behind a big easy chair, sloping into a rampart against the wall, reaching up almost to the window, then across a bookcase and over a floor-standing speaker and further, up onto a shelf, heading for the ceiling in the far corner.

There is more. A door opens to the kitchen, where the great rock river rolls on, over a table, jumping onto the stove, into a back room and out the back door and down three steps, petering out – finally – with a few big slabs on the ground.

And footprints! Imprinted upon every piece, each slab, each slice, all of them, every last one, hundreds and hundreds of pieces, maybe a thousand, is a dinosaur track, or three, or 12, from three-toed scratch marks smaller than a penny to elephantine ovals size 18EEE.

This is College Park? More like Cretaceous Park.

"My jaw stayed dropped for an hour," said Bob Bakker, perhaps the most famous dinosaur hunter of the past half-century, who some years back toured the Stanford Museum.

Here and there riding the rocky waves peek out actual dinosaurs – the plastic variety. A leering two-legged carnivore threatens from behind a chair, all stubby arms and flashing teeth. Under the coffee table, a little low-slung, spiky ankylosaur stands guard. Each dinosaur is roughly of the type that made the

track it stands upon: visual aids for the overwhelmed visitor.

There's even more to take in, as Stanford's interests range far beyond dinosaur tracks. Cases of Indian arrowheads hang on the walls. Dozens of matchbox-size plastic boxes hold slices of meteorites. A dozen stone discs cover a small round coffee table — pieces for a game known as Chunkey, played by the plains Indians beginning some 1,500 years ago. The Indians rolled the discs on the ground and threw spears at them.

"Take a seat," says Stanford, his turquoise bolo tie swinging as he settles on the easy chair. "There's a lot to show."

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The first time Ray Stanford spotted a dinosaur track -- in a rivulet in Riverdale -- he left it behind. There weren't supposed to be any dinosaur footprints here.

It had been 100 years since someone had spied a dinosaur track in Maryland — and that was in much older rocks, from the Triassic period, 100 miles away in a quarry near Emmitsburg. Some of the great dinosaur hunters of the 19th and 20th century, including Yale University's O.C. Marsh, had searched the D.C. area. But no footprints had ever been found. The iron-rich geology wasn't right for it. The textbooks said so.

Stanford knew this. In 1994, he had bought a used copy of "Dinosaurs of the East Coast," by noted Johns Hopkins University paleontologist David Weishampel. Stanford's three children from a previous marriage were visiting, and his youngest son, Jordan, then 9, was going through his dinosaur-crazy phase.

One August afternoon, out hunting for Indian arrowheads, Stanford found a flat rock with an impression that looked like three fat toes. He asked the children what it might be. They had been flipping through another recent purchase — an illustrated guide to dinosaur tracks, it just so happens -- so they were primed: It was an iguanodon footprint!

Stanford thought that unlikely. So he dropped the piece. But he returned a few days later, finding a similar-looking piece, with three splayed impressions, like toe marks. He kept it.

On his third trip, another discovery "set him on fire": two wider, rounder footprints. The claw marks, the rounded shape, the girth: Stanford put it together. A young sauropod -- a long-necked tree grazer -- had stamped them.

"If a sauropod can run, this guy was running!" Stanford says. "I got more and more excited. I was like a kid."

Tromping streambeds, flipping rocks, Ray learned what to look for. Within a year, he and Sheila had collected 90 pieces with nearly 20 types of tracks.

No dinosaur footprints in Maryland? There were stampedes of them.

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Taking notes at the Stanford Museum is like chasing a racecar on a bicycle. For four hours, Ray talks nearly nonstop, flashing footprint after footprint.

He ushers me to Pterosaur Corner, near the kitchen.

"What I'm going to show you will *reset the clock* on size evolution of pterosaurs," he says.

Before Ray Stanford, no one had found a pterosaur footprint east of the Mississippi River.

He's got a pile of them.

The slab he points to is one of his bigger pieces, 18 inches long. It holds a huge three-digit handprint, each slender impression tapering to a pointy claw mark.

"Just look at that digit length," says Stanford.

Pterosaurs had three fingers dangling from the middle of each wing; when they landed, they left widely splayed marks, as if someone had pressed into mud an outstretched thumb, middle finger and pinky.

"This thing was humongous," Stanford says: 400 pounds with a wingspan of 40 to 50 feet, a dive-bombing Learjet with serrated teeth. On the ground, it balanced itself on its wingtips, eerily, like a vampire bat taller than a house.

The current pterosaur record holder, *Quetzalcoatlus northropi*, hails from Texas and had a wingspan of 38 feet. But it lived 50 million years after whatever made this monster hand print.

The biggest flying reptile ever, 50 million years before its time, soaring over prehistoric Maryland?

I was skeptical. So I called one of the world's foremost dinosaur trackers, Martin Lockley. Beginning in the 1980s, Lockley exposed trackways in the West where dinosaur footprints ran on for a kilometer or more. His careful reading of the tracks broke the myth that all dinosaurs were lumbering behemoths; many were quite nimble.

Lockley toured the Stanford Museum in 1999 after appearing on the Diane Rehm radio show and getting a call from Ray. He saw the pterosaur print.

"It is equal to the largest, or is possibly *the* largest, pterosaur track in the world," Lockley said. He is eager to co-author a scientific paper on it with Stanford.

But Ray doesn't know when he'll get around to writing it up.

We move on -- so much to see! -- to the other end of the size scale. Stanford pulls out a plastic case the size of a credit card, opens it to display small chips of stone. Three-toed footprints improbably scratch the chips; each could fit on a penny.

The tiniest dinosaur footprints ever found, says Stanford.

A chick-sized hatchling of a new-to-science species of plant-eating dinosaur Stanford dubbed *Hypsiloichnus* made them. "Dinosaurs had babies, too," he says. He did publish that one, in 2004.

Oh, the curiosities abound at the Stanford Museum: a dark ice-cream scoop-shaped chunk of fossilized dinosaur feces – a coprolite; a 98-pound coprolite propped near the front door; a smaller one with a splayed-toe track on it ("He stepped where his mother told him never to step," says Ray. "I always tell that to the Cub Scouts.").

The collection could launch a dozen academic careers, keep an army of graduate students toiling for decades. But Stanford doesn't play by those rules. He doesn't have to publish or perish.

Instead, he sits in his easy chair and ponders each find, turning it over in his hand and his mind.

He sells nothing, despite offers. "Oh god no," he says.

Robert Weems, a fossil hunter with the U.S. Geological Survey in Virginia, and among the first professionals to view the Stanford Museum, recalls worrying that he was driving out to "look at some squiggles on a rock."

Instead, he found a modern-day Edward Hitchcock, who had collected 20,000 dinosaur tracks from the Connecticut River valley starting in 1836, before the word "dinosaur" had even been coined.

Stanford views the collection "as his scientific legacy. If he had another personality, it would be on eBay and we wouldn't know about it," said Weems.

I ask Stanford if he can provide any insight into the nature of his talent, how he has spotted so many dinosaur tracks where no one ever had before.

He allows that, yes, he has exceptional visual pattern-recognition abilities. Then, slowing his usually-swift speech, he says, "My whole life, strange things have happened to me."

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Before Stanford's haul, the remains of just three or four species of dinosaurs – the number is in dispute -- were known in Maryland. He has added at least 14 types of dinosaurs and winged reptiles, and, just possibly, a stunningly large early mammal.

"Ray has footprints of dinosaurs we don't have bones for yet," said Matthew Carrano, curator of dinosaurs at the Smithsonian Institution. "It's astonishing."

These creatures thundered, skittered, and flapped their way across an ancient, boggy floodplain that later hardened into a geologic formation known as the Arundel Clay. This 112-million-year-old spine of bedrock runs from the southern tip of New Jersey south to Baltimore, then through Prince George's County – roughly paralleling I-95 – and into Virginia.

Stanford finds the pieces as "float." After heavy rains, fast water scours the bottoms and banks of streams, breaking up the substrate. Some of this geological wreckage gets hung up on sandbars and shorelines, where Stanford spots it.

The outlines of Stanford's tale are familiar to historians of science: He is the uncredentialed enthusiast, who, unaware of the boundaries that the high priests of a given field have staked out, naively stumbles outside those lines and into a great discovery.

"He's John the Baptist of Cretaceous fossil footprints. He's a national treasure," says Bakker, Steven Spielberg's dinosaur guy, whose bushy visage and wide-brimmed hat appear regularly on the Discovery Channel. "He's of the great tradition of the self-taught amateur who keeps on hunting for fossils despite rain and wind and official discouragement."

Oh yes, that: official discouragement.

Early in his dinosaur-collecting days, a prominent local dinosaur hunter hounded Ray, spread rumors that he had hauled in the footprints from out of state. The first time Stanford presented a track at a dinosaur enthusiast meeting, in 1998 in Philadelphia, a prominent German dinosaur tracker, Adolf Seilacher, stood up and publicly rejected Stanford's interpretation of the find. Further, Seilacher did not accept that it came from Maryland.

But now, 18 years after his first track, some 40 top academic paleontologists and ichnologists (track specialists) have toured the Stanford Museum and proclaimed its authenticity.

One of Stanford's fossils anchors an exhibit at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History. He has co-authored three scientific journal articles. Inside the front of his copy of "Dinosaurs of the East Coast," the author, Weishampel, wrote in black sharpie pen, "Now that I've met you, this book is in for a big rewrite."

For Ray Stanford, none of that is enough.

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Saving the footprints will always be an urgent rescue operation, of both the footprints and his reputation. He quails at the thought of the footprints washing into the Potomac and out to sea.

"I can't quit," he says. "Who else will do this?" In 2004, a near-fatal heart attack stole 15 percent of Stanford's heart; he worries his time may be short. "I have to dedicate whatever I've got left to doing this."

The three tons of rock in his house will need to go somewhere else eventually. It's tough for Stanford to think about.

"People keep telling me I should give it to the Smithsonian," he says.

There are other suitors, chief among them Lockley's Dinosaur Tracks Museum at the University of Colorado-Denver.

In 2004 and 2007, Lockley, Weems and Stanford finally put the collection in the scientific record, publishing two overviews of some 300 of the tracks in the journal *Ichnos*.

So, the esteemed Dr. Lockley, what should Ray do with his collection?

"He's understandably – I won't say he's possessive – but he wants to keep it all together and ruminate on it," Lockley said. "I'm sure he agrees that in the long run it should go to a proper institution." I can almost hear him salivate. "I would hope it would be us."

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On Saturday, Dec. 1, 2007, Stanford went dinosaur tracking, just like he had a thousand times before. He gathered his plastic bags and drove to the high school where he took me tracking last fall. It was senior picture day. Forty degrees and bright. Cloudless.

As Stanford crossed the parking lot, he looked up. And there, beyond two rows of parked cars, above the three-story brick building, he made the day's first discovery.

It was a shuttlecraft docking to a mothership. Stanford snapped three pictures of it.

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This is where the story itself takes a sharp left turn. I'm back at the Stanford Museum, up in Ray's second-floor office. It's musty, the shades are drawn. Small dinosaur teeth, slices of meteorites and sparkly minerals, back issues of *Science News* and *Archaeology* magazine cover every surface. A dusty, gray E.T. the Extraterrestrial alarm clock presides from atop a cabinet. "UFO Landing Area," reads a small green sign on a shelf.

Now we arrive at Ray's original obsession, the one that stretches back to his childhood. Long before the first dinosaur track hopped into his life, Ray Stanford chased UFOs, a term he professes to dislike. "It's so loaded," he says. He prefers "Anomalous Aerial Objects," or AAOs.

"I'd rather track AAOs than dinosaurs any day," he says. "That's my streambed in the sky."

On his computer, Ray is showing me one of the pictures from that day in 2007. "Just look at that!" he exclaims. "It was moving up, and then zoom."

Two white smudges appear to hover over the school. Or maybe it's one T-shaped smudge. The horizontal smudge is tube-like but blobby, like a sausage losing its filling. No details are discernable. Beneath it, a smaller, fuzzy white vertical object noses the tube. That, says Ray, is the shuttlecraft coming in to dock.

This is not the *Battlestar Galactica*.

Still, it's a hint of something. Could be a cloud, except I've never seen one that shape. Besides, the rest of the sky is blue and weather records confirm it was a clear day.

It is only now, here, after half-day tours of the Stanford Museum and trips to the creek, after months of emails and phone calls, that Ray Stanford reveals to me his life's purpose: The dinosaurs? Well, sure, Ray Stanford just happened to blow open a wormhole 112 million years deep into a hitherto unseen era of fantastic beasts roaming the Earth. Yeah, he did that. But that's small stuff. This, the secret of these craft, how they move, who they carry, *the occupants* – that's what drives Ray Stanford.

His first sighting, in the summer of 1954, in Corpus Christi, Tex., where he grew up, made the cover of *Fate* magazine. A framed cover of the May 1956 issue hangs on his office wall: It's a dramatic illustration of an outsized flying saucer, glowing white, with three trenchcoated police officers standing beneath it, looking up. TEXAS SAUCER CONTACT, blares the cover line. POLICE AFFADAVITS!

"You can imagine when this came in the mail," says Ray, meaning the magazine. "What a thrill for a 16-year-old."

Ray details the encounter for half an hour. He admits that the cover drawing is a gross exaggeration; the saucer was neither that large nor that bright.

At key points in the story, Ray rolls up his right sleeve and sticks out his arm. "I've got goosebumps, my arm hair is standing up!" I lean in to look. He does; it is.

Ray came of age when UFOs were booming. The first flap occurred in 1947, when Ray was 9. At 15, in 1953, Ray devoured George Adamski's pulpy alien-contact tract, "Flying Saucers Have Landed," and began corresponding with Adamski.

Later, a photo Adamski took of a flying saucer was revealed as a cheap hoax, a garbage can lid with a light bulb.

Ray Stanford still stings from that deceit. He spits out Adamski's name like a hard seed.

Ray built rockets and won first prize in the 1955 Texas state physics competition.

Despite obvious talent, Ray never managed college. Instead, he moved to Austin and became a psychic. Whoever came up with the slogan "Keep Austin Weird" may have had Ray Stanford in mind.

From 1961 to 1979, Ray led a group of paranormal explorers called the Association for the Understanding of Man; he charged \$35 for psychic readings. The group sold recordings and transcripts of Ray's readings, in which he made contact with "Brothers," who offered their opinion on the Fatima miracle, the nature of Christ, or whether the read-ee had a dread disease or was carrying a boy or a girl in her womb.

Two big donors – an Austin real estate mogul and a Texas oilman -- helped launched Stanford's next

venture in 1973, the one that catapulted him to middling media glory: Project Starlight International.

Donning white jump suits and green goggles, Ray and his merry band of alien hunters built a landing pad in the hills west of Austin, ringed with spotlights that flashed odd rhythms. A chunky device shot a laser into the sky that transmitted, via pulses, messages of peace. It was totally disco.

Ray would wave at the sky and shout, "LAND OVER HERE. WE HAVE NO WEAPONS."

Big VHS video cameras, magnetometers and gravimeters were at the ready to document any fly-bys or landings.

This was a time in America when UFOs made the nightly news. Saucers over Phoenix. Cigars buzzing Buffalo. A streaking flash in Utah. The late 1960s to the late 1970s saw a fevered peak of the UFO craze, and Ray Stanford was smack in the middle of it. No, he never became as famous as Barney and Betty Hill, whose alien abduction story launched a Hollywood-mythological-industrial complex that climaxed during the nine-year run of the "X-Files." But, Ray Stanford worked the media and clawed at the center of the fray.

He made the Phil Donohue show.

He chased a lot of UFOs. Er, AAOs. He documented it all. He's showing me everything. For seven hours, Ray Stanford reels through 437 Powerpoint slides. That's part 1.

Deltoids. Shuttlecraft. Saucers. Motherships. Beam-ahead propulsion. Time-shifting. Dimensional leaps. Military men. "Bird colonels." Air Force guys, NASA labs, cover-ups, a green glass globe on the moon.

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It would take Fox Mulder another decade to chase it all down.

Toward the end -- it's nearly 6 p.m.! -- I'm feeling faint from lack of food and drink. Reverting to his less preferred term, Ray says, "This is as good evidence you'll see for UFOs anywhere."

I want to believe. I do.

"The universe is so damn strange."

"The aliens, are they trying to create religion?"

"I'm not saying this is true, but maybe we're just something for them to play with."

"It may be a tourist operation? This could be Disneyland for them!"

Ray says he has movies of the craft that he took from airplane windows. I ask to see them. He demurs.

He does, however, lead me upstairs, to the third floor. And there it is -- the UFO detector, the magnetometer, a chunky blue box on a coffee table. Ray switches it on and it emits a long, piercing tone.

"Now watch," says Ray. "A UFO flies by!" He whips a small disc containing a magnet across the room. The beeping trills, a fast stutter.

Ray points out a window. On Nov. 14, 1988, Ray heard the trill, the UFO alarm. He ran upstairs and looked outside. It was a mothership!

Later, he emails me a photo he took of it.

It's another blobby sausage tube thingy.

Ray Stanford more than believes. He's invested his life in documenting UFOs. And perhaps, I think, just maybe, his wildest notions lie a nanometer inside the realm of possibility. A city in space, green globes on the moon, astronauts conversing with aliens -- much of it is easy to debunk. But who am I to say that time-stopping, dimension-hopping aliens do not exist? A negative cannot be proven.

And that, of course, is the crux of why the alien hypothesis will never die. There's no way to exclude all possibility. *Anything can and might happen.* An enormous pterosaur may have landed in your backyard 112 million years ago -- and you, *you* -- dig up the handprint! I mean, what are the blazin' chances?

So the aliens live on, in Ray's mind, and on his computer, and maybe, who knows, maybe up there, too. I am in no position to say they don't.

Young, the kid who ran around the landing pad, says, "You can wound him deeply by saying he's a crackpot. Lots of people give Ray a hard time but he's the real deal - a maverick, an eccentric gentleman, just a supercool guy. He is one hundred percent what you see is what you get. He's a genuine dude. He is doing it because he wants to learn the truth, not to sell copies of the DVD. There is no DVD. He's just that way."

Young pauses, dramatically: Ray Stanford's theatrical impulses living on in another generation. "He's a searcher."

I can't help but think that, like all of life's profundity's, the lesson Ray Stanford has to offer the world may be a simple one: Keep your eyes open. Keep looking. A hidden world, a universe trapped in time, a realm so foreign and bizarre as to stretch all credulity, may be lurking just beneath your feet -- or, maybe, just maybe, winging over your head.

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For the record: Ray's has an identical twin, Rex. Rex is now retired after a long career as a tenured professor at St. John's University in New York. He was a professor of parapsychology. He studied ESP.

Ray's wife, Sheila? She works at NASA, as an information specialist.

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Great ferns and bushy-topped, flaky-barked cycad trees swayed. Flowers had recently evolved, sprinkling petals under the canopy. The global supercontinent Pangea was breaking up, spreading apart, so much heavy rock adrift. North America, as a shape, was just coming into focus, bisected by a giant seaway. The air carried more carbon dioxide and less oxygen than it does now. Any human - or alien - teleported here might have found the breathing tough.

Dinosaur diversity was speeding toward its peak. After more than 100 million years – that's more than 500 times longer than humans have walked this Earth – a great flourishing of dinosaurs both enormous and small, predator and prey, had spread into every corner of the warm, wet Earth, from Alaska to Antarctica.

Among the profusion, low-slung armored beasts, built like mini-tanks with bristling spikes, browsed the low plants. They were the nodosaurs, the most famous – ask any 8-year-old - being club-tailed ankylosaurus.

One such nodosaur, a female, dropped a clutch of eggs near what is now Paint Branch Creek. The nest flooded. When one of the brood hatched, it drowned almost immediately, on its back. Minerals leached into its tiny bones, hardening into a fossil. Sediment layered on top, preserving the death nest.

Eons later, a herd of an entirely different sort - upright, gangly, and mostly hairless - dropped a Taco Bell outlet almost on top of it.

At 1:15 p.m. on Superbowl Sunday, 1997, Ray Stanford spied this "Cretaceous roadkill," as he later dubbed it. "I could see this curved cavity, filled with silt," he said. Sheila implored him to leave it. It wasn't a dinosaur footprint. "We've got enough rocks at home," she said. Stanford dug it out anyway, bagged it, and put it in his backpack.

He took it home and set it above the stove, where the slanted afternoon light hit it. Almost as big as a dinner plate, but thicker, most of the stone was red. But one pocket, the cavity, was lighter, almost tan. Stanford noticed unusual shadows in there. He grabbed a soft brush and whisked out the rest of the silt. Ribs. He saw little ribs. "We've got a small dinosaur here!" he called to Sheila.

And so they did. The couple had found hundreds of dinosaur footprints almost literally in their backyard. But never had they found a fossilized dinosaur.

This was special.

Stanford noticed a cross-hatched pattern on the fossil's head. After studying a reference book, he decided the pattern marked it as a nodosaur.

Last September, 14 years after the discovery, Stanford, Weishampel, and another Hopkins paleontologist, Valerie DeLeon, finally published a full description of the fossil in the *Journal of Paleontology*. They dubbed this new species *Propanoplosaurus marylandicus*, which Stanford pronounces with a great bouncy flourish. It's the only hatchling nodosaur found anywhere, and one of the only known hatchling dinosaurs of any kind, two points Stanford eagerly makes.

Dinosaur hunters tend to search for big bones, big footprints: Bigger is better. So they miss the little ones.

Stanford was reluctant to part with the find, as he is with all of them. But after lobbying by the Smithsonian's Carrano, he donated the nodosaur to the Smithsonian.

It now sits under lights, in the "Dinosaurs in Your Backyard" exhibit in the National Museum of Natural History. "It's one of our star pieces," says Carrano. "We learned more about these animals than we had in 150 years." Even when lit, the curve of the h

\*\*\*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.

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.

*vastagb@washpost.com*