

OVERVIEW OF MAZON CREEK FOSSILS

The fossil-bearing ironstone concretions (or nodules) found at the Mazonia-Braidwood Fish and Wildlife Area are world famous. Paleontologists consider this fossil deposit to be one of the world's most important fossil deposits. The plants and animals found in the nodules lived about 300 millions years ago (during a time known as the "Coal Age"). The fossils provide a wonderful glimpse of the plants and animals that lived during that time in what is now Illinois.

The area that is now the Mazonia-Braidwood SFWA was very different 300 millions years ago. The area was a mixture of low flat land, rivers, bays and sea. It was a massive delta building out into a shallow tropical sea. The land was covered with swamps (which would later form the coals mined in the area). The land and water teamed with life. When the plants and animals died, they were quickly buried at the bottom of the shallow bays. After they had been buried, ironstone nodules formed around the plants and animals, preserving them for us as Mazon Creek fossils.

These fossils are contained in concretions known as Mazon Creek Nodules. These are smooth, oval or round, generally rust-colored masses of rocks. They are formed in a layer of shale that covered the coal that was mined in the area. When the coal was mined, the shale and nodules (which was part of the overburden) were dumped into large spoil piles. As the nodules weather out of the piles, they can be collected.

The nodules contain a great variety of kinds of plant and animal fossils. Some of the kinds of plant fossils that are found in the nodules include fern fronds, bark of scale trees, and leaves of other coal age trees and shrubs. Animal fossils found in nodules include shrimp, worms, jellyfish, clams, and Tully Monsters. The Tully Monster, Illinois' State Fossil, is known only from these spectacular deposits.