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Frozen Fauna of the Mammoth Steppe: The Story of Blue Babe

R. Dale Guthrie

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Frozen mammals of the Ice Age, preserved for millennia in the tundra, have been a source of fascination and mystery since their first discovery over two centuries ago. These mummies, their ecology, and their preservation are the subject of this compelling book by paleontologist Dale Guthrie. The 1979 find of a frozen, extinct steppe bison in an Alaskan gold mine allowed him to undertake the first scientific excavation of an Ice Age mummy in North America and to test theories about these enigmatic frozen fauna.

The 36,000-year-old bison mummy, coated with blue mineral crystals, was dubbed "Blue Babe." Guthrie conveys the excitement of its excavation and shows how he made use of evidence from living animals, other Pleistocene mummies, Paleolithic art, and geological data. With photographs and scores of detailed drawings, he takes the reader through the excavation and subsequent detective work, analyzing the animal's carcass and its surroundings, the circumstances of its death, its appearance in life, the landscape it inhabited, and the processes of preservation by freezing. His examination shows that Blue Babe died in early winter, falling prey to lions that inhabited the Arctic during the Pleistocene era.

Guthrie uses information gleaned from his study of Blue Babe to provide a broad picture of bison evolutionary history and ecology, including speculations on the interactions of bison and Ice Age peoples. His description of the Mammoth Steppe as a cold, dry, grassy plain is based on an entirely new way of reading the fossil record.

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