

Meet Sasha - the world's only baby woolly rhino

The SiberianTimes By Anna Liesowska

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First pictures of remains at least 10,000 years old found in Siberia's Sakha Republic



'The find is absolutely unique, a baby rhino was never found before'. Picture: Academy of Sciences Republic of Sakha

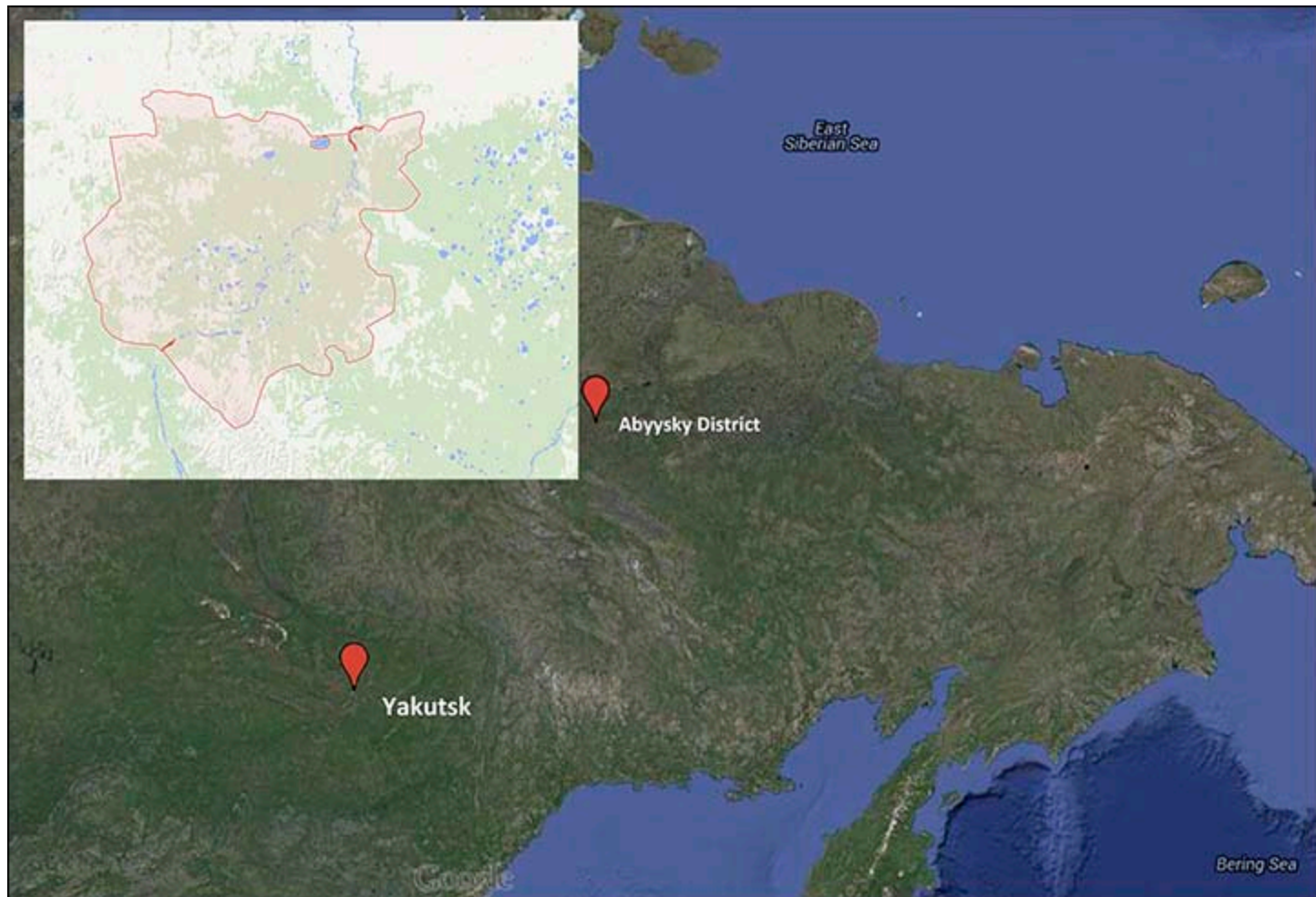
The discovery of the baby woolly rhinoceros preserved in permafrost was described as 'sensational' by local palaeontologists in Russia's largest region.

Experts hope to be able to extract DNA from remains of the extinct creature which was today being handed over to scientists from the Academy of Sciences in Yakutsk, capital of the Sakha Republic, also known as Yakutia.

The rhino was found on the right bank of a stream flowing into Semyulyakh River by Alexander 'Sasha' Banderov, a hunter and businessman from Abyysky district. He and friend Semen Ivanov thought at first it was the remains of a reindeer, before realising they had made a truly historic discovery.

'We were sailing past a ravine and noticed hair hanging on the top of it,' said Alexander. 'At first we thought it was a reindeer's carcass, but after it thawed and fell down we saw a horn on its upper jaw and realised it must be a rhino. The part of the carcass that stuck out of the ice was eaten by wild animals, but the rest of it was inside the permafrost and preserved well'.

'We immediately got in touch with Mammoth Fauna Department of the Yakutian Academy of Sciences'.







Alexander Banderov (R) and Semen Ivanov present baby woolly rhino. Pictures: Academy of Sciences Republic of Sakha

The age of the calf when it died has yet to be established, but scientists estimate it to be about 18 months old. Precise tests will be conducted to ascertain when Sasha died, with the results likely in six months. The creature's wool is well preserved, and an ear, one eye, its nostrils, and mouth are clearly visible.

The remnants of two horns were found on the carcass. The find was made in September last year, and the preserved remains will today be handed over in Yakutsk, some 2,900 kilometers away.

Albert Protopopov, Head of the Mammoth Fauna Department of Sakha Republic Academy of Sciences, said: 'The find is absolutely unique. We can count the number of adult woolly rhinos found around the world on fingers of one hand. A baby rhino was never found before.'

'There was only one case in the 21st century when we found a frozen carcass of an adult woolly rhino in Yakutia. It was in 2007 in Kolyma.'

'In the 20th century there were carcasses of woolly mammoths found in Verkhoyansky and Vilyuisky districts, but they were mummified and therefore not usable for studies'.



Sasha the rhino moments after it was found in Yakutia. Picture: Alexander Banderov

Mr. Protopopov explained: 'Even to find a skull of a baby rhino is very lucky indeed. The possible explanation to it is that rhinos bred very slowly. Mothers protected baby rhinos really well, so that cases of successful attacks on them were extremely rare and the mortality rate was very low.'

'Woolly rhinos are less studied than mammoths. We are hoping Sasha the rhino will give us a lot of answers to questions of how they grew and developed, what conditions they lived in, and which of the modern day animals is the closest to them.'

'We know nothing about baby rhinos, while the morphology of adults is better known. So far we didn't have a chance to work even with a tooth of a baby rhino, and now we have the whole skull, the head, soft tissues, and well preserved teeth.'

'First of all we will concentrate on the DNA, because the carcass was kept frozen and chances are high we will get a better preserved DNA.'

'We are hoping to report first results in a week or two'.







'The discovery of the baby woolly rhinoceros described as 'sensational'. Pictures: Academy of Sciences Republic of Sakha

Russian and foreign scientists are expected to take part in the study of the baby woolly rhino. The woolly rhino was common throughout Europe and northern Asia during the Pleistocene epoch. The animal roamed from Scotland and Spain to South Korea. The species survived the last glacial period and hunting by early humans is seen as a factor in their extinction along with the receding ice age and 'hyperdisease'.

The animal is reckoned to have become extinct around 10,000 years ago.

The rhino was named after the finder. Russians use Sasha as a short name for Alexander.