

MEGALONYX

MEGALONYX (GREAT CLAW) IS THE GREEK NAME FOR ANOTHER OF THE GIANT GROUND SLOTHS. THE NAME WAS PROPOSED BY THOMAS JEFFERSON IN 1797, BASED ON FOSSIL SPECIMENS FOUND IN A CAVE IN WEST VIRGINIA. MEGALONYX JEFFERSONII, OF THE FAMILY MEGALONYCHIDAE, WAS A LARGE, HEAVILY BUILT ANIMAL ABOUT 8 TO 10 FEET (2.53 M) LONG. ITS MAXIMUM WEIGHT MAY HAVE BEEN AS MUCH AS 800 POUNDS. THIS IS MEDIUM-SIZED AMONG THE GIANT GROUND SLOTHS.

LIKE OTHER GROUND SLOTHS IT HAD A BLUNT SNOUT, MASSIVE JAW AND LARGE, PEG-LIKE TEETH. THE HIND LIMBS WERE PLANTIGRADE (FLAT-FOOTED) AND THIS, ALONG WITH ITS STOUT TAIL, ALLOWED IT TO REAR UP INTO A SEMI-ERECT POSITION TO FEED ON TREE LEAVES. THE FORELIMBS HAD THREE HIGHLY DEVELOPED CLAWS THAT WERE PROBABLY USED TO STRIP LEAVES AND TEAR OFF BRANCHES.

M. JEFFERSONII WAS APPARENTLY THE MOST WIDE-RANGING GIANT GROUND SLOTH. FOSSILS ARE KNOWN FROM MANY PLEISTOCENE SITES IN THE UNITED STATES, INCLUDING MOST OF THE STATES EAST OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS AS WELL AS ALONG THE WEST COAST. IT WAS THE ONLY GROUND SLOTH TO RANGE AS FAR NORTH AS THE PRESENT-DAY YUKON AND ALASKA.

IN 2010, THE FIRST SPECIMEN EVER FOUND IN COLORADO WAS DISCOVERED AT THE ZIEGLER RESERVOIR SITE NEAR SNOWMASS VILLAGE (IN THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS AT AN ELEVATION OF 8,874 FEET). WHY THE GIANT GROUND SLOTH, AS WITH OTHER MEGAFAUNA OF THE MIOCENE EPOCH, GREW TO SUCH ENORMOUS SIZE IS A MYSTERY.

BESIDES THEIR BULK, THESE SLOTHS WERE DISTINGUISHED BY THEIR SIGNIFICANTLY LONGER FRONT THAN HIND LEGS, A CLUE THAT THEY USED THEIR LONG FRONT CLAWS TO ROPE IN COPIOUS AMOUNTS OF VEGETATION. AS BIG AS IT WAS, THOUGH, MEGALONYX WAS A MERE PUP COMPARED TO THE TRULY GIANT MEGATHERIUM.

MEGATHERIUM AND MEGALONYX ARE DISTANT RELATIVES OF TODAY'S MODERN TWO- AND THREE-FINGERED SLOTHS THAT LIVE IN CENTRAL AND SOUTH AMERICA.