

# Lucy (Australopithecus)

In 1974, a small team of scientists made the amazing discovery of several hundred bone fossils in Ethiopia, Africa. These bones would become one of the most important fossil discoveries ever found and helped pave the way for scientists to better understand the process of human evolution.

## Discovery of a Lifetime

On 24th November 1974, a team of scientists specialising in human evolution were busy digging in the Afar region of Ethiopia, in north-eastern Africa. The area was widely known for being a possible hotspot for finding fossils and evidence of early humans. On a hunch, a scientist called Donald Johanson decided to dig in an area that had already been checked by other members of his team. Soon, he spotted a small bone fragment poking up from under the ground and immediately recognised it as an elbow fragment from a human ancestor. He called over his team and they soon discovered plenty more than an elbow bone; they found parts of a skull, some jaw bone and much more, totalling around 40% of a complete skeleton. This skeleton would turn out to be over 3 million years old, the earliest 'human' ever found at that time.



## Did You Know...?

Lucy's skeleton is preserved at the National Museum of Ethiopia. There are many plaster replicas on display around the world, including at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, USA.

## What's in a Name?

That night, when back at their camp, the group of scientists talked about their amazing discovery. By this time, they had found out that the skeleton belonged to a female and she became known as 'Lucy', due to The Beatles song 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds' playing in the background as they worked.

It took four years of study before Lucy was officially described as belonging to the 'Australopithecus afarensis' family: a new kind of human ancestor that had only recently been discovered. The name, 'Australopithecus' comes from the Latin word 'australis', meaning 'southern', and the Greek word 'pithekos', meaning 'ape'.

'Afarensis' refers to Lucy having been found in the Afar region of Ethiopia. Although Lucy was given the category of a new species, she wasn't the first Australopithecus found. The 'Taung Child', the fossilised skull of a child, was discovered in South Africa in 1924. It was recognised as having come from a new species which was named, 'Australopithecus africanus'.

### What Was Lucy Like?

From studying her skeleton, scientists have discovered many amazing things about Lucy. Firstly, she was 1.1m tall and weighed about 29kg. Her face would have been very ape-like and she had a small brain. She would have walked upright and had long, dangly arms. Despite walking upright, Lucy would have spent most of her time up in the trees like chimpanzees and orangutans do today. Looking at her teeth, scientists could tell Lucy was a herbivore; her diet would have been made up of raw fruits and vegetables, nuts and seeds.

It isn't known for certain how Lucy died; however, scientists think that she died as a young adult at 12 years old. The only obvious damage found on her skeleton was a single tooth mark from a carnivore on her pelvis. However, it cannot be said whether this injury caused her death.

