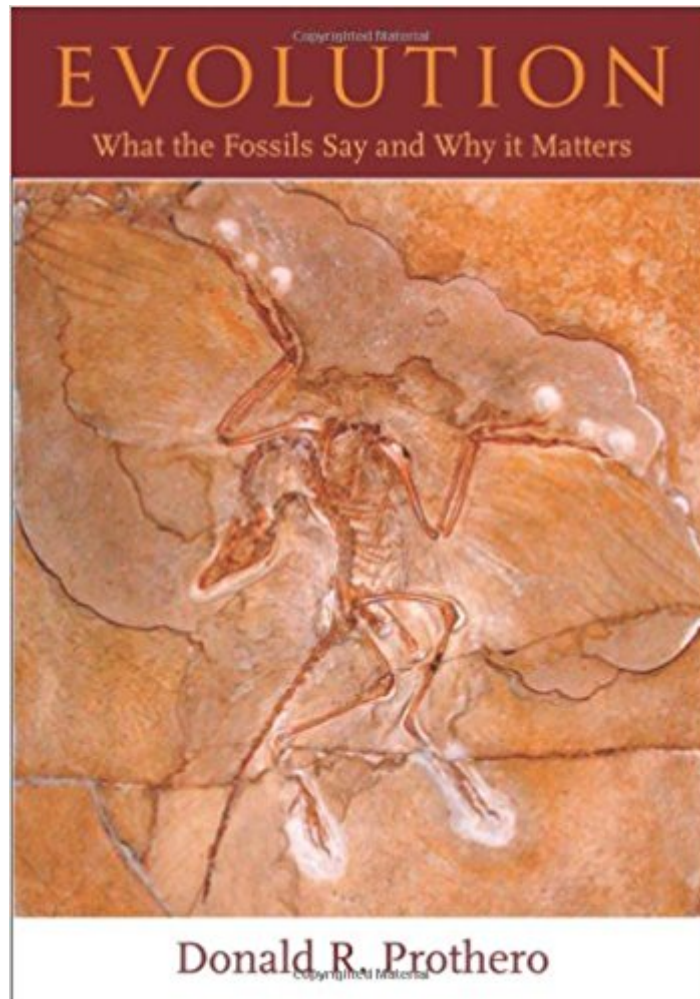


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Evolution: What The Fossils Say And Why It Matters



Synopsis

Over the past twenty years, paleontologists have made tremendous fossil discoveries, including fossils that mark the growth of whales, manatees, and seals from land mammals and the origins of elephants, horses, and rhinos. Today there exists an amazing diversity of fossil humans, suggesting we walked upright long before we acquired large brains, and new evidence from molecules that enable scientists to decipher the tree of life as never before. The fossil record is now one of the strongest lines of evidence for evolution. In this engaging and richly illustrated book, Donald R. Prothero weaves an entertaining though intellectually rigorous history out of the transitional forms and series that dot the fossil record. Beginning with a brief discussion of the nature of science and the "monkey business of creationism," Prothero tackles subjects ranging from flood geology and rock dating to neo-Darwinism and macroevolution. He covers the ingredients of the primordial soup, the effects of communal living, invertebrate transitions, the development of the backbone, the reign of the dinosaurs, the mammalian explosion, and the leap from chimpanzee to human. Prothero pays particular attention to the recent discovery of "missing links" that complete the fossil timeline and details the debate between biologists over the mechanisms driving the evolutionary process. Evolution is an absorbing combination of firsthand observation, scientific discovery, and trenchant analysis. With the teaching of evolution still an issue, there couldn't be a better moment for a book clarifying the nature and value of fossil evidence. Widely recognized as a leading expert in his field, Prothero demonstrates that the transformation of life on this planet is far more awe inspiring than the narrow view of extremists.

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Customer Reviews

A cursory look at the science section of any bookstore will reveal a current glut of books about evolution and creationism, some works being excellent reviews of the debate while others are not worth the paper they're printed on. Prothero's book falls into the former category, being the best popular resource I've come across to date about evolution and the evidence from the fossil record. One of the most important (and appealing) aspects of Prothero's book is that he takes a "gloves off" approach to creationism, not waffling on the subject like other recent works (i.e. Whitham's "Where Darwin Meets the Bible"). This more up-front tone allows Prothero to look at the claims of creationists and ID advocates in depth, his excellent review of the formation of the Grand Canyon (the only one I know of in the popular literature) being a fantastic example of melding positive scientific evidence with a thorough refutation of pseudoscience. Still, while Prothero takes a more aggressive approach than other recent authors the book is hardly a long diatribe against creationism; Prothero combines personal experience debating YEC stalwarts like Duane Gish with his extensive knowledge of paleontology, geology, and evolution, delivering a successful one-two punch that is informative on more than just one level. If I have any complaint about this book, it is only that some of the sections require a little more fine-tuning or focus to bring out the important evolutionary trends. The chapter on Dinosaurs is a good example of this; while Prothero provides a good review of important fossil finds, the origin and diversification of sauropod dinosaurs, ceratopsians, and dromeosaurs could use some further clarification as there is certainly more to the story than was given room for discussion.

"Evolution: What the Fossils Say and Why It Matters" is the best book I have ever read emphasizing the importance of the fossil record as the indisputable "facts" of biological evolution, documenting the history of life on Planet Earth. Its publication is long overdue, and yet, remains quite timely, when major publishers like Simon and Schuster have mistakenly published sterling examples of mendacious intellectual pornography like Michael Behe's "The Edge of Evolution". Indeed, Prothero's book ought to be viewed as the one that demolishes forever, Behe's inane assertion (which he had expressed in a private e-mail reply to me that I've posted elsewhere here at .com) that the fossil record is irrelevant, claiming that the "truth" will be found only at the molecular level (More than anything else, that terse comment from Behe merely demonstrates his profound ignorance and understanding of the fossil record. Incidentally, Prothero refers to Behe as an

"Intelligent Design creationist"). It also demonstrates the absurdity of creationist claims from the likes of Behe's Discovery Institute colleagues Paul Nelson, Jonathan Wells, and Geoffrey Simmons, among others, that the fossil record does not have "transitional forms". Indeed, as Prothero clearly shows his readers again and again, the history of life on our planet is replete with "transitional forms" documenting the evolutionary transitions from fish to tetrapods, from terrestrial carnivorous dinosaurs to flying birds, from primitive ungulate mammals to whales, and from apes to mankind. He also stresses the relevance of the fossil record to other aspects of evolutionary biology, noting its relevance with respect to molecular - as well as comparative anatomical - data.

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