

# Discovery

## FOOD ENOUGH

### PALEOBOTANY

**W**HETHER humans could have migrated from Asia to North America during the last ice age across Beringia — the now-submerged land bridge between Siberia and Alaska — depends on whether there were enough animals there for them to eat. And although mammal remains are not uncommon in the region, paleobotanists have long argued that micro-fossil pollen deposits in lake beds indicate an Arctic environment



Yukon, and sediment from the Blue Fish River region, in the northern Yukon, where some believe the earliest evidence of human habitation in North America has been found.

"We know that grass, sedge and sage are the plants that supported those

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which could not have supported the large animal populations that human habitation requires.

Grant Zazula, a Ph.D. candidate from Simon Fraser University, and his colleagues, however, believe the lake-bed evidence is misleading. "Nobody looked at the actual plant remains associated with fossils," says Zazula, and when he and his fellow researchers did, they unearthed evidence of abundant Beringian flora.

Zazula examined immaculately preserved seeds from 24,000-year-old rodent nests found near Quartz Creek, Y.T., as well as the stomach contents of the permafrost-frozen carcass of an extinct horse. He also analyzed peat associated with woolly-mammoth remains found near Last Chance Creek, in west-central



mammals," says Zazula. "Until recently, no one had any evidence that the mammals and steppe vegetation coexisted, and now we do."

Along the way, Zazula and his colleagues uncovered an intact 90-kilogram woolly-mammoth tusk beneath layers of volcanic ash and peat near Last Chance Creek.

"Taken together, the evidence is clear," says Zazula. "Humans could definitely have crossed the Beringia land bridge. There was no shortage of food."

Heather Kent

