

# Old chalk mine is treasure-trove of animal burrows



A Lincoln group tours the Happy Jack Chalk Mine near Scotia. The mine, which closed in 1946, has a honeycomb of fossilized animal burrows.



JEFF DEIERMANN/THE WORLD-HERALD

A guide traces the outline of a fossilized animal burrow in the Happy Jack Chalk Mine near Scotia. About 460 feet of the mine's tunnels, illuminated by electric lights, are open for tours.

■ The network, which is at least 6 million years old, is "spectacular," a geologist says.

By JULIA MCCORD  
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

SCOTIA, Neb. — It's hard to explain the fascination that underground mines and caves exert over some people.

Maybe it's because they are cool, dark and mysterious, and you never quite know what lies hidden in their depths.

University of Nebraska research geologist Matt Joeckel knew he might find pieces of the past in Happy Jack Chalk Mine when he went there last fall to update the mine's educational materials.

Once he was inside and new lighting was switched on, what

he saw took his breath away. "My God!" he exclaimed. "There's giant burrows."

Embedded in the walls of the mine was a honeycomb of perfectly preserved fossilized animal burrows. Joeckel estimates they are at least 6 million to 12 million years old.

Nebraska is already famous for its fossils.

■ The Agate Fossil Beds in Sioux County contain one of the world's greatest concentration of fossil mammals from the Miocene Epoch and the renowned "Demonelix" — the corkscrew-shaped fossil rodent burrows.

■ The Ashfall Fossil Beds in

northern Antelope County have yielded hundreds of complete skeletons of barrel-bodied rhinos, three-toed horses and other prehistoric animals that were buried in volcanic ash.

■ In Jefferson County, 19 dinosaur tracks were spotted on a farm during a Fourth of July picnic in 1999. The tracks confirmed what scientists had long suspected but had been unable to prove — that dinosaurs inhabited this area about 95 million years ago.

The Happy Jack burrows rank right up with the rest, Joeckel said.

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