

Fossil and artifact hounds return to Bee County ranch



By [Jon Wilcox](#)

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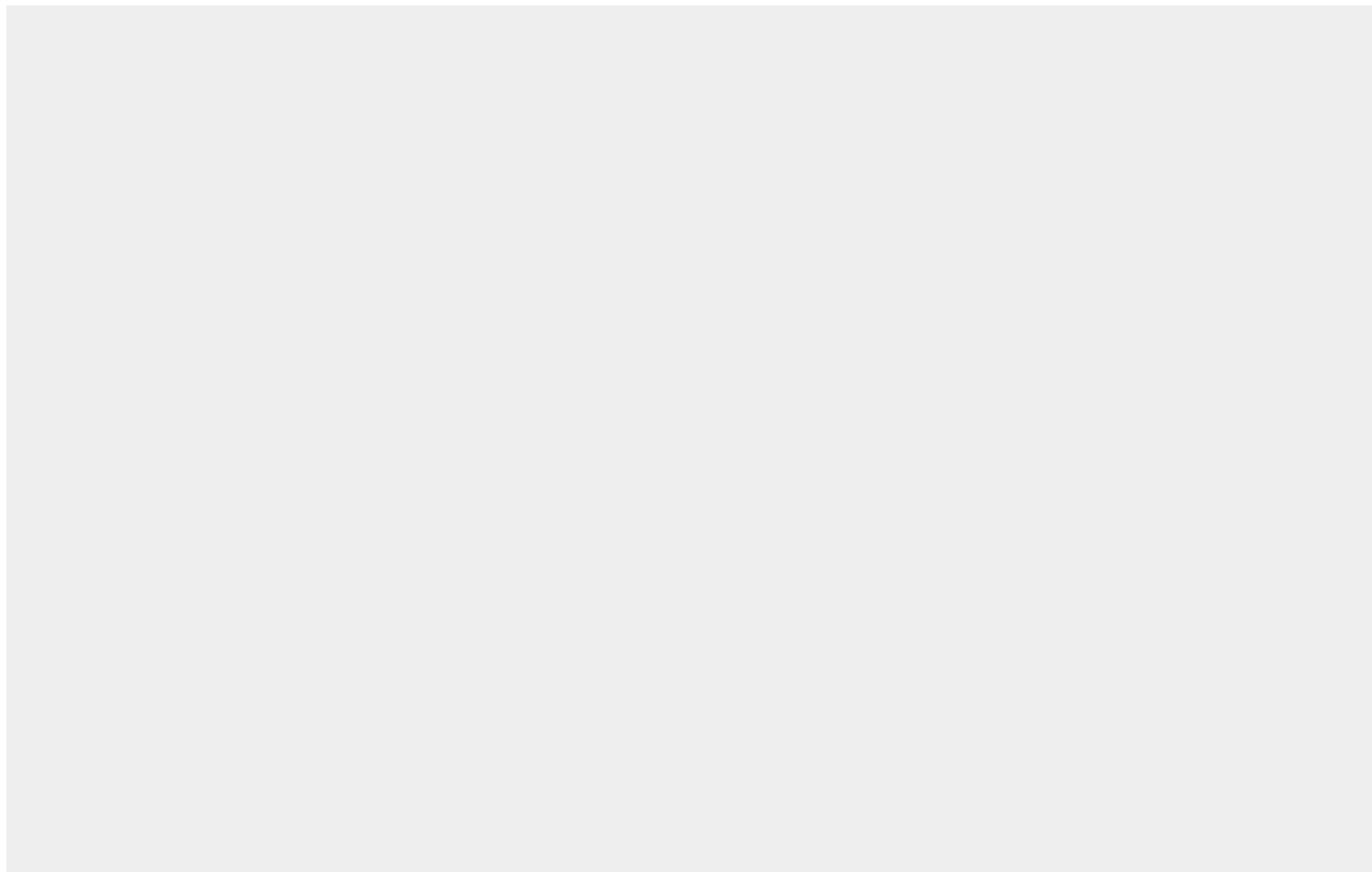
Dusty Clark, 61, shovels sand from the site into a bucket for sifting through a fine wire mesh. Bonnie Arbittier for The Victoria Advocate

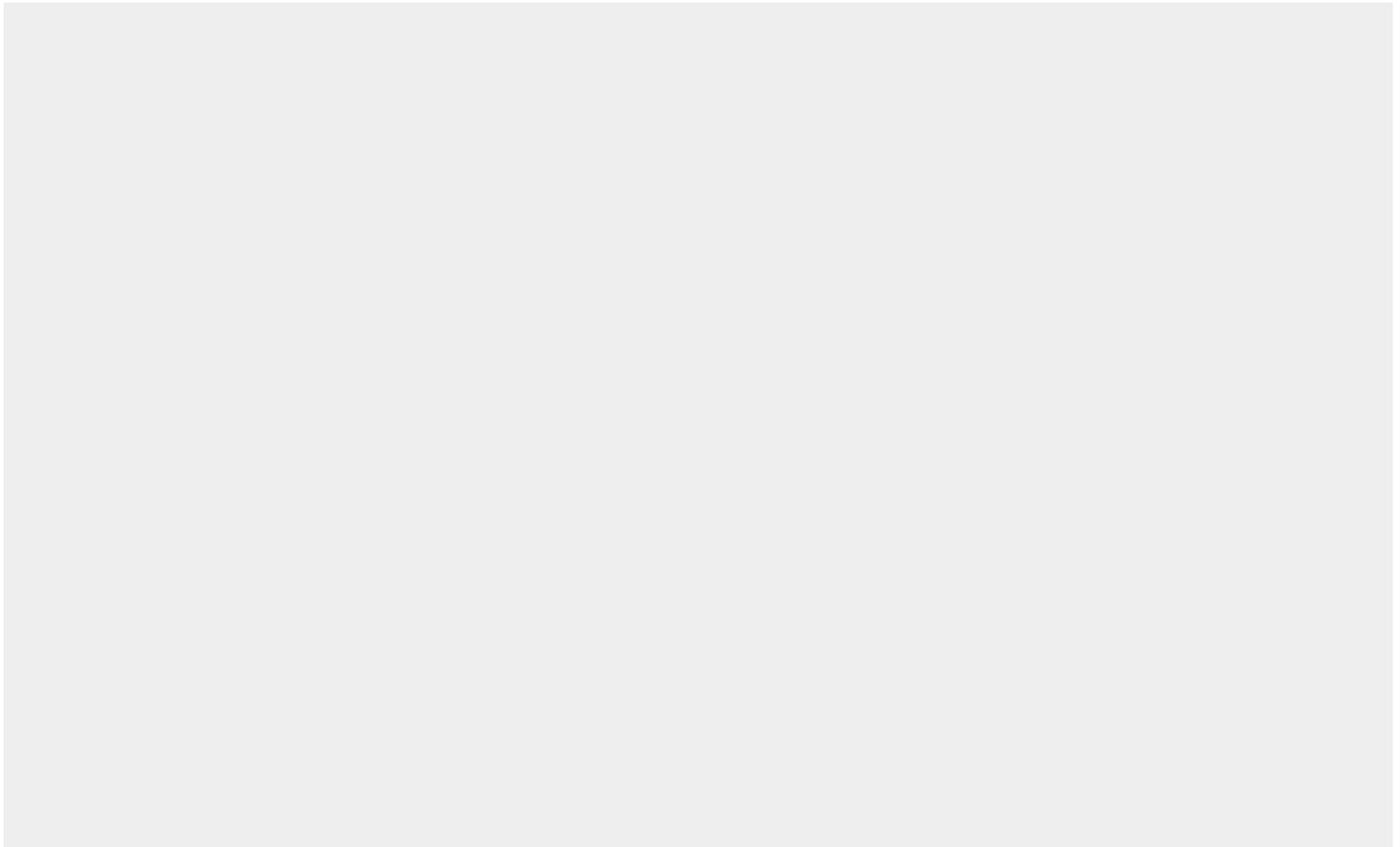
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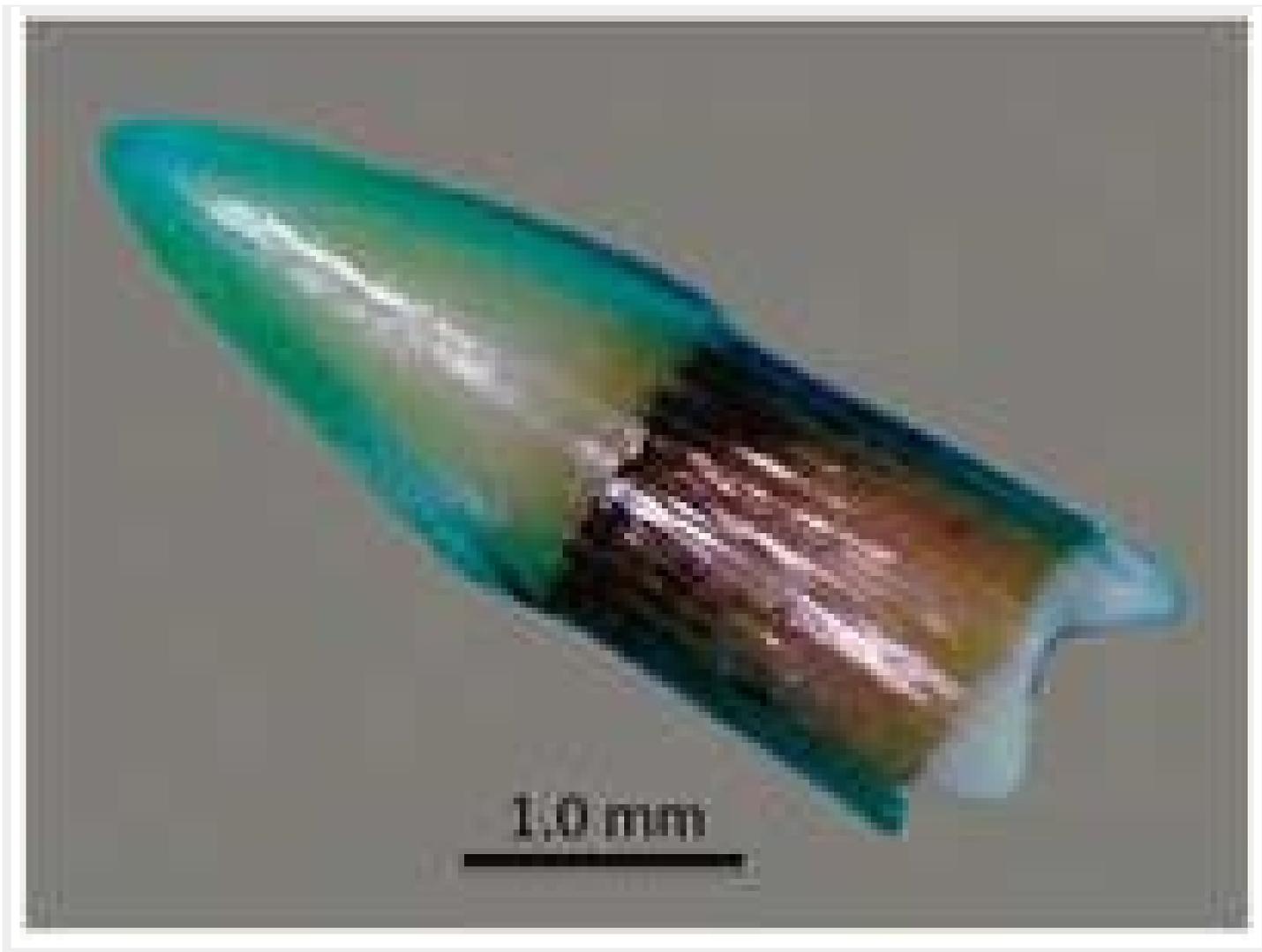
Amateur archaeologist David Calame is seeking help.

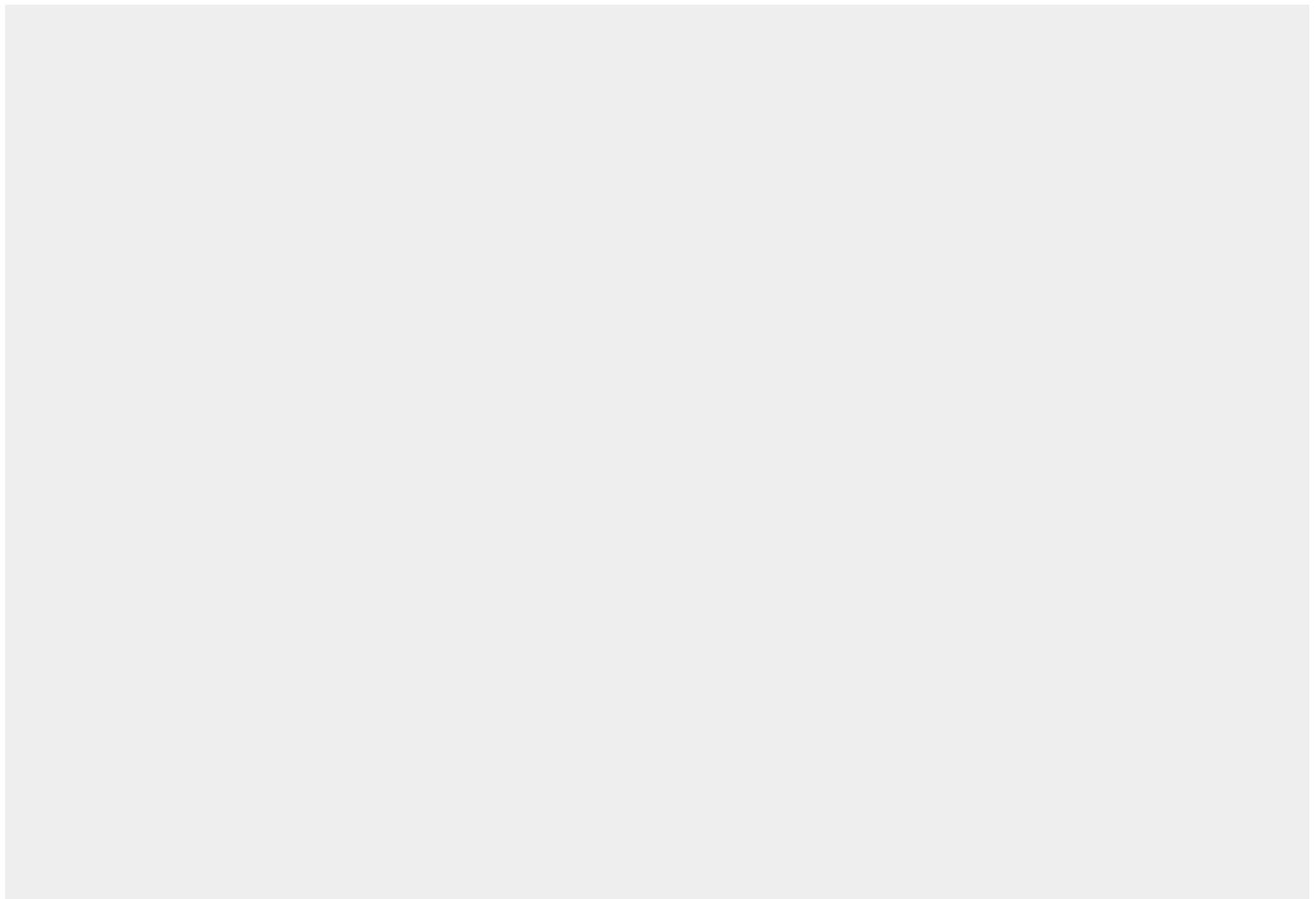
Those with a passion for archaeology and a little experience are encouraged to contact him.

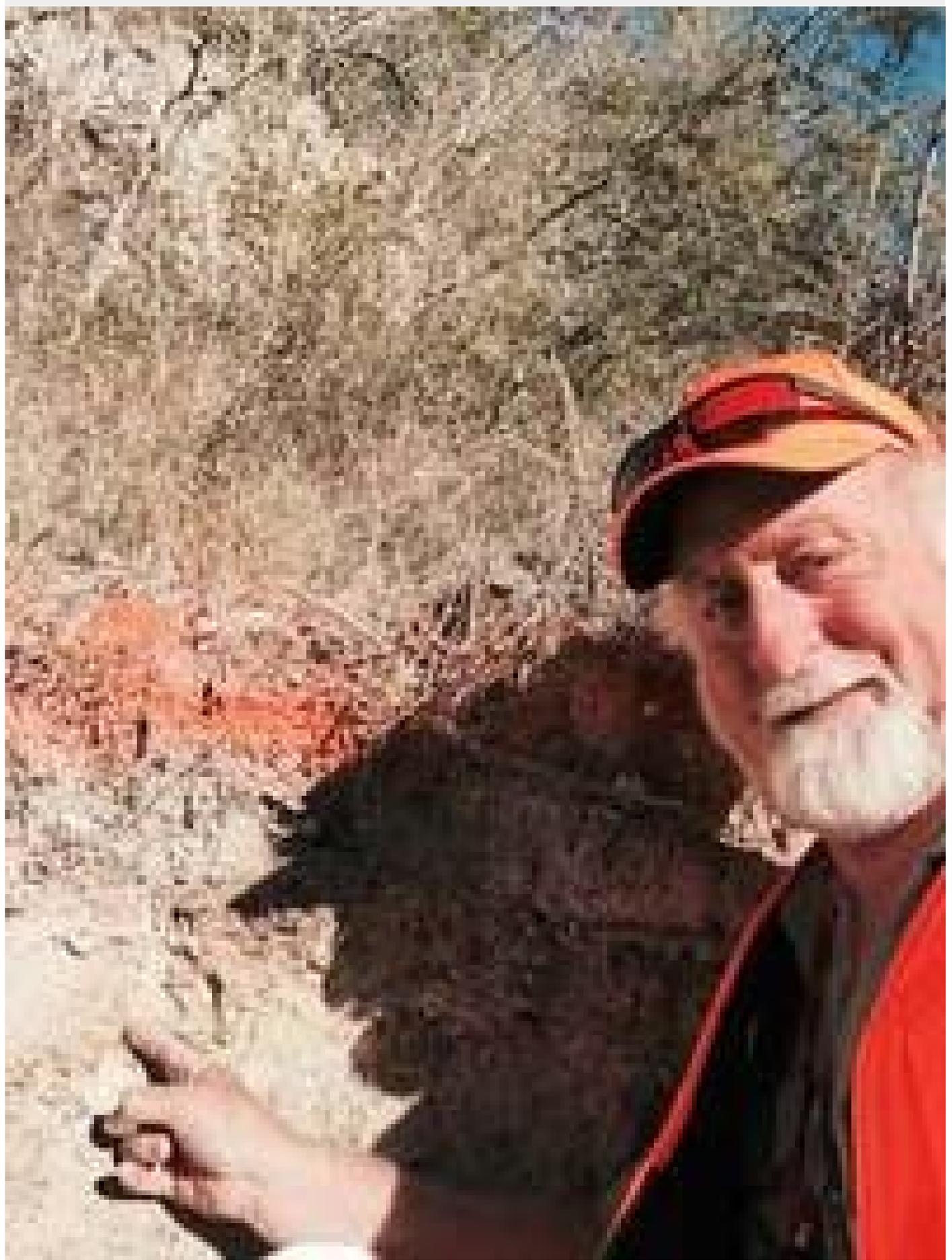
- Visit texasarrowheads.org for more information.
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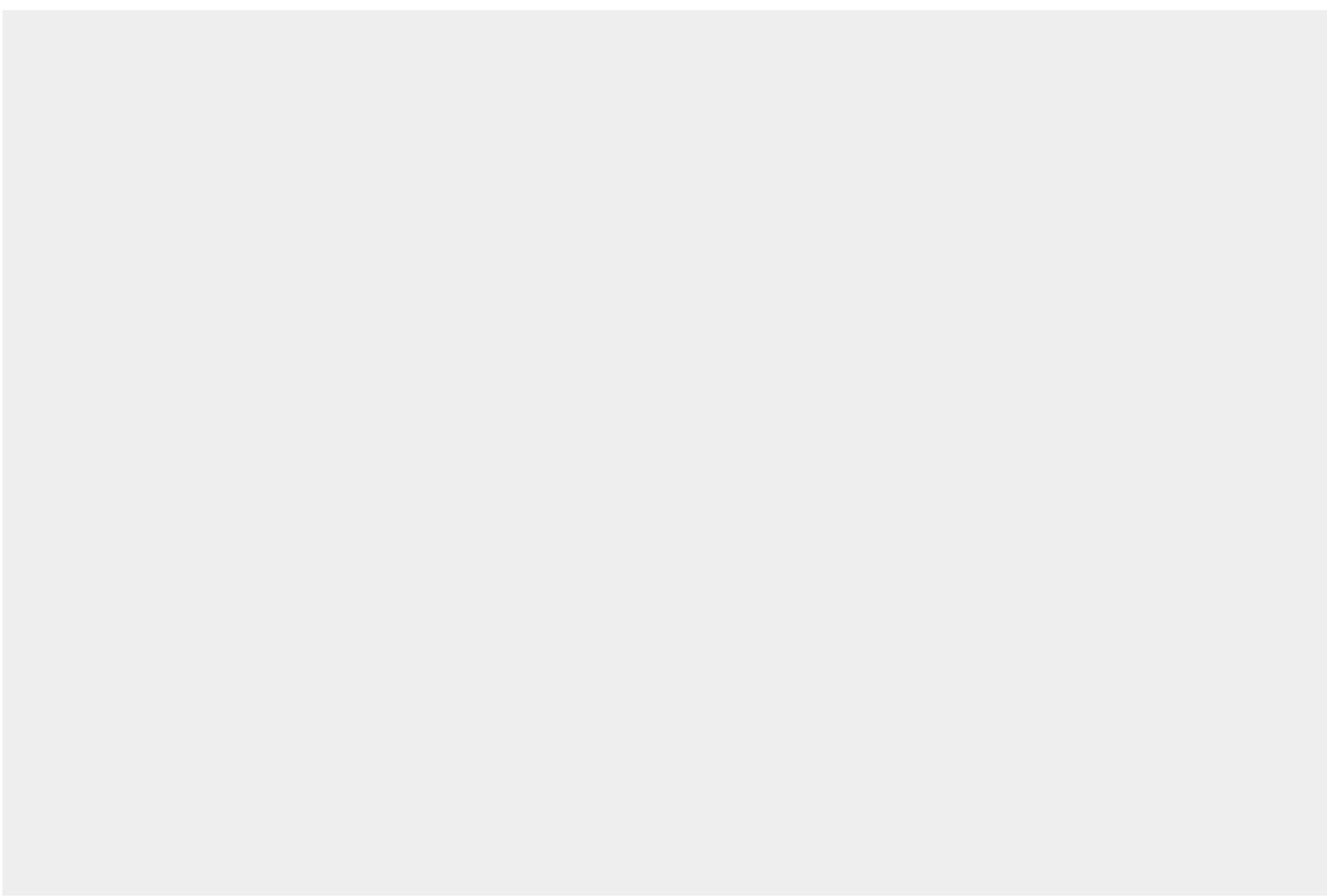
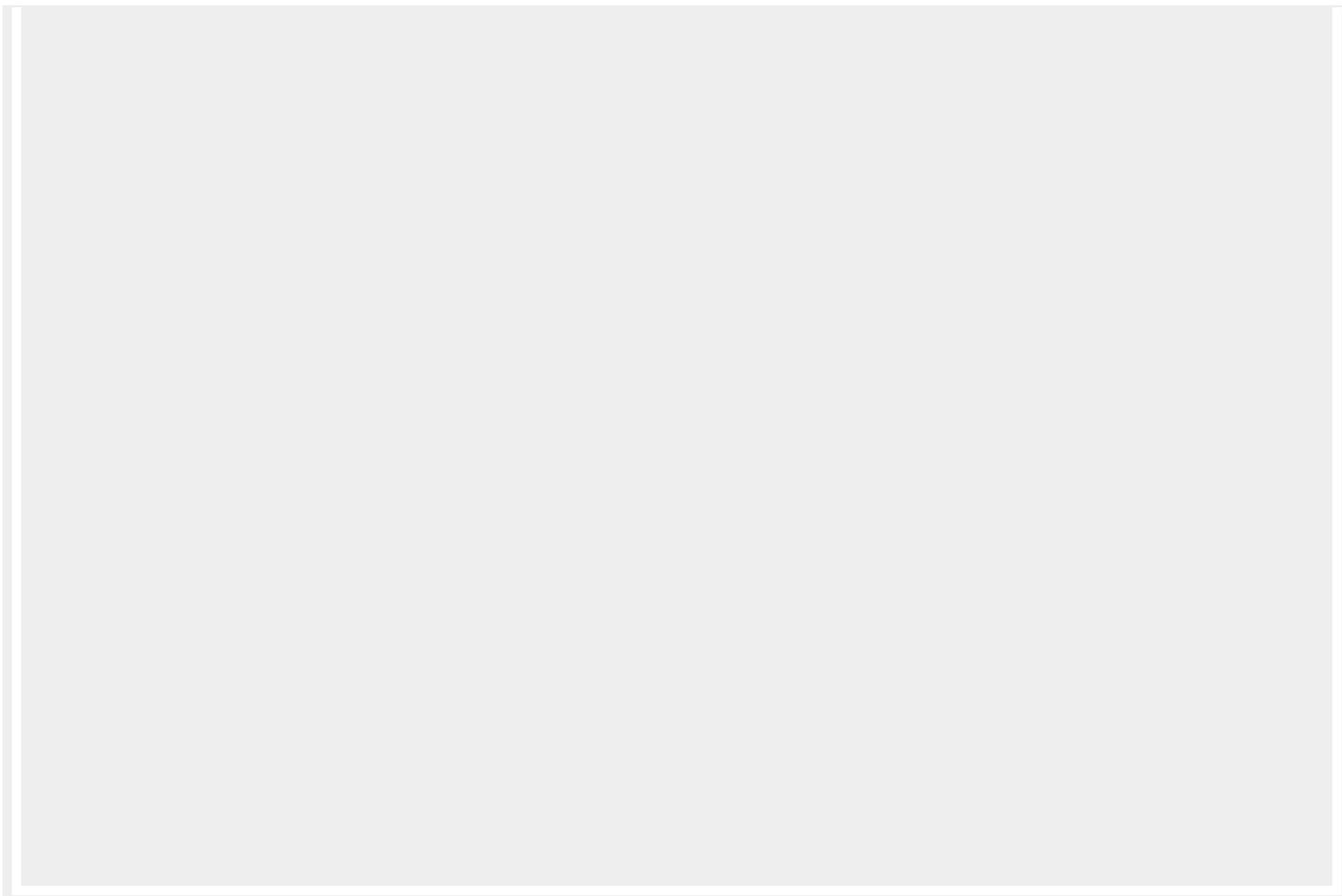


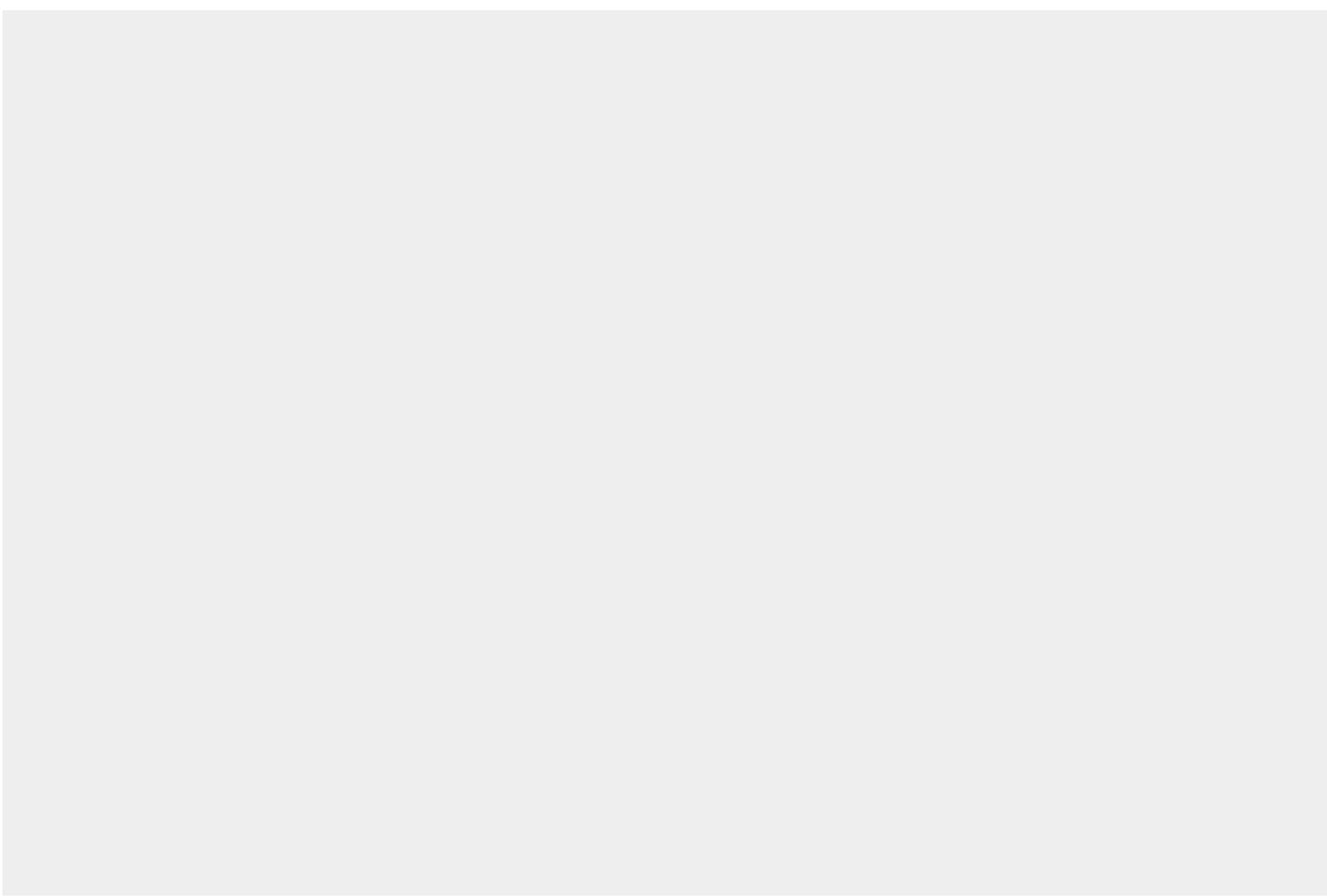
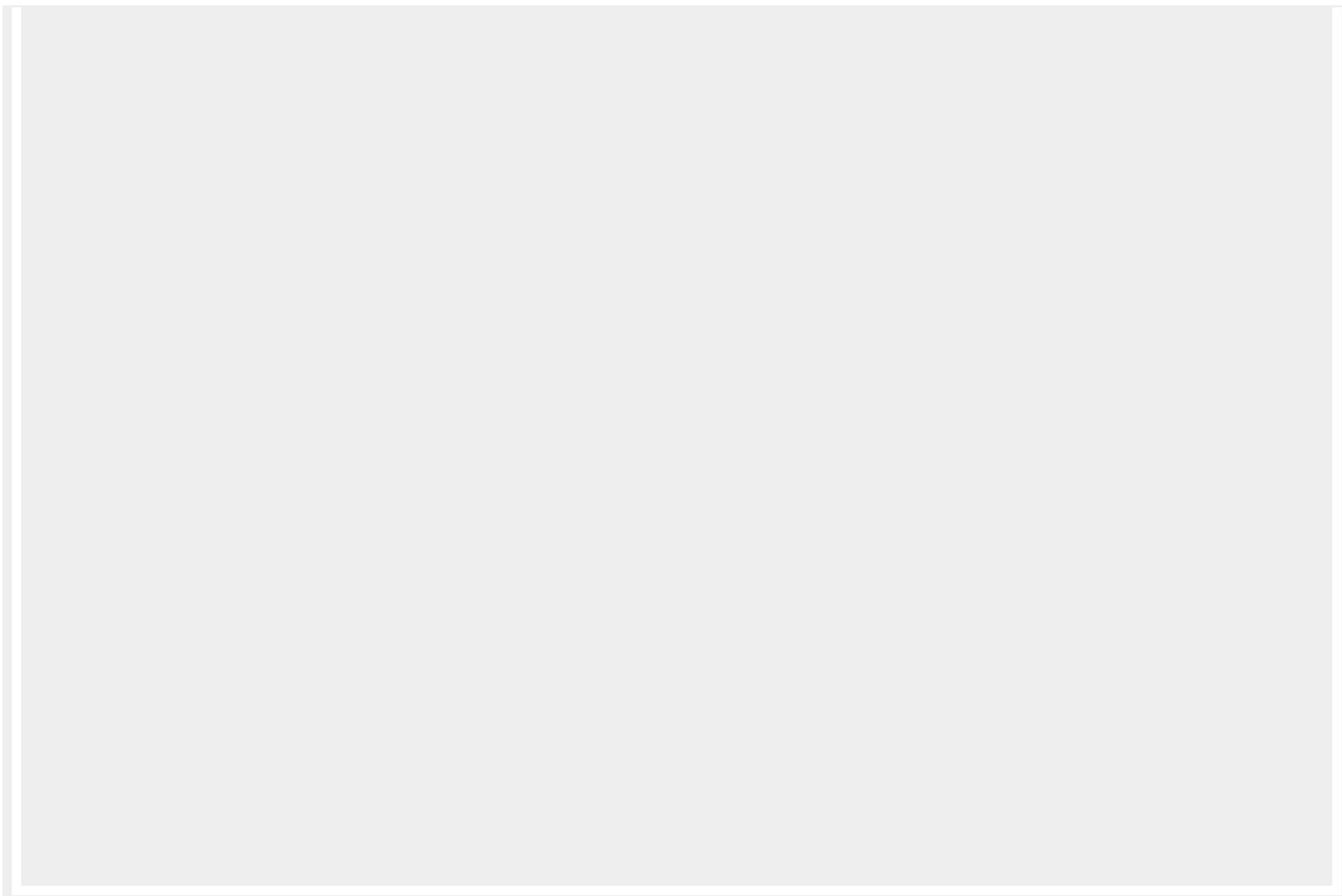


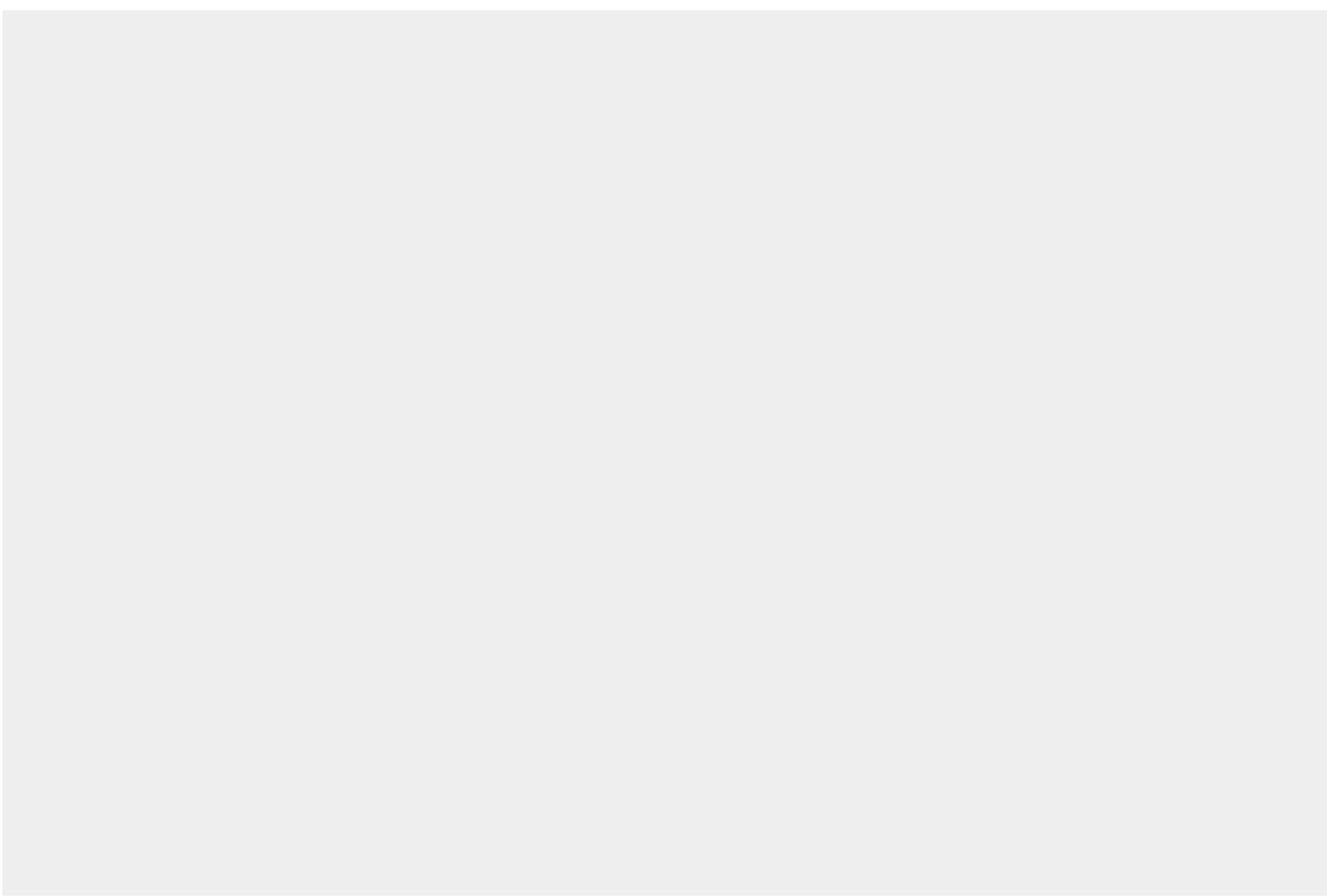
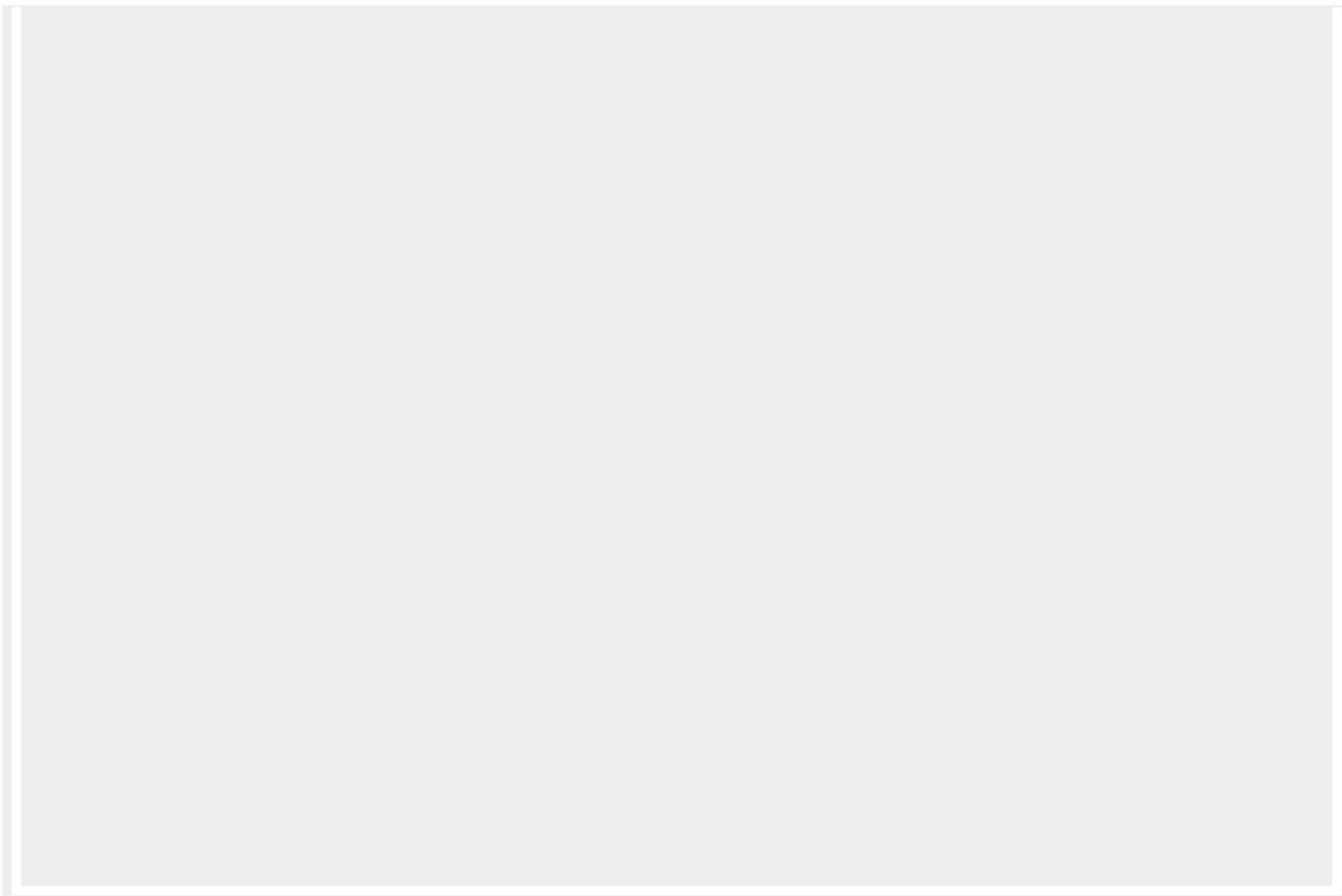


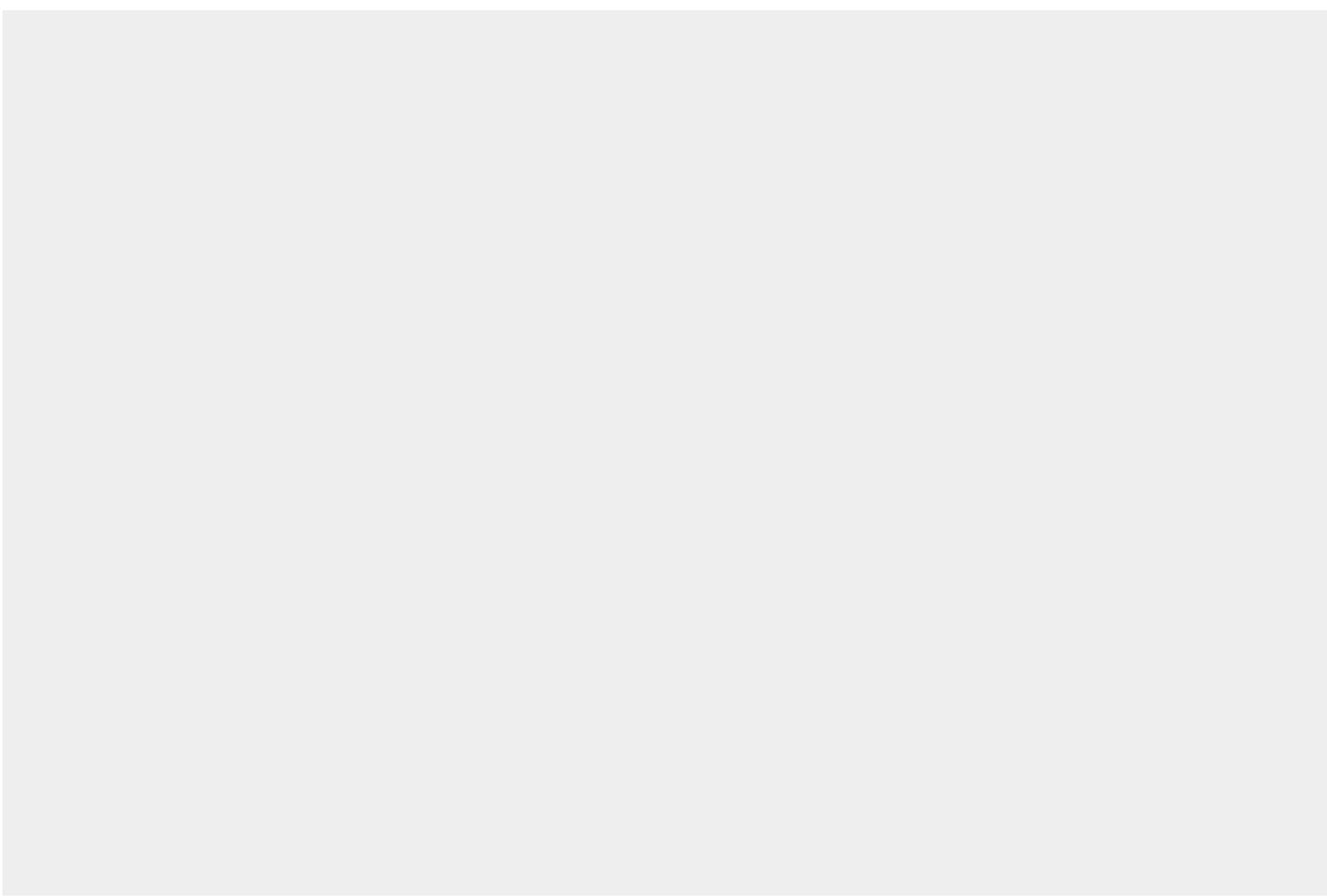
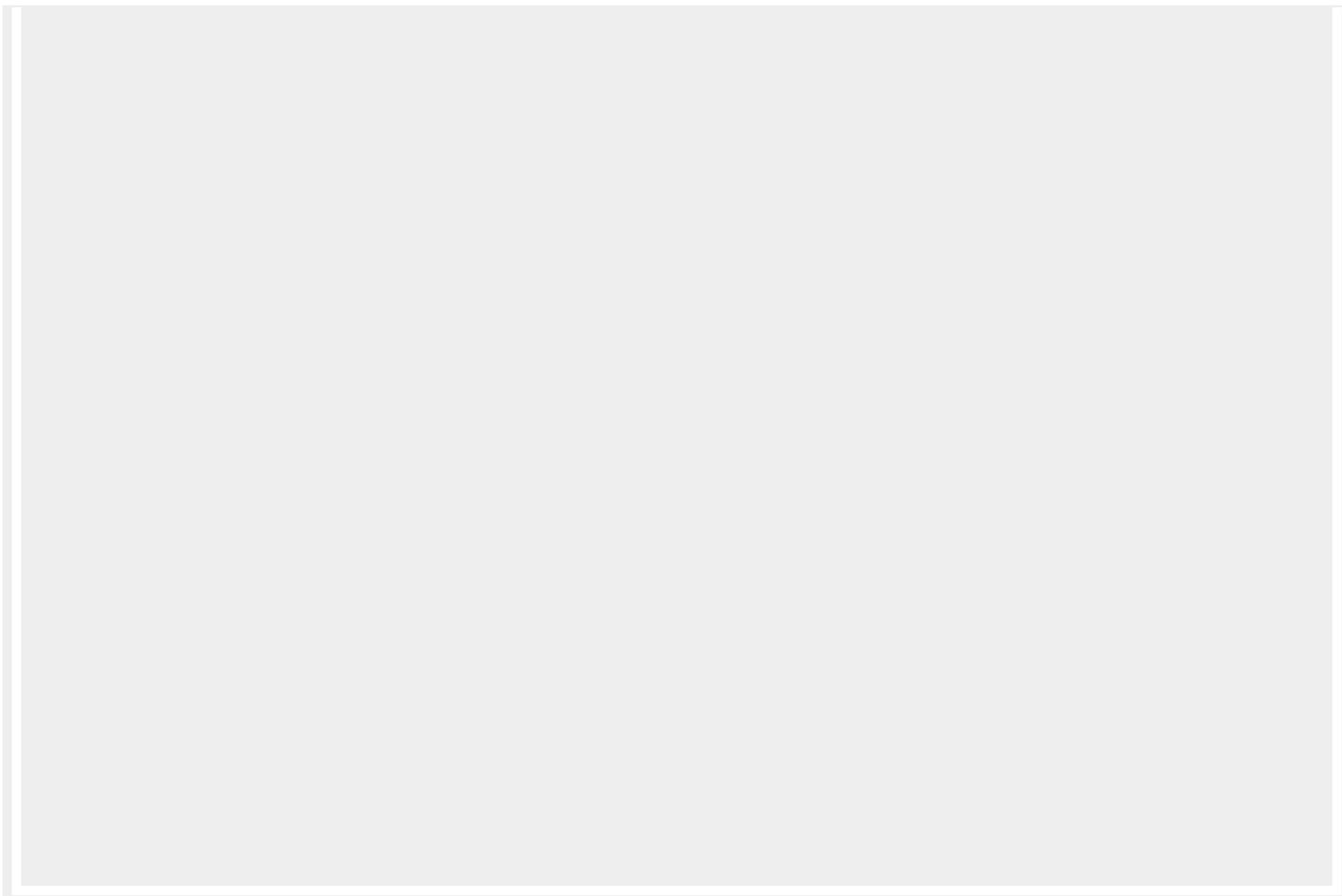


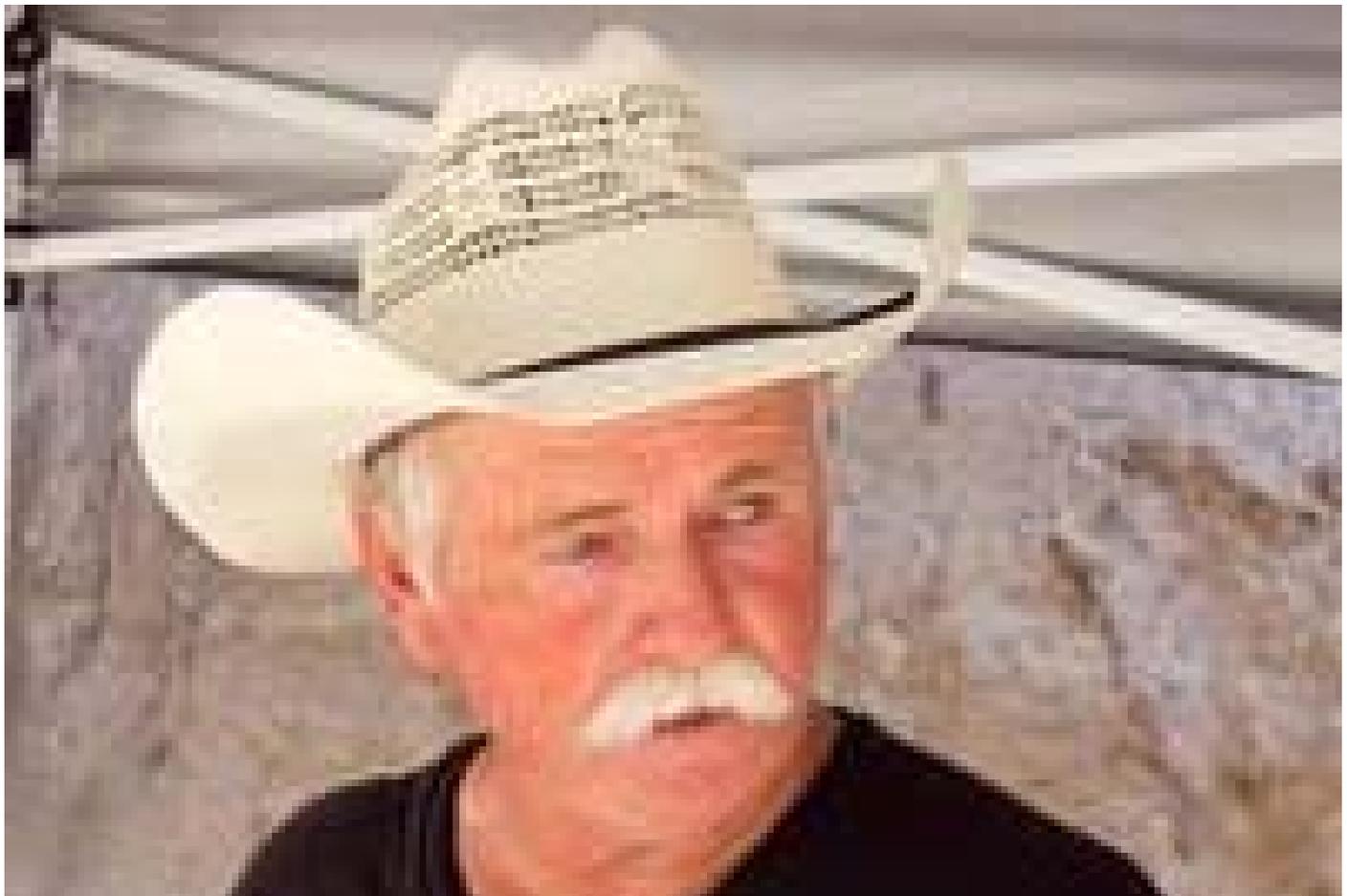
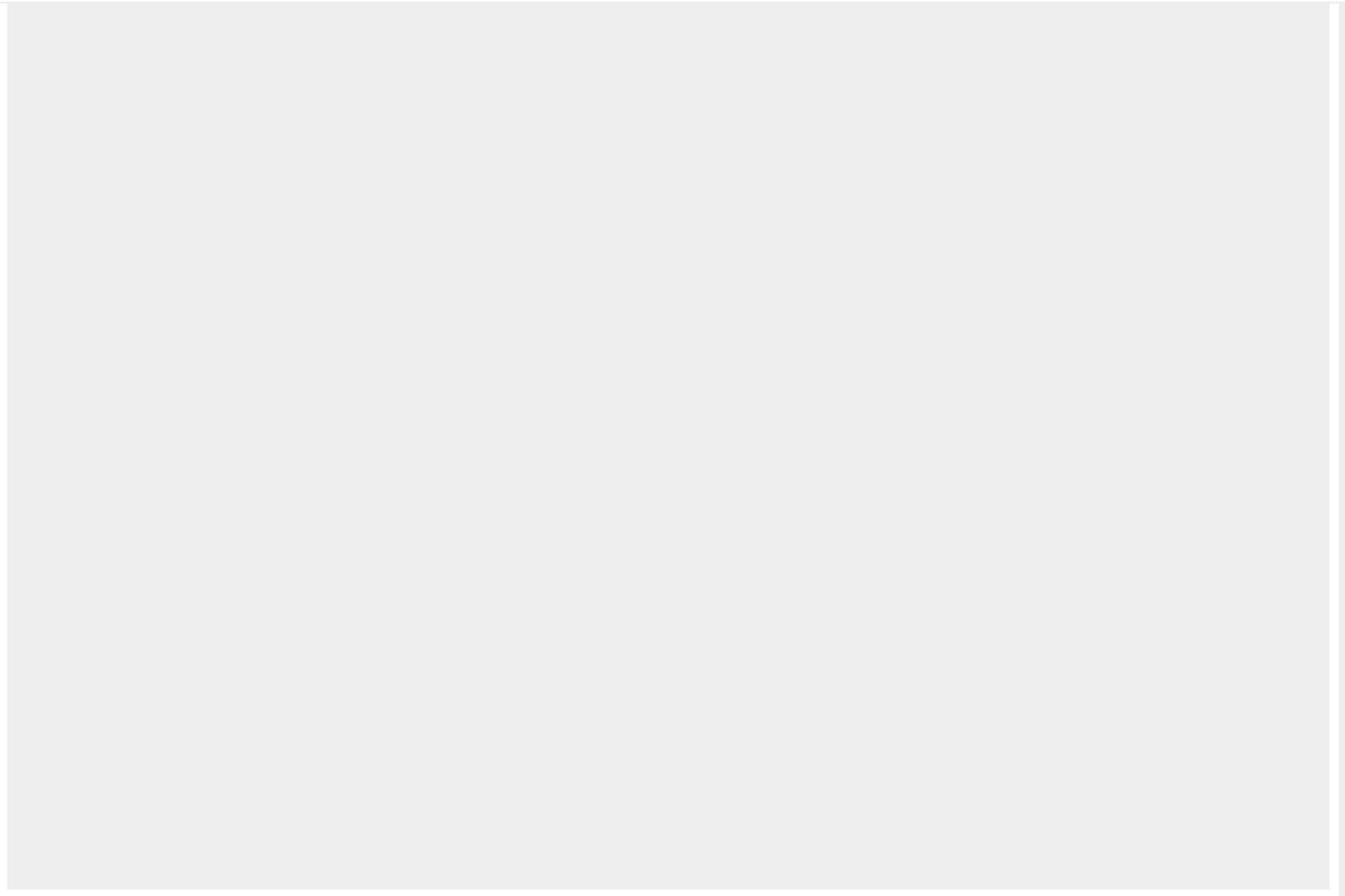








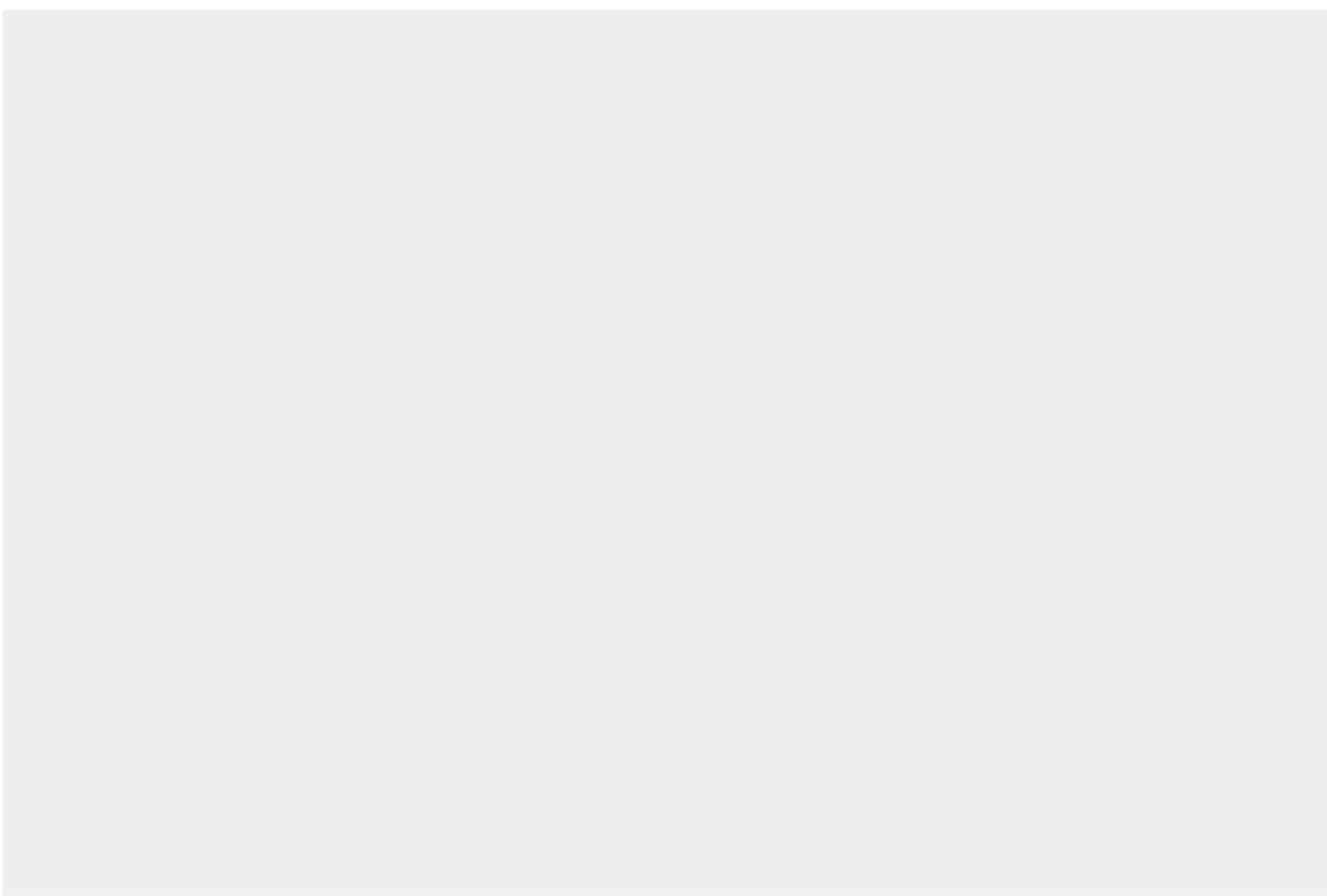
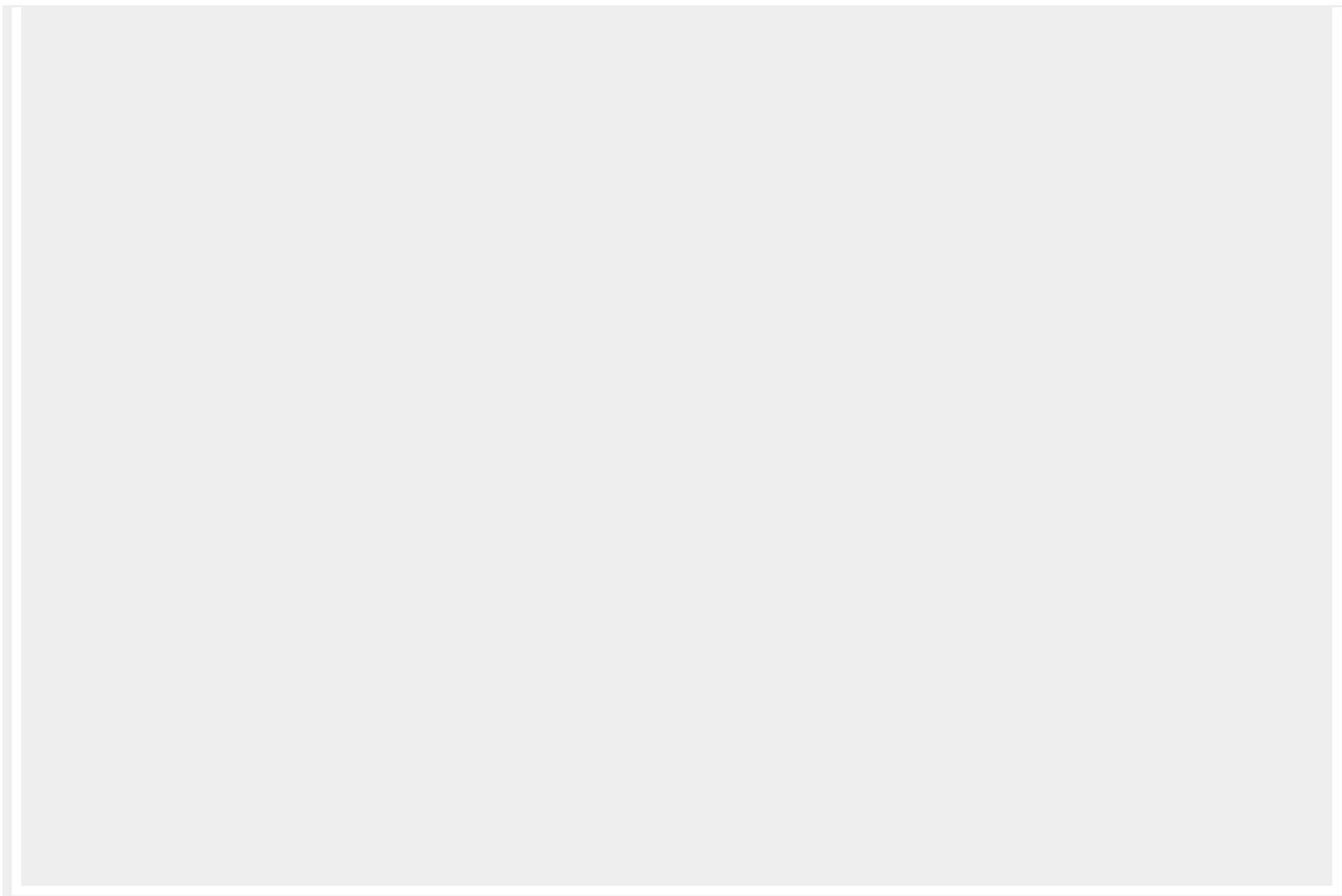


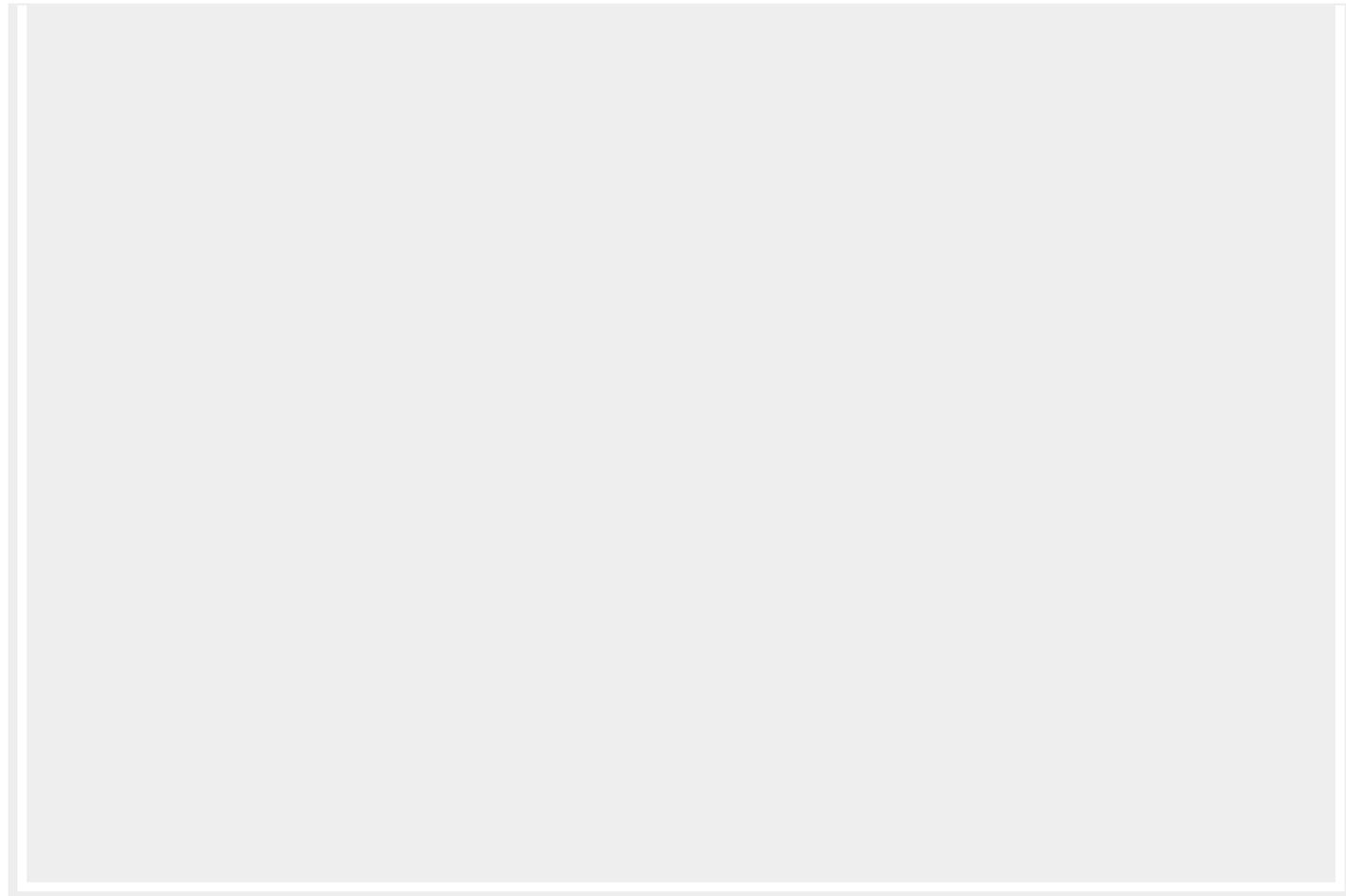












NEAR BERCLAIR - Amateur archaeologist David Calame, 58, marveled at how he came to be standing in a dusty hole cut deep into an east Bee County ranch Sunday afternoon.

"All these years, I never would have thought I'd end up having fun digging ditches," said Calame, who divides his time between hunting artifacts and owning Calame Contracting, an underground utility contracting business.

Calame and his friend and fellow artifact hound Dusty Clark, 61, spent their weekend on John Blackburn's sprawling family ranch, enduring the overbearing heat of a South Texas sun.

They worked on buried ground that once was trod by mammoths, car-sized armadillos, thousand-pound ground sloths and other long-lost wonders.

But the pair was in search of far-more fascinating creatures, Calame said.

Armed with a backhoe, shovels, buckets and a burning desire to break scientific ground, they were there in search of human artifacts more than 10,000 years old.

"If a group of (humans) came by here and camped here once a week and discarded one old arrowhead here every year 14,000 years ago, there would be 14,000 of

them," Calame said. "That's a lot of time."

After finding an arrowhead as a child, Calame began a lifelong love affair with archaeology. And on Sunday, he continued that passion as he and Clark painstakingly shoveled dirt from a 5-foot-by-5-foot hole about 20 feet beneath a steep hill carved by the Blanco Creek.

With a fine wire mesh, Calame and Clark sifted through the ancient earth, hoping to separate history from soil.

Although he has yet to find a motherlode under Blackburn's property, Calame thinks the site has the potential to yield new evidence demonstrating prehistoric humans settled the area for far longer than once thought. So far, he has found a flint flake that could be the result of tool-making and a dusty ring of ancient soil possibly bearing evidence of an about 10,000-year-old fire pit.

But the dust and dirt under Blackburn's ranch previously has borne secrets of the past in vast quantities - some of which are millions of years old.

John Blackburn

Growing up, ranch owner John Blackburn, 36, heard stories of what lay beneath his family's land.

In 2014, Blackburn received a letter from Steve May, a research associate with the University of Texas at Austin's Vertebrate Paleontology Laboratory, asking permission to examine the property.

May had learned of a joint excavation by the Works Progress Administration and Bureau of Economic Geology that removed thousands of fossilized animal remains, including skulls belonging to gomphotheres, an elephantlike animal with a spoon-shaped jaw and long, protruding tusks.

Many of those fossils were wrapped in plaster and archived at the University of Texas for later study.

But after the excavation was filled in and abandoned in 1941, the site's exact location was left a mystery.

"We were looking for something that was about 200 feet long, and it has been filled in, so where do you start? Well, this is where we started," said Blackburn, jumping from the cab of his pickup into a mostly dry creekbed where Calame and Clark were working Sunday.

With the aid of aging aerial maps, outdated charts and a drawing sketched on a library catalog card from the University of Texas, Calame and Blackburn have come to think they have found the 1939 dig.

Although black-and-white photographs show a vastly different terrain, they are confident they are working in the right area.

Steve May

For May, the cooperation of the Blackburns has been an essential resource in conducting his research.

"They have basically allowed me to come in whenever I want - except for hunting season, and I don't want to be there then," the researcher said.

Working on his own far from the dusty dig site favored by Calame and Clark, May has visited the ranch more than 10 times in search of tiny fossils. He prefers to walk along the steep creekbeds where water has done much of the digging for him.

"What I'm really interested in is (finding) the smaller animals in the fauna," he said. Where the inexperienced eye may see grains of sand or fragments of rock, May is able to distinguish fossils.

Since starting his search at the property, he said he has unearthed, documented and archived numerous teeth and bones belonging to mice, fish and other small animals dating to millions of years ago.

"It's kind of forensics in a way," he said.

And the fossils he has found amid the countless 30-pound bags of soil carried on his back from the creekbeds are proving valuable to his work.

May said he is making progress in a draft manuscript about the estimated 10-million-year-old ecology of South Texas. He said he plans to publish that report for scientific peer review.

He said he hopes to somehow share that information with nearby libraries and schools in an effort to share his findings with nearby residents.

"It's piecing together all these bits," May said. "It's an interesting puzzle."

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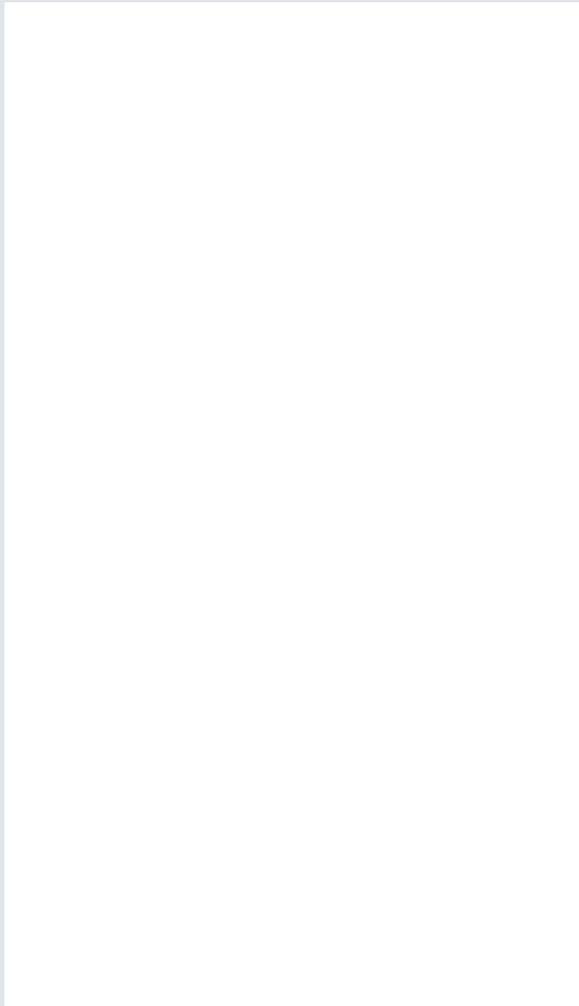
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