



John McKew, the Brooklyn-born son of Co. Westmeath immigrants, is pictured in his office at the Bronx Zoo with the antlers of a giant Irish elk. Photo courtesy of the New York Zoological Society.

Irish *NATURAL* History in New York

The borough of the Bronx is rich in Irish American history, but a treasure of Irish *natural* history was recently brought to our attention by Timothy O'Sullivan, Deputy Director of Administrative Services of the New York Zoological Society (The Bronx Zoo).

The antlers pictured above were from *Megaceros giganteus*, the giant Irish elk which became extinct, in Ireland, about 10,000 years ago.

Pat Thomas, also from the New York Zoological Society, provided further information about the elk:

"The most prominent feature was its enormous antlers, which weighed more than 45 kg (99 lbs.) and spanned up to 3 m (10 ft.). It had the largest antlers of any known deer, although its body size was no bigger than that of a present day moose.

Assuming that they replaced their antlers annually, and that the new antlers grew during a four month span (as occurs with extant cervids), *Megaceros* antlers probably grew at a rate of several centimeters each day. To fuel this incredible growth, the deer needed a diet that was very high in calcium. From the location of most fossils, it seems that the Irish elk probably inhabited calcium-rich plains and lowlands rather than higher elevations. Presumably they preferred grazing to browsing."

It is uncertain how or when the antlers were acquired by the Society. At present, this extraordinarily well-preserved relic of ancient Ireland is in the office of John McKew, Director of Administrative Services at the Society.

—Susan Neill