They lived 205 million years ago, dominating the oceans just as dinosaurs were becoming the undisputed masters on land

A jawbone fossil found on a rocky English beach belongs to one of the biggest marine animals on record, a type of seagoing reptile called an ichthyosaur that scientists estimated at up to 85 feet (26 meters) long - approaching the size of a blue whale. Scientists said on April 9 that this ichthyosaur, which appears to be the largest marine reptile ever discovered, lived 205 million years ago at the end of the Triassic Period, dominating the oceans just as dinosaurs were becoming the undisputed masters on land. The bone, called a surangular, was part of its lower jaw.

The researchers estimated the animal's length by comparing this surangular to the same bone in the largest ichthyosaur skeleton ever found, a species called Shonisaurus sikanniensis from British Columbia that was 69 feet (21 meters) long. The newly discovered bone was 25 percent larger.

“This bone belonged to a giant,” said University of Manchester paleontologist Dean Lomax.

“The entire carcass was probably very similar to a whale fall in which a dead whale drops to the bottom of the sea floor, where an entire ecosystem of animals feeds on the carcass for a very long time. After that, bones become separated, and we suspect that's what happened to our isolated bone.”

Fossil collector Paul de la Salle, affiliated with the Etches Collection in Dorset, England, found the bone in 2016 at Lilstock on England's Somerset coast along the Bristol Channel.

“The structure was in the form of growth rings, like that of a tree, and I'd seen something similar before in the jaws of late Jurassic ichthyosaurs,” he said.

Ichthyosaurs swam the world's oceans from 250 million years ago to 90 million years ago, preying on squid and fish.