Texas Memorial Museum hosts annual Identification Day
By Megan Fee

Sixty-five million years ago, the Texas pterosaur soared over West Texas with a wingspan of 36 feet. Sunday, its reconstructed skeleton towered over visitors and experts sharing their passion for fossils at the Texas Memorial Museum in Austin.

Families, students, and individuals crowded into the museum's Great Hall Sept. 22 for Identification Day, an opportunity for the public to have their rocks, bones and other natural artifacts examined by scientists. The event was part of Austin Museum Day, an annual celebration that opens over 30 Austin museums to the public for free.

"This year we've had a great start… within the first 50 minutes, not even an hour, we had over 300 people in the door," said Pamela Owen, associate director of the Texas Memorial Museum and organizer of the event. She has been with the museum full time for 19 out of the last 20 years Identification Day has been held.

"A lot of the fossils that are being brought in are from the cretaceous period, so they're roughly 100 million years old," said Owen, describing the excitement many visitors experience when they speak one-on-one with an expert about their specimen.

Owen, whose personal research focuses on vertebrates as well as ice age mammals, explained that many of the artifacts brought in turn out to be bones and teeth of animals that were recently alive, like raccoons, opossum, and deer. People also often bring in limestone, mistaking its weathering from water for the anatomical features of a fossil or skull.

The fascination some of the visitors experienced was shared by many of the experts as well, including geologist Alan Cherepon, who said he found sharing his knowledge with the public to be very rewarding.

"Two guys brought in what they think are meteorites, and very well could be," Cherepon said as he shined a blacklight on a fluorescent rock sitting beside him. "You just get to see such strange rocks and minerals that you don't get to see every day."

Cherepon, long-time member and former president of the Austin Gem and Mineral Society, specializes in fluorescents, and has worked recently with ancient volcanic areas at Pilot Knob in Austin.

Another expert at the event, Chris Sagebiel, identified fossil vertebrates at his table. Sagebiel said he identified mostly domestic animal fossils, but also recognized an ancient sea turtle, a modern sea turtle, and a stromatolite, which is an “unusual fossil algae.”

“How can you not like your job when there’s a bunch of kids that come up and are excited to talk to you?” Sagebiel said with a smile.

Sagebiel and many of the experts have dedicated a lifetime to mastering their craft, but some others at the event had far fewer years of experience.

“I’m just really excited to see what my fossils are,” said 9-year-old Kasper Guth, dubbed the “dinosaur expert” by his mother. Guth had been patiently waiting to have the specimens that he and his uncle found examined by the experts. The hopeful future longhorn considered the museum his favorite spot on campus.

“Especially with families, if you have kids that are interested in the sciences, here’s a chance to meet a real live paleontologist, or an archeologist, or a geologist,” Owen said. She emphasized that visitors didn’t have to bring something in to have had the opportunity to chat with the experts.

And if the love for archaeology shared at Identification Day was not bound by age, it most certainly was not bound by distance.

As Eduardo Vidili looked longingly at the museum's 250-pound amethyst quartz geode, that like him, is from Brazil, he couldn’t help but reflect on his time in Austin. Vidili is studying at UT for one year in pursuit of a doctorate in music. He read about the event several weeks ago and has been looking forward to it ever since.

Although the event only lasted from 1-5 p.m., Owen said she hopes the lessons learned will stick with visitors for years to come. Whether it’s getting outside, making connections to the world around them, or even thinking about deep time, Owen said the knowledge shared Sunday will have a lasting impact on curious explorers.

“It’s that connection that’s so important -- that we’re a part of a natural world, we’re not separate from it,” Owen said. “I think that coming here is a reminder of that.”