



Columbian Mammoth



Columbian Mammoth / Mammuthus columbi (NPS Photo)

Mammoth is one of the most well-known prehistoric mammals. To many people, these giant, furry ancestors of the elephant practically embody the Ice Age. But did you know there was more than one kind of mammoth?

In fact, during the Pleistocene epoch, several types of mammoths walked the earth at one time or another. Some of these mammoths even made their way through White Sands, back when this area was a large lake called Lake Otero. Their footprints now make up part of our Pleistocene trackway. The mammoths here at White Sands were Columbian mammoths.

The Columbian mammoth (*Mammuthus columbi*) first showed up in North America about one million years ago. It evolved from an earlier mammoth species that had crossed into North America early in the Pleistocene epoch. Just who exactly this ancestor was is still debated; different sources report southern, imperial, or steppe mammoths as the possible culprit. Regardless of its family history, the Columbian mammoth quickly established itself in North America, migrating throughout almost the

entire continent. Its range stretched from Canada all the way down to Nicaragua and Honduras.

One of the largest mammoths of its time, the Columbian mammoth stood up to 14 feet (over four meters) tall at the shoulder, 13 to 15 feet (4-4.5 meters) long, and possibly weighed in at a massive 18,000 to 22,000 pounds (8,000-10,000 kilograms)! It also boasted large tusks up to 16 feet (almost five meters) long. Other than size, the major difference between the two mammoths was hair. While the woolly mammoth was named for its thick coat, the Columbian mammoth probably did not have much hair. Its home in North America was generally warmer than the woolly mammoth's homeland of Eurasia, so it did not need as much hair to stay warm.

The Columbian mammoth did share some similarities with modern elephants. They may have lived in herds like elephants, as some fossil

sites suggest. Both mammoths and elephants also share similar ridged teeth, good for chewing plants. These teeth grow in sets, with more sets of teeth growing in as the elephant or mammoth ages. From this scientists have estimated the Columbian mammoth could live up to 70 or 80 years old. The ridged teeth also fit with the mammoth's diet, which appears to have been grasses, sedges, and brush with some trees and woody plants. Like modern elephants, mammoths would have had to eat a lot of this food each day to fuel their enormous bodies. Columbian mammoths likely spent up to 16 to 18 hours a day eating, consuming up to 150,000 calories and hundreds of pounds a food each day!

