

What was the smallest dinosaur?



For years the tiny Jurassic theropod *Compsognathus longipes* held the title of smallest dinosaur. *C. longipes* was 90 centimeters long and only weighed as much as a guinea pig. Some books have cited the Triassic theropod *Saltopus* as the smallest dinosaur, but the only known specimen is incomplete and very badly preserved, so it's impossible to tell how big

Saltopus really was, or even if it's a dinosaur at all.

Recently, however, other fossils have come to light that challenge the right of *C. longipes* to the title. For one thing, another *Compsognathus* skeleton turned up that was quite larger than the original, 125 centimeters long. This may indicate that the original specimen was only a juvenile, although some scientists think that the larger specimen is a different and larger species, *Compsognathus corallestris*.

Recently, several skeletons of even tinier dinosaurs have been discovered in the Liaoning province of China. The smallest is *Microraptor zhaoianus*, which was only 41 centimeters long from the head to the tip of its tail. The tail was very long and thin and wouldn't have added much to the animal's mass. In life, *M. zhaoianus* wouldn't have weighed more than a gerbil!

Two other dinosaurs smaller than *C. longipes* have been discovered recently-- *Microraptor gui*, also from Liaoning, and *Scipionyx* from Italy. *M. gui* is 77 centimeters long. *Scipionyx* is 46 centimeters long, but the only known specimen is a juvenile, so *Scipionyx* might have grown quite a bit larger as an adult.

