In 1993 I was looking for ammonites—extinct relatives of the chambered nautilus—in the hills east of Redding, California, with geologist Tom Peltier and my son Jakob Hilton when I happened upon some fossil bones. Two years later, when my friend and fellow fossil hunter Pat Embree removed the bones from the rock, I realized their importance. The bones comprised the lower leg and foot of a hypsilophodontid, a relatively small plant-eating dinosaur: the first of its kind from California.

After publishing a short article on the find in *California Geology* magazine I received a letter from geologist Allan Bennison, who as a boy had found the first dinosaur remains in California. The remains belonged to a hadrosaur, one of the duck-billed dinosaurs. He invited me to visit the site of that 1936 discovery as well as nearby sites where he had found other important reptilian remains, including the complete skull of a mosasaur, a large seagoing reptile that was subsequently named in his honor (*Plotosaurus bennisoni*).

During that trip, I had a growing sense that a story was waiting to be told. My hypsilophodontid and Bennison’s hadrosaur and mosasaur were just a few of the many Mesozoic reptile fossils that had been discovered in California. We have bones from herbivorous and carnivorous dinosaurs, giant turtles, ichthyosaurs, plesiosaurs, mosasaurs, and even flying reptiles. I thought that many people, including paleontologists, must be curious about these creatures—what they looked like, how they behaved, where they lived. Who found the fossils, and who prepared them out of the rock? Who were the scientists who studied them and published their findings? And what about the artists who brought the fossils to life?

In late 1999, after I had begun work on this book, I happened to have dinner with several colleagues, including one of California’s best-known geologists. The subject of dinosaurs in California came up. This well-known geologist commented that he thought “perhaps” a dinosaur find had been made somewhere in southern California; the discussion then turned to the occasional mammoth remains that are sometimes found in the northern part of the state.

This conversation confirmed my suspicion that the great majority of Californians, including even geologists and some paleontologists, are unaware of the wealth of Mesozoic reptilian remains that have been found—and that continue to be found—here. In just the
five years I spent doing research for this book, several plesiosaur remains, a couple of mosasaur
remains, three more dinosaur finds, new turtles, the first Mesozoic birds, and the first pterosaur
remains were found in California. It is my hope, therefore, that this book will enlighten many
people about the wealth of Mesozoic reptile finds made in this part of the world and per-
haps spur interest that will lead to many new discoveries.

In addition to describing California’s dinosaurs and other fossil reptiles, this book tells the
stories of the people behind their discovery. Within this group one would expect to find an
abundance of scientists with training in paleontology (the study of prehistoric life), and there
are a few. Certainly without them many of these discoveries would never have been brought
to science. But we also find ranchers, weekend fossil hunters, community college teachers,
and plenty of students at all educational levels. People of different races and ages have par-
ticipated in this fascinating quest, as have a fair number of women, from the very beginning
of discovery nearly a hundred years ago. Back then, vertebrate paleontology was considered a
man’s science, and even at midcentury women were relatively rare in the field, so their in-
volvement is especially notable.

Even today, anyone with an interest in paleontology and who works properly and with the
right people can make important contributions. Although we live in a technological world,
someone still has to venture out to the rock outcrops in search of the fossils—an aspect of
the field that has not changed since the 1800s. I hope it never does. The thrill of discovery is
as inspiring for the learned scholar as it is for any eight-year-old fascinated by dinosaurs.

A warning is in order here: The collecting of fossil bones is illegal on public lands unless proper
permits are first obtained. On private land, never trespass and please do not ask landowners to al-
low you on their land unless you are a qualified paleontologist; even then it is imperative to
get written permission. If a novice stumbles across vertebrate fossils on public lands, the fos-
sils must be left alone and a scientist summoned to the site. The best way for novices to be-
come legitimately involved in the search for vertebrate fossils is to hook up with a working
paleontologist or a professor of paleontology.

Remember that fossils do not belong on the mantel as mere curios. Fossils are pieces of
a giant puzzle that reveals the history of life on this planet. They need to be appropriately
housed in a scientific institution so that they are available for systematic study. Often a spec-
imen lurking in a drawer of a properly curated collection has provided the very clue needed
to answer a vexing question. In contrast, most fossils that are brought home and put in a
drawer eventually end up in the trash.

If you have information that I might consider adding to the next edition of this book,
please send me an e-mail: rhilton@sierracollege.edu.