

Fossils tell of mammals' rough road to survival

When the asteroid slammed into prehistoric Mexico and drew the curtain on the Cretaceous, dinosaurs did not fare very well. All but the toothless birds soon died.

The aftermath of the impact wasn't kind to the rest of life on Earth, either. Entire plant communities withered and died, their rotting leaves and trunks feeding pioneering fungi that eventually gave way to ferns and then forests as sunlight started to peek through the dusty skies.

Mammals are often presented as being more resilient. Life beneath the claws of the dinosaurs had kept them small and wily enough to escape underground, shuddering in their burrows as the worst of the extinction fallout slowly passed. But this is myth.

Mammals, as a taxonomic group, survived the K/Pg extinction – just as dinosaurs did – but they suffered major losses that irrevocably changed the evolutionary pathways open to those beasts that survived. This fact has traditionally been taken right from mammalian mouths. Fragments of jaw and shiny black teeth tell who lived and who perished.

But paleontologists can draw from more than dental details. In a new *Cretaceous Research* paper, University of Washington paleontologists Lauren DeBey and Gregory Wilson looked to leg bones to gauge the ebb and flow of mammal evolution across the fifth great extinction.

Read the full, original story: [The mammals who lived](#)