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Cal Poly Professor Documents Local Pleistocene Dinner: Ancient Duck

SAN LUIS OBISPO – What was for dinner on the Channel Islands in ancient times? A flightless duck, according to a Cal Poly professor's study, which appears in the current issue of the Proceedings of the National Science Academy.

It appears California once had its own version of a dodo bird, a flightless duck known in scientific circles as Chendytes lawi, which managed to escape terrestrial predators by colonizing the Channel Islands. Unlike the dodo bird, Chendytes could dive and swim, which may partially explain its longevity as a species: more than 8,000 years.

Cal Poly archeology professor Terry Jones, Judith Porcasi of the Costen Institute of Archeology at UCLA, and Jon Erlandson of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Oregon have shown that California prehistoric coastal peoples began hunting the duck about 11,000 years ago.

More significantly, they hunted it for fully 8,000 years before it finally became extinct some 2,400 years ago. The details of this finding are based on carbon dating of archeological remains from 14 prehistoric settlements spanning from San Diego to Sonoma County.

"The duck could not fly, and the people were able to collect their eggs," said Jones, whose research was funded by California Sea Grant. "This is a 'perfect storm' for driving an animal to extinction. It's surprising it took 8,000 years to wipe them out."

The duration of the duck's demise led Jones to doubt the validity of the "Pleistocene overkill hypothesis" -- the theory that Ice Age megafauna such as the ground sloth and mammoth were pushed to extinction 13,000 years ago in a span of just 400 years.

Why would it take 8,000 years to wipe out one species of flightless bird, and why would there be virtually no archeological evidence for human hunting of extinct Pleistocene megafauna, save the mammoth, Jones asked.

"We make the case that the Pleistocene megafauna were wiped out in some other way than being hunted," he said. "If the overkill hypothesis were true, we would expect to see a more substantial record of exploitation in the archeological record. That record is not there."

Jones' study, titled "The protracted Holocene extinction of California's flightless sea duck (Chendytes lawi) and its implications for the Pleistocene overkill hypothesis," appears in the current issue of the Proceedings of the National Science Academy and can be seen at http://www.pnas.org/cgi/reprint/0711140105v1.

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About the California Sea Grant:
The study was funded by NOAA's California Sea Grant College Program, a statewide, multi-university program of marine research, extension services, and education activities administered by the University of California. It is the largest of 31 Sea Grant programs and is headquartered at Scripps Institution of Oceanography at UC San Diego. The National Sea Grant College Program is part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), U.S. Department of Commerce.

***(Note to Editors:** Cal Poly's Public Affairs office can e-mail photos and/or artwork to accompany the article.Contact Scott Roark at sroark@calpoly.edu or 756-6530.*

To read the Birders World story, go to
http://bwfov.typepad.com/birders_world_field_of_vi/2008/03/californias-for.html).

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