

《科学家发现非洲以外人类最古老的脚印遗迹》

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Scientists have discovered the earliest evidence of human footprints outside of Africa, on the Norfolk Coast in the East of England.

The footprints are more than 800,000 years old and were found on the shores of Happisburgh.

They are direct evidence of the earliest known humans in northern Europe.

Details of the extraordinary markings have been published in the science journal Plos One.

The footprints have been described as "one of the most important discoveries, if not the most important discovery that has been made on [Britain's] shores," by Dr Nick Ashton of the British Museum.

"It will rewrite our understanding of the early human occupation of Britain and indeed of Europe," he told BBC News.

The markings were first indentified in May last year during a low tide. Rough seas had eroded the sandy beach to reveal a series of elongated hollows.

I walked with Dr Ashton along the shore where the discovery was made. He recalled how he and a colleague stumbled across the hollows: "At the time, I wondered 'could these really be the case? If it was the case, these could be the earliest footprints outside Africa and that would be absolutely incredible."

Such discoveries are very rare. The Happisburgh footprints are the only ones of this age in Europe and there are only three other sets that are older, all of which are in Africa.

"At first, we weren't sure what we were seeing," Dr Ashton told me, "but it was soon clear that the hollows resembled human footprints."

The hollows were washed away not long after they were identified. The team were, however, able to capture the footprints on video that will be shown at an exhibition at London's Natural History Museum later this month.

The video shows the researchers on their hands and knees in cold, driving rain, engaged in a race against time to record the hollows. Dr Ashton recalls how they scooped out rainwater from the footprints so that they could be photographed. "But the rain was filling the hollows as quickly as we could empty them," he told me.

