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Smithsonian opens new mammal hall

Spectacular display of taxidermy



Carl E. Hansen / AP

A stuffed vampire bat rests on a model of a sleeping scientist's foot, recalling a real incident where the bat feasted on the scientist's foot.

By Randolph E. Schmid
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON, Nov. 13 — A towering moose stands nose to nose with a furry little pika. A porcupine huddles nearby in a child-level display. Around a corner, a vampire bat sets tooth to a sleeping scientist's foot. A spectacular display of the taxidermist's art goes on view to the public Saturday when the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History opens its new mammal hall.

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In the Arctic section, startled viewers suddenly see a polar bear looking down from above, while in the African savanna a hippo yawns, displaying a mouthful that would traumatize an orthodontist.

“THIS HALL IS ABOUT US,” said Robert Sullivan, associate director of the museum. “Everyone who visits this hall is a mammal ... a successfully adapted mammal.”

The new exhibition contains 11 fossils and 274 preserved animals in dynamic displays, as they would have been seen in life.

“Children of all ages will be very pleased,” said Lawrence Small, head of the Smithsonian Institution.

A pair of lions attacks a water buffalo. A giraffe, front legs splayed, stretches for a drink of water while a second reaches an impressive tongue upward to pull in some leaves for a meal.

Recalling a real incident, a vampire bat rests on a model of the scientist’s foot where a live bat once feasted — a display Sullivan expects youngsters to love “because it will gross out their parents.”

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“We’re setting a new standard in taxidermy here,” said Sullivan, explaining that museum scientists told their taxidermists, “We don’t want to show animals in the dullest moment of their lives ... as most museums do.”

The massive moose seems almost to smile as he ponders a shelf holding the little pika, a mountain creature sometimes called a rock rabbit. Below, a little mole rests atop a granite block that Sullivan says raises it up to show its importance.

“Attention to elegant detail is the way you show

respect for nature," said Sullivan.

Visitors entering the exhibition first meet a wall of photos of various mammals — animals that share such characteristics as specialized ear bones and secrete milk to feed the young. Included are cats and dogs, manatees, apes and monkeys.

All mammals are descended from a common ancestor. The exhibition discusses how evolution produced today's great variety from the tiny shrew-like creature, *Morganucodon oelheri*.

Affectionately known as Morgie to the scientists, this creature lived in the shadow of dinosaurs 210 million years ago and is represented by a bronze model and bigger than life fuzzy toys for sale in the museum shop.

An eight-minute video traces that evolution for visitors, who watch in the company of Harriet, a life-size sculpture of a chimpanzee seated on one of the benches.

Visitors can walk over clear glass atop casts of footprints of an ancient hominid in Africa, enjoy the sights and sounds of an African thunderstorm displayed on screens in the walls, and touch bear paws and feel blubber.

None of the animals on display was killed for this exhibit, Sullivan points out.

Formally known as the Kenneth E. Behring Family Hall of Mammals, for the philanthropist whose donation made it possible, the permanent exhibition covers more than half an acre of space renovated to its original Beaux Arts design and architecture. The California businessman donated \$17.2 million of the \$31.3 million cost of renovating the hall and creating the new exhibition.

The museum opened in 1910, but in World War I this wing was turned into government offices and has remained subdivided since. The new hall brings it back to the open plan originally designed with 54-foot ceilings and sunlight flooding through skylights.

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