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See the toe-sucking bat!

Come Meet Your Relatives!

Smithsonian's Mammal Hall: It's a Zoo in There

Tuesday, November 11, 2003; Page C16

They're HAIRY! They drink milk from their

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mothers! And guess what?

They are MAMMALS, and YOU are one of them!

The Smithsonian is opening a new mammal hall Saturday, and it's meant to help families understand that they are part of a bigger family -- the mammal family.

The Kenneth E. Behring Family Hall of Mammals (it's part of the Natural History Museum at 10th and Constitution) is like a three-dimensional portrait gallery of our motley family crew, freezing some of them in amazing poses:

The bobcat is standing up on its hind legs and stretching its forepaws to snag a bird. Lions are sinking their teeth and claws into an African buffalo. A maned wolf is arching up in a graceful pounce.

Several areas in the exhibit are interactive: Visitors to the new hall will be able to touch life-like models of vampire bat teeth and beaver dung. They also can step in the footsteps of hominids, ancient pre-humans.

One of the main goals of the redone museum is to show how mammals have evolved over millions of years, some adapting to changing habitats and climates, others going extinct. (The oldest mammal whose fossils have been found is a Morganucodon oehleri, "Morgie" for short. It's about four inches long and looks like a shrew. It's the common ancestor of all mammals.)

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Most of the 274 animals in the exhibit are the preserved bodies of animals that died natural deaths. The Smithsonian sent out a "wish list" of species, asking zoos or other organizations to send the bodies of any animals that have died of old age or disease. Some of the animals on exhibit were killed by Kenneth Behring, the businessman and big-game hunter who gave the museum \$20 million for the new exhibit. But curator Sally Love said no animals were killed specifically to be put in the hall.

Fern Shen describes some favorites from the exhibit: Definitely not cute or cuddly, just oddly cool.

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