

## **Trapped in Tar**

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Thousands of years ago, near the end of the ice age, Los Angeles was not a nice place to be. How do we know that? Because the bodies of hundreds of ice age creatures are preserved there, caught in sticky tar that sucked them down. This tar pit has a name, in fact. It is called the La Brea Tar Pits, and is one of the most infamous of all tar pits.

In southern California, large deposits of oil lie just beneath the surface. This is not the oil you put straight into your car. This is raw oil, and it is heated by the magma beneath it until it is bubbling. It obviously searches for ways to escape, finds cracks in the surface, and bubbles up to create pools of tar. Sometimes these pools of tar are covered by water, making them that much harder to see. When an unlucky creature steps into a tar pit, WHOOMP! That poor creature sinks into the tar and isn't found until thousands of years later, when paleontologists dig it up. They get very excited about this (paleontologists have a rather sick sense of what's exciting), and see what else they can find.

The La Brea Tar Pits were discovered when people were digging out the tar to use it, about one hundred years ago. They probably weren't expecting to come face to face with a woolly mammoth! Scientists have since removed millions of bones, and I say bones because the creatures are usually discovered with their bones all jumbled up. Rearranging them is like finishing a really hard jig-saw puzzle. A large, ancient jig-saw puzzle. The fossils removed from the La Brea Tar Pits have given insight into the lives and deaths (but mostly deaths) of hundreds of ice age creatures.