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8 April 2022

Top honours for UCT expert on outstanding work for African dinosaur footprints

A fascinating research paper authored by University of Cape Town (UCT) academic Associate Professor Emese Bordy, which carefully studies a trackway made by a tiny, agile dinosaur almost 200 million years ago, offers an “evocative” reading of a time long ago.

“[Darting towards storm shelter: a minute dinosaur trackway from southern Africa](#)” makes for a captivating read. And we’re not the only ones who think so. For her exceptional work on this paper, Bordy has received the 2021 Outstanding Article Award from the *South African Journal of Science* (SAJS).

The paper was originally published on the SAJS platform in May 2021, and in March this year Bordy got word that she was named the recipient of the award. The award recognises outstanding work by African academics who seek to advance the SAJS’s mission: to publish high-quality research from the African continent or on African-relevant issues that are of interest to readers across disciplines, makes an important contribution to general knowledge and benefits academics, educators and the general public.

“Being recognised as an academic in this way for my work is a rare honour. Most academics do excellent work throughout their careers, but only a few are acknowledged. This is so because awards are in short supply for this group of high achievers. So, I am elated by this accolade,” Bordy said.

The discovery

Bordy said her research revealed that about 195 million years ago – during the Early Jurassic period, a tiny dinosaur raced across a muddy environment near Nqanqarhu in the Eastern Cape, at an estimated running speed of 12.5 km/h.

“We don’t know whether this bipedal carnivore was avoiding being eaten, chasing its own meal or darting across the landscape for another reason. But we do know – based on the tracks themselves – that it was running very fast,” Bordy said.

Incredibly, millions of years later, several of the dinosaur’s footprints remain intact. They form a short trackway and provide an exciting snapshot into the animal’s behaviour and the ground on which it ran.

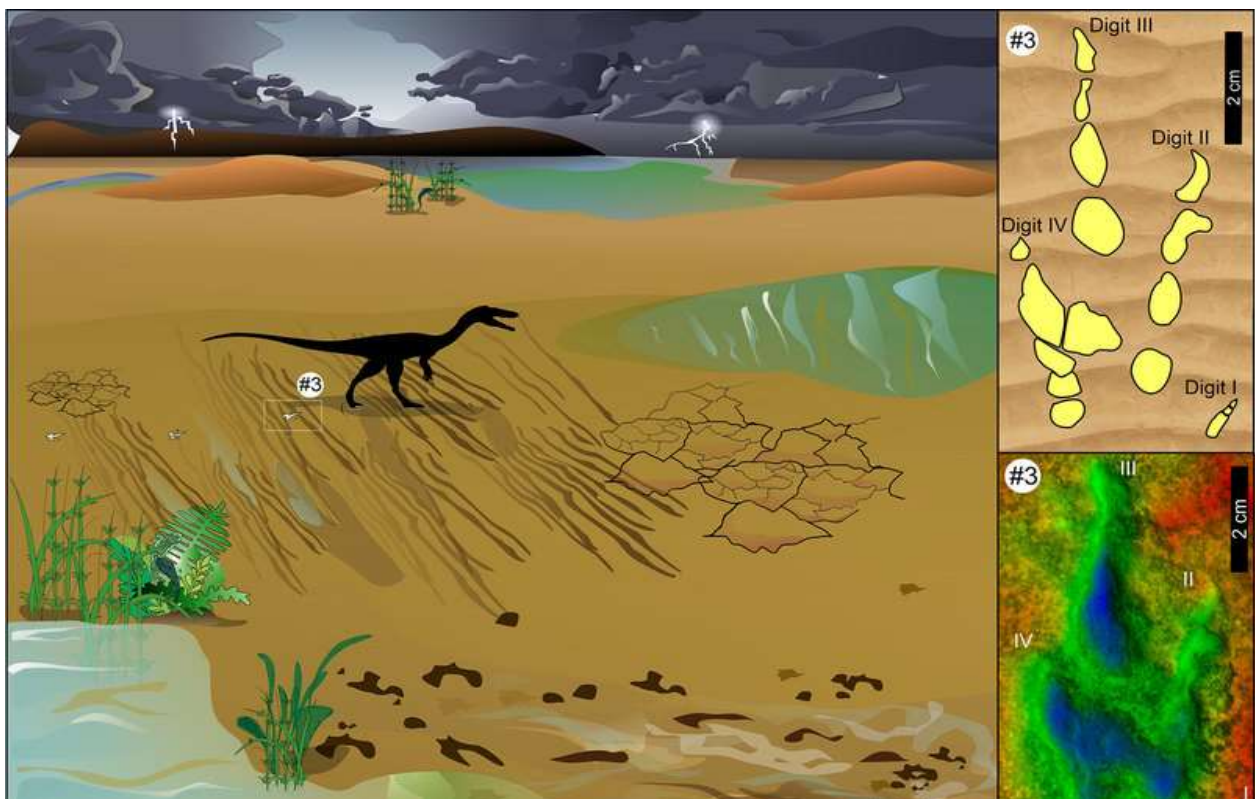
What the prints reveal

Judging by the tracks' characteristics, Bordy said the footprints are likely those of a coelophysoid dinosaur, which mirrored the size of a large rooster or a turkey. And when it dashed across the landscape, the carnivore ran through a pool of stagnant water.

"Wrinkles in the rock around each fossil footprint provide evidence of microbial mats – a common feature of fossil footprints throughout southern Africa, and something that might have enhanced the tracks' preservation," she said.

The dinosaur's footprints were located on the surface of a sandstone and show four claw impressions. But when she inspected the tracks closely, Bordy said it was evident that the dinosaur put most of its weight on just three of its toes.

Story by Niémah Davids, UCT News



Associate Professor Emese Bordy described her Outstanding Article Award as a rare honour.

Photo: Supplied

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