

Monster Tracks

by Barbara Bruno

Snarl. Splash. Plop. Eek! Crunch. Just how did those bones and footprints come to be in these fossil rocks—rocks that tell a wordless story lost in time?

Sand-cast your own fossil clues from a past when monsters roamed and left odd tracks and dinner crumbs in the prehistoric ooze. First gather some feathers, twigs, bones (fish bones are fun), seashells, stones, or small sharp rocks to imprint or embed in sand.

Along with this interesting assortment of objects, you'll also need enough plaster of Paris to fill a mold, sand for shaping the mold, and a container. A plastic-lined, shallow cardboard box works well.

Wet the sand enough so that it keeps its shape when squeezed into a ball, then pack it into the box. Scoop out a flat area about an inch deep and as large as you want your fossil rock to be. Smooth the surface. You're ready to begin sand-casting.

To form the mold you must think in reverse. Holes poked in the sand will stick out. Sunken areas, like footprints, must be built up in the sand. Textures and other features can be made by pressing different objects into the sand. Seashells, bones, and other objects to be left in the sand casting must be pressed facedown into the sand. That way they'll rise above the finished casting's surface. (Half-buried things are interesting, too.)

When you have finished making the mold, mix the plaster according to the instructions on the box. Mix only the amount you'll need to fill the mold. Slowly pour the plaster into the deepest parts of the mold first so that trapped air won't spoil the sand casting. Then carefully fill the rest of the mold.

When the sand casting has hardened completely (about fifteen minutes, depending on its size and thickness), carefully dig it up. Gently brush away as much of the sand as you can. Some sand will remain embedded in the plaster.

Your sand casting most likely won't look exactly as you expected, but the results are always fun to see. You can "age" your fossil rock by painting it with watercolors or rubbing mud into the deepest imprints.