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## Letters

### 'A trail' reassessment

The report on the reassessment of the Laetoli  
"A trail" ("Hominids bear up, become porpoise-  
ful," SN: 4/16/83, p. 246) is rather puzzling. If we  
are to accept Tuttle's tests with trained circus  
bears, we are left wondering what trained circus  
bears were doing in Laetoli 3.5 million years ago  
and who trained them in those days.

Seriously speaking, these tests tell us only  
how trained bears walk, not how wild bears  
walk, and are therefore not applicable to the  
question. Even if wild bears had been used,  
questions would arise. We are not told whether  
the composition of the test surface was the  
same as, or even approximated, the composi-  
tion of the imprinted soil, which is vital to the  
validity of such a test. Claw marks usually are  
visible unless the prints are very shallow or, in  
other words, imprinted in fairly hard material.

A mountain of pertinent questions is not  
addressed by this report. Wild bears walking  
bipedally leave a distinctly pigeon-toed trail. Is  
the Laetoli trail pigeon-toed? Wild bears can  
walk bipedally only for very short distances on  
level ground lacking obstacles. Are those condi-  
tions consistent with the Laetoli trail? What is  
the plantar index of the hypothesized animal  
compared to that of the Laetoli prints?

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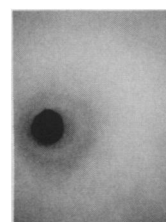
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Cover: A hole in snow reveals a vivid blue color that is more pure than that of the bluest sky. This blue color and the greenish hue of bubbly ice arise from the way ice particles scatter and absorb light. (Photo: Craig F. Bohren)



## Departments

### 355 Letters

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As for the large outside toe of bears, this is such a distinctive feature that it should be readily distinguishable by experts. That there is apparently some disagreement about this feature in these prints should make everyone suspicious of an attribution to bears. But of course, the animal is said to be an "ursid-like" creature rather than a bear. One wonders what tests on modern trained bears can tell us about extinct, untrained "ursid-like" creatures."

Michael T. Shoemaker  
Alexandria, Va.

**Tim White has not demonstrated** that the Sahabi clavicle is a dolphin rib. In fact, he has not even examined the original specimen from Sahabi, despite my invitation to do so. The six traits that he has used from a cast to show affinities of the Sahabi specimen with dolphins are variable, occur in hominoid clavicle and, with the rest of the morphology which White does not discuss, all suggest that the Sahabi specimen is most parsimoniously interpreted as a hominoid clavicle.

The other postcranial element of Hominoidea from Sahabi is not a femur, as you report, but a fibula.

Who are the skeptical "other anthropol-

ogists"? This is a low blow. Alan Walker should be reminded that in 1979 I showed him the specimen in Berkeley and he suggested at "first glance" that it appeared to be a clavicle. Of course we must remain skeptical, because 5 million years ago is an unknown time period in hominid evolution. We know nothing of what locomotor antecedents of hominids may have been, and any specimen which may shed light on this problem should be studied and reported, as I did.

It is particularly unfair to accuse me of "viewing the world through hominid-colored glasses." The International Sahabi Research Project, which I founded and direct, has from the first been committed to the fullest possible elucidation of the geology, paleobotany, taphonomy [the study of how fossils survive], paleontology of invertebrates and vertebrates, and paleoecology of the site, in addition to the paleoanthropology. The published record bears this out. Few other paleoanthropological research projects can make this same claim. I suggest that you consult the facts, and then report them accurately, before following Dr. White in his *ad hominem* sophistry.

Noel T. Boaz, Ph.D.  
New York, N.Y.

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