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Smithsonian adds to its wealth of museums

A hall that gives mammals a high-tech look

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WASHINGTON -- For those pining for the sight of a pink fairy armadillo, large tree shrew, blue wildebeest, Gunther's dik-dik, bushpig, bush dog, Spix's disk-winged bat, greater spear-nosed bat, armored rat or grasshopper mouse, there is good news.

You needn't travel to Africa or some such exotic place to satisfy your yearning. A trip to the National Mall here will now suffice.

This weekend, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History opened its new Hall of Mammals, a sprawling, 25,000-square-foot interior expanse that will be home to well-preserved specimens of the creatures named above, plus 264 others, including the short-beaked echidna, the Chinese water deer and the white rhinoceros.

In marked contrast to its dull, staid and scholarly predecessor space, the new hall is an airy, lively, friendly and very accessible place--abundantly equipped with high-tech interactive screens, displays and devices to make it inviting and interesting for children.

There is a decided emphasis on making the animals as animated and lifelike as possible, arranging them in natural (and sometimes intimidating) settings and poses (modern day taxidermy involves not "stuffing" the creatures but stretching their skins over custom-designed Styrofoam molded forms that allow for every conceivable position).

Thus one of the giraffes to be on view has splayed its legs and bent down its long neck and head to drink from a water hole, while the other is fully erect, pulling leaves from a tree with its blue, prehensile, 21-inch tongue.

The hall is dedicated to reminding visitors that the history of life on Earth is a history of evolution, and that, when contemplating such creatures as the bongo, the Dzhungarian hamster and the crested macaque, museumgoers will be looking at their own, however distant, relatives.

"The exhibit is designed with families and children in mind and reminds us all that we are also mammals," said museum director Cristian Samper.

In fact, human beings are represented in one of the displays, though thankfully not as skin-covered Styrofoam form. In one of the exhibition hall's interactive "discovery zones" there's a high-tech night

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vision system that allows visitors to view a nocturnal rain forest as a human sees things in that lack of light, and then, for comparison, to view it through the eyes, as it were, of a vampire bat or northern night monkey.

The exhibition is arranged in sections focusing on four continents--Africa, North America, South America and Australia--chosen for their diversity of animals and climate, and for extremes of evolution. There is a "discovery zone" for each continent.

The centerpiece, logically enough, is the Africa section. This is organized around the aforementioned water hole, as well as a jungle display, a replicated patch of Saharan desert and a tableau that pits two meat-eating lions against the mighty but vegetarian water buffalo.

Here you will learn that evolution gave the zebra its stripes as a protective marking because, when the animals are mingled together in a herd, the stripes make it harder for a predator like the lion to pick out an individual zebra to attack.

Also in the Africa section are a display of scavengers and a large termite mound, and the floor is inlaid with the replicated footprints of an early hominid (human ancestor) millions of years old.

And you'll also be able to enjoy, through sound and visual effects, a recurring representation of a rainstorm ending the long African dry season.

The North America section is presided over by a large brown bear and has subsections devoted to the creatures of temperate climate prairies and forests, and the Arctic far north. In its "discovery zone," one can touch a refrigerated ground squirrel kept at hibernating temperature.

On the other side of this "discovery zone" is a charming exhibit on rodents, which can far exceed the size of the dreaded Norway rat. There's a rodent in South America, for example, that can weigh up to 100 pounds, and there was once a now-extinct (thank heavens) rodent larger than a grizzly bear.

The South American section is divided between an exhibit about the top (or canopy) of that continent's fabled rain forest and another about the rain forest's floor.

The three-toed sloth and red howler monkey can be found in the former while the giant anteater and bush dog hang out in the latter.

Australia's exhibits are divided between rain forest and grassland. Its mammals include the only two that lay eggs--the echidna and the platypus.

There is the obligatory kangaroo, of course, an animal that can hop for miles at a cruising speed of about 15 miles per hour and rev up to a top hop speed of 30 m.p.h.

At a separate Evolution Theater, where one shares seating with a life-like chimpanzee, an eight-minute video gives the history of mammal evolution--starting about 210 million years ago.

Back then, there was only one continent on the planet, which scientists call Pangaea, wherein dwelt a four-inch, shrew-like mammal called the Morganucodon oehleri, which is said to be an ancestor of us all.

The National Museum of Natural History is located at 10th Street and Constitution Avenue, N.W., in Washington; 202-357-2700; www.mnh.si.edu. There is no admission fee, but visitors are required to pass through metal detectors.

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