

Devonian Fact File

Ichthyostega

This ancient amphibian was one of the first four-footed creatures to walk on land. It reached a huge size for the time – some individuals that have been found are over 1.5 metres long.

A body for land or water?

It is not known whether *Ichthyostega* spent all of its time on land, or whether it spent most of its time in shallow rivers and lakes, coming out of the water to feed on the new land plants beginning to develop or to bask in the sunshine. It has a very odd skeleton, where the front legs are robust and could easily have supported its weight, but the back legs look quite delicate in comparison. Maybe it dragged the back half of its body along when on land, and used it as a paddle – like a fish – when in the water.

The rest of the skeleton is unusual as well. Along with delicate back legs, *Ichthyostega* also had a tail that appeared to still have a fin around the edge of it – some fossils have even preserved the tiny cartilage rays that would have supported the edge of the fin, as they still do today in fish. The vertebrae in the spine are only loosely connected – very good for giving flexibility in water, but not so good for giving support when on land. Strangest of all, the ribs are very thick, and some of them even overlap each other. Was this an adaptation to support the front of the body and prevent the lungs from collapsing when it ventured up onto land?

Fascinating fingers

Ichthyostega had one last mystery – quite literally up its sleeve! For a long time it had been thought that all land animals had five fingers or toes, just like us, that may become adapted in some circumstances, but can still be counted. When the rock covering parts of the *Ichthyostega* skeletons was cleaned away, it was discovered that they had not five, not six, but seven digits on each foot. It seems the development of limbs from fins is much more complicated than we thought at first.

See also: **Acanthostega**