

# Megalonyx

**Meaning of name:** Giant claw

**Size:** 10 feet long and 1 ton

**When it lived:** Pleistocene—Modern (2 million to 10,000 years ago)

**Where it lived:** Woodlands of North America

**What it ate:** Plants

**Best viewed at:** Natural History Museum of Utah (Salt Lake City), American Museum of Natural History (New York)

Plenty of megafauna mammals lived in North America during the Pleistocene epoch, but only one of them has the honor of being named by Thomas Jefferson. In 1797, when he was serving as vice president of the American Philosophical Society, Jefferson came into possession of scattered bones that had been recovered from a cave in Virginia. Misinterpreting the specimen as an extant (but still undiscovered) species of lion, Jefferson named it *Megalonyx* (“giant claw”) and even asked Lewis and Clark to keep their eyes peeled for this elusive beast during their famous westward journey.

A couple of years later, it was determined that the bones actually belonged to a giant sloth, and it took twenty years after that for *Megalonyx* to become an official part of the Pleistocene bestiary.

Although it ranged far and wide across North America—fossils have been discovered in Idaho, Nevada, Texas, and even Florida—*Megalonyx* originated in South America, which was cut off from the mainstream of evolution for much of the Cenozoic era. Even before the formation of the Isthmus of Panama—which connected North America and South America shortly before the start of the Pleistocene epoch—the ancestors of the Giant Ground Sloth



“island-hopped” their way to North America, a process that took hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of years. (What that means is that the sloths blundered their way atop a raft-size tangle of sticks, floated to a nearby island, and bred to their heart’s content—and that their descendants repeated the process, island by island, over the course of generations.)

At ten feet long and one ton, *Megalonyx* was far from the biggest prehistoric sloth—that honor belongs to the two-ton *Megatherium* (“giant beast”) of South America—but it was still much, much bigger than any sloth alive today.

By the start of the modern era, about ten thousand years ago, sloths had vanished from North America, but don’t give up all hope for your *Megalonyx*-watching expedition. It’s possible that a few poky individuals still persist in the Appalachian woodlands, too dumb to know they’re