

When science writer Tom Hollon recently went digging for bones of Columbian mammoths on Earthwatch's Mammoth Graveyard project, he found himself remembering what it was like to feel young and invulnerable.

Hot Springs, South Dakota—What would I do if I were a young Columbian mammoth here in the first snows of winter, 26,000 years ago? Turn my tusks into snowshovels, pushing snow aside so I could eat something underneath? Or waltz over to the edge of the sinkhole, where heat from a thermal spring below melted the snow to reveal all my favorites—grass, pigweed, and ragweed? Would I be wise or lazy?

With thousands of years of palaeontological hindsight, I know lazy is the wrong answer. But back then, mighty as I would have been, I would have sauntered toward that pit like it was my personal salad bar.

Snowshoveling was for squares and squirts—females and infants. The sinkhole—the deathtrap—would hold no fear.

In my mind's eye I see how the pit would become my grave. Grazing near the edge, suddenly the ground gives way under my weight, or I slip on snow, and in I go, my fate sealed. Wet winter weather has turned the clay walls of the pit slippery, impossible to climb. Swallowed by the sinkhole, I will starve or drown.

As I dig in the pit where the remains of 52 mammoths have been found, I realize that thousands of mammoths must have grazed near this hole without harm. This thought underscores one astounding fact: Every mammoth that fell into this pit was male. Teeth measurements revealing their age show they mostly died young.

Thousands of towns have some sort of Dead Man's Curve. In evolutionary terms, these asphalt

deathtraps "select" for certain drivers. Most "selectees" are teenage boys and young men, the ones most likely to ignore the message that speed kills, to hear but not heed warnings about drinking and driving.

When I was a teenager, I had a heavy foot on the accelerator. One rainy Sunday afternoon I drove a '66 Ford Fairlane around a sharp curve at 70 miles an hour. From out of nowhere a stop sign appeared. Slamming on the brake with everything I had, I stopped, but not without spinning the car completely around. Here in Dead Mammoth's Pit, this dredged-up memory gives me a sense of kinship to these awesome animals.

I was lucky only to suffer embarrassment that day—my cousin, brother, and I could have been killed. I'd like to tell you that I learned my lesson, but the truth is that more years passed before I finally eased off the gas. Today it comforts me to hear my daughter complain that I drive like an old man. I just want to get there in one piece, I reply.

I did not expect to be moved when I came here, but I am. I am moved by the shared weakness—call it stupidity—of being young and male. A once-young human fool empathizes with once-young fools of the Ice Age. Amidst the bones of fallen giants, I reflect how lucky I was to learn about my own mortality without paying with my life.

Mammoth Site of Hot Springs, SD Inc.



Columbian mammoths like this one stolidly weathered icy weather and saber-toothed cats, but apparently proved vulnerable to teenage impulsiveness.