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Helicopter gives stegosaurus a lift into the modern world

Linda Carlson
For the Daily Record

CAFFON CITY — A 7-ton, plaster-jacketed stegosaurus skeleton was successfully airlifted Friday from a steep canyon in the Garden Park Fossil Area.

A 35,000-pound Chinook helicopter, operated by an expert crew from Fort Carson and piloted by Ron Noga, carefully hoisted the 15,000-pound load using a 100-foot steel sling, rigged by Sgt. Floyd.

"The operation went even more smoothly than we had hoped," said crew member Robert Wilson. "We had no concerns about the scaffolding, but it was hard to know how the wash from the rotors would affect the load in the narrow canyon. It certainly helped to have the 100-foot cable, and that the mass of the rock, plaster and lumber was high — if it had weighed less, then it might have swayed or rotated."

Friday's airlift was the culmination of several weeks of excavation and plaster-jacketing by a field crew from the Denver Museum of Natural History, followed by more than a week of skilled mining under the skeleton, the building of a lumber and steel support and other preparative work by Bill Nezak and his team from Colorado Quarries.

Bryan Small, discoverer of the stegosaurus and director of the excavation, Small's fiancee, archaeologist Yan Min, and Ken

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as the huge package containing Small's discovery was raised from its 145-million-year-old resting place.

"This has been a lot of work, but it is most exciting to see the jacket come out intact. I must say that relief is the only thing I feel now," said Small.

BLM spokesman Dan Grenard said the entire project has demonstrated a unique partnership of the Denver Museum of Natural History, the Garden Park Paleontology Society, the Bureau of Land Management, Fort Carson, Colorado Quarries and a host of local businesses and individuals.

"All of them made significant contributions," he said. "Without their collective efforts, the project could not have been completed so successfully."

The next trip for the rock-embedded skeleton is to temporary safe-storage in Fremont County.

"The skeleton is going to take about three years of skilled paleontological preparation," Grenard said. "We hope to have the opportunity for the public to view

stegosaurus will be put on permanent exhibit, we hope here at the National Visitor Center. In any event, it will remain in Colorado, unlike so many of the splendid fossils found here in the past."

Tremendous local interest has been voiced in support of the stegosaurus being allowed to remain here because the Garden Park Fossil Area has supplied so much for the world in dinosaur knowledge over the last 120 yrs.

"There is preliminary discussion of preparative work on this specimen being performed under a co-operative management agreement between the BLM, Denver Museum and GPPS. We are hoping that the stegosaurus specimen and accompanying exhibits can be accommodated somewhere at the proposed River Station project, in downtown Cafton City," said Grenard.

Cafton City Mayor Roger Jenson, watching the preparations for the airlift, agreed.

"This is a great boost for the visitor center. To have this dinosaur on public display will be a wonderful tourist attraction — it is truly a unique asset for our community."

The River Station location would serve as an interim display facility while the National Visitor Center in Garden Park is being built, Grenard said.

According to GPPS President Donna Engard, the Visitor Center proposal is nearing completion of the Master Planning stage, which



A 35,000-pound Chinook helicopter, operated by an expert crew from Fort Carson and piloted by Ron Hegg, carefully moves a 7-ton, plaster-jacketed stegosaurus skeleton (lifted out of a steep canyon in the Garden Park Fossil Area) onto a Colorado Gurtner truck for transport into Canon City.