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Natural History Museum's New Hall Is Stuffed With Innovative Displays

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The new mammal hall represents the largest renovation of the National Museum of Natural History since the building opened in 1910.

It is more than three times the size of the old one. Installing it took three years and was spurred by a \$20 million gift from Behring. Three hundred scientists, taxidermists and designers worked on the project. Total cost: \$31.3 million.

What they have produced is amusing and awe-inspiring. The innovative design abandons the painted dioramas that have been part of museums for more than 100 years.

The poses of animals not only give clues to their behavior but also show off the ways they have adapted. For example, a koala bear is shown gripping a pole, but the pole is clear Lucite, which allows the visitor to see how the structure of the tree-dwelling animal's palms and claws make climbing easier. The claws of a greater bulldog bat are clutching a small fish to show how this bat is equipped to pluck food out of a pond.

There are fanciful juxtapositions: The pink fairy armadillo is not far from the walrus. The armadillo is four inches long; the walrus is nine feet.

Throughout the hall, the specimens are augmented with interactive computer displays, flip doors, touchable objects and lots of audio. As visitors study the rain forest, they can use flashlights to reflect the "eye shine" of the nocturnal mammals. In the main area, a series of television screens set in the floor play videos that show animals adapting to the dry and wet seasons.

The designers gave special attention to the needs of children. Nearly 60 percent of the visitors at the Natural History Museum are families with children under the age of 10. Most of the animals are encased in glass, but the curators left plenty of things for children to handle. They can touch bones and fossils. They can walk on top of fossilized footprints of a 1.5 million-year-old hominid. They can get down on the floor and crawl into tunnels built to resemble animal burrows. They can touch the leathery skin of a model platypus egg. They can open the pouch of the model of a red-necked wallaby. There are also sound zones, where children can listen to calls and sounds, such as the noise a giraffe makes when it is chewing leaves and straw.



A Grey's zebra, fetchingly posed by taxidermists, inhabits the African watering hole exhibit in the National Museum of Natural History's new mammal hall.



A pair of lions and an African buffalo are among the 274 stuffed specimens.



In the new hall, a leopard rests in a tree and a huge hippopotamus gazes at visitors. A red howler monkey and her baby, right, are in the South American section. A baby Huon tree kangaroo, bottom left, peeps from its mother's pouch.



Gallery design by REICH + FETCH

* as edited from the full length article



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