Evolution in the Dog Family

The story of dogs began in North America, and Oregon hosts a rich fossil record of their evolution. Dogs that specialized for eating meat rose to the top of the food chain—but dogs with more flexible diets outlasted them.

Dogs evolved from an omnivorous to a carnivorous diet three times over the last 35 million years. The earliest dogs were facultative omnivores—eating both plants and meat. Some descendants split into new groups specialized for meat eating. As predators, these carnivorous dogs were at risk of extinction if their prey disappeared. Whenever meat-eating dogs disappeared, other omnivorous dogs had a chance to evolve into carnivores. Today, as in the past, dogs with both diets live side by side.

Look at the illustrations of the three waves of dogs.

Do the dogs in each wave have similar body types?

What can body shape tell us about dog evolution?

Which living dogs maintain the diet of their common ancestor?

Which single group of dogs has lasted the longest?