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Name: Bruhathkayosaurus (Greek for "huge-bodied lizard"); pronounced broo-HATH-kay-oh-SORE-us Habitat: Woodlands of India Historical Period: Late Cretaceous (70 million years ago) Size and Weight: Up to 150 feet long and 200 tons, if it really existed Diet: Plants Distinguishing Characteristics: Enormous size; long neck and tail Bruhathkayosaurus is one of those dinosaurs that comes with a lot of asterisks attached. When the remains of this animal were discovered in India, in the late 1980's, paleontologists thought they were dealing with an enormous theropod along the lines of the ten-ton Spinosaurus of northern Africa. On further examination, thought they were dealing with an enormous theropod along the lines of the ten-ton Spinosaurus of northern Africa. On further examination, thought they were dealing with an enormous theropod along the lines of the ten-ton Spinosaurus of northern Africa. the type fossil speculated that Bruhathkayosaurus was actually a titanosaur, the huge, armored descendants of the sauropods that roamed every continent on earth during the Cretaceous period. The trouble is, though, that the pieces of Bruthathkayosaurus that have been identified so far don't convincingly "add up" to a complete titanosaur; it's only classified as one because of its enormous size. For example, the supposed tibia (leg bone) of Bruhathkayosaurus was almost 30 percent bigger than that of the much-better-attested Argentinosaurus, meaning that if it really was a titanosaur it would have been by far the biggest dinosaur of all time--as much as 150 feet long from head to tail and 200 tons. There's a further complication, which is that the provenance of the "type specimen" of Bruhathkayosaurus is dubious at best. The team of researchers that unearthed this dinosaur left out some important details in their 1989 paper; for example, they included line drawings, but not actual photographs, of the recovered bones, and also didn't bother to point out any detailed "diagnostic characteristics" that would attest to Bruhathkayosaurus truly being a titanosaur. In fact, in the absence of hard evidence, some paleontologists believe that the alleged "bones" of Bruhathkayosaurus are actually pieces of petrified wood! For now, pending further fossil discoveries, Bruhathkayosaurus languishes in limbo, not quite a titanosaur and not quite the largest land-dwelling animal that ever lived. This isn't an unusual fate for recently discovered titanosaurs; pretty much the same can be said about Amphicoelias and Dreadnoughtus, two other violently disputed contenders for the title of Biggest Dinosaur Ever. Name: Abelisaurus (Greek for "Abel's lizard"); pronounced AY-bell-ih-SORE-us Habitat: Woodlands of South America Historical Period: Late Cretaceous (85-80 million years ago) Size and Weight: About 30 feet long and 2 tons Diet: Meat Distinguishing Characteristics: Large head with small teeth; openings in skull above jaws "Abel's lizard" (so named because it was discovered by the Argentinian paleontologist Roberto Abel) is known by only a single skull. Although entire dinosaurs have been reconstructed from less, this lack of fossil evidence has forced paleontologists to hazard some guesses about this South American dinosaur. As befitting its theropod lineage, it's believed that Abelisaurus resembled a scaled-down Tyrannosaurus Rex, with fairly short arms and a bipedal gait, and "only" weighing about two tons, max. The one odd feature of Abelisaurus (at least, the one that we know of for sure) is the assortment of large holes in its skull, called "fenestrae," above the jaw. It's likely that these evolved to lighten the weight of this dinosaur's massive head, which otherwise might have unbalanced its entire body. By the way, Abelisaurus has lent its name to an entire family of theropod dinosaurs, the "abelisaurs were restricted to the southern island continent of Gondwana during the Cretaceous period, which today corresponds to Africa, South America and Madagascar. Name: Megapiranha; pronounced MEG-ah-pir-ah-na Habitat: Rivers of South America Historical Epoch: Late Miocene (10 million years ago) Size and Weight: About five feet long and 20-25 pounds Diet: Fish Distinguishing Characteristics: Large size; powerful bite Just how "mega" was Megapiranha? Well, you may be disappointed to learn that this 10-million-year old prehistoric fish "only" weighed about 20 to 25 pounds, but you have to bear in mind that modern piranhas tip the scale at two or three pounds, max (and are only truly dangerous when they attack prey in large schools). Not only was Megapiranha at least ten times as big as modern piranhas, but it wielded its dangerous jaws with an additional order of magnitude of force, according to a recently published study by an international research team. The largest variety of modern piranha, the black piranha, times its own body weight. By contrast, this new study shows that Megapiranha chomped with a force of up to 1,000 pounds per square inch, or about 50 times its own body weight. The only logical conclusion is that Megapiranha was an all-purpose predator of the Miocene epoch, chowing down not only on fish (and any mammals or reptiles foolish enough to venture into its river habitat) but also large turtles, crustaceans, and other shelled creatures. However, there's one nagging problem with this conclusion: to date, the only fossils of Megapiranha consist of bits of jawbone and a row of teeth from a single individual, so a lot more remains to be discovered about this Miocene menace. In any event, you can bet that somewhere right now, in Hollywood, an eager young screenwriter is actively pitching Megapiranha: The Movie! Name: Argentavis (Greek for "Argentina bird"); pronounced ARE-jen-TAY-viss Habitat: Skies of South America Historical Epoch: Late Miocene (6 million years ago) Size and Weight: 23-foot wingspan and up to 200 pounds Diet: Meat Distinguishing Characteristics: Enormous wingspan; long legs and feet Just how big was Argentavis? To put things in perspective, one of the largest flying birds alive today is the Andean Condor, which has a wingspan of nine feet and weighs about 25 pounds. By comparison, the wingspan of Argentavis was comparable to that of a small plane--close to 25 feet from tip to tip--and it weighed anywhere between 150 and 250 pounds. By these tokens, Argentavis is best compared not to other prehistoric birds, which tended to be much more modestly scaled, but to the huge pterosaurs that preceded it by 60 million years, notably the giant Quetzalcoatlus (which had a wingspan of up to 35 feet). Given its enormous size, you might assume that Argentavis was the "top bird" of Miocene South America, about six million years ago. However, at this time, "terror birds" were still thick on the ground, including descendants of the slightly earlier Phorusrhacos and Kelenken. These flightless birds were built like meat-eating dinosaurs, complete with long legs, grasping hands, and sharp beaks that they wielded on their prey like hatchets. Argentavis presents some difficult issues, chief of which is how this prehistoric bird managed to a) launch itself off the ground and b) keep itself in the air once launched. It's now believed that Argentavis took off and flew like a pterosaur, unfurling its wings (but only rarely flapping them) in order to catch the high-altitude air currents above its South American habitat. It's still unknown if Argentavis was an active predator of the huge mammals of late Miocene South America, or if, like a vulture, it contented itself with scavenging already-dead corpses; all we can say for sure is that it was definitely not a pelagic (sea-flying) bird like modern seagulls, since its fossils were discovered in the interior of Argentina. As with its style of flight, paleontologists have made a lot of educated guesses about Argentavis, most of which, unfortunately, are not supported by direct fossil evidence. For example, analogy with similarly built modern birds suggests that Argentavis laid very few eggs (perhaps an average of only one or two per year), which were carefully brooded by both parents, and presumably not subject to frequent predation by hungry mammals. Hatchlings probably left the nest after about 16 months, and were only fully grown by the age of 10 or 12; most controversially, some naturalists have suggested that Argentavis could attain a maximum age of 100 years, about the same as modern (and much smaller) parrots, which are already among the longest-lived vertebrates on earth.

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