

# UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

## Mann Wildlife Learning Museum Showcases Wildlife Conservation through Education

By Kim G. Nix, Managing Editor

Observing a polar bear in the wild is not something many of us will ever have the opportunity to experience. The same can be said for many other species of North American wild animals. Thanks to the efforts of The Montgomery Zoo and wildlife enthusiast George P. Mann, many of these animals can be viewed up close and personal by all.



The Mann Wildlife Learning Museum, acquired last year by the Montgomery Area Zoological Society, provides an opportunity to look at over 70 life-size mounted exhibits of wild animals. The acquisition of this facility makes the Montgomery Zoo one of only three zoos that host both live and still action exhibits.



### ***From Dream To Reality***

Mann conceived the idea for the museum in 1978 when he visited the Museum of Natural History in New York City. That museum had two very large moose, but they were behind glass and some 30 feet from the person viewing the exhibit. He thought, why not have a museum where people can appreciate the immensity of animals like the moose? The ideal setting would be one where people could walk around the animals to get a true perspective of their size. Mann achieved this by putting the animals in individual cases so they are visible from at least three sides. Background murals and natural items such as leaves, dirt and twigs enhance the exhibits. The murals are recreated from actual photographs taken by Mann at the location the animal lived.



PHOTOS BY BILLY POPE





The Mann Museum was originally located in Opelika, Alabama. All of the large animals were taken by hunting with a bow and arrow and the edible meat was consumed. The young animals, birds, reptiles, and other natural materials were donated to the museum by different state game and fish departments or by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. These donated animals died of natural causes. The taxidermy work was done by world class taxidermist Henry Inchumuk, who was a curator at the Denver Museum of Natural History for 33 years and helped Mann formulate plans for the creation of the museum.

Text in each case describes the animal and its habitat. The descriptions are written at a level that children can understand. When first developing the museum, Mann took seven first grade teachers through it and they helped write a description for each animal.

“The main thing I wanted to try to do was to get young people to appreciate the animals,” said Mann. “I wanted to teach the children that sportsmen are not killers but are the true conservationists of the world.”

## **Museum’s New Home**

Several factors led to Mann seeking another location for his museum, not the least of which was so that he could enjoy retirement. “I wanted to fish every day, and I wanted to be sure of what would happen to it after I’m gone,” he said. Mann was flattered that many entities were interested in obtaining the Museum. “We had many big time players that wanted it,” he said. In the end, he chose the Montgomery Zoo as the museum’s new home. The Montgomery Zoological Society made it happen by procuring the funds to construct the building. Museum admission receipts currently go toward offsetting this loan.

Deputy Zoo Director Marcia Woodard says the match was a plus for both sides. “Our whole goal has been to piggyback on people who are already coming to the zoo,” she said. The Montgomery Zoo averages 285,000 visitors a year. Many of those are choosing to also visit the Mann Museum. Entrance is available separately or as part of a zoo/museum combo admission price. Currently the museum has its own entrance and is also accessible from the zoo by a walkway. Accessibility from the zoo will improve when the new elephant exhibit is complete in the near future; a bridge will lead from it to the museum.

The museum is already popular with school and scout groups. In preparation for a visit, teachers are sent an informational

packet so they can share some background about the museum and the animals with their students.

Museum Attendant Deborah Stewart says that since most people have never seen these animals up close, many are surprised by their size. “People can’t believe how large the bears, moose and deer are,” she said. The most talked-about exhibits are usually the polar bear and the wolves, she adds. The polar bear is standing on two legs and is well over 10 feet tall.

Also popular are the “touch and feel” exhibits. Different furs and antlers are in cases that allow visitors to reach in and touch them. Children in particular like these kinds of exhibits.

The museum also allows an air conditioned respite from the heat during the summer. Zoo visitors can cool off while learning about wildlife and conservation.

Additional amenities contained in the museum are a gift shop and a seminar room. This room, which can seat up to 200 people, can be booked for receptions, meetings, parties and other gatherings. Catering facilities are available as well.

## **Conservation Featured**

Upon entering the museum, one of the first displays visitors see is about the many facets of conservation in Alabama. The Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries is featured with exhibits about conservation history, tools used by biologists and photos depicting conservation careers.

When the museum moved to Montgomery, Mann asked that the Alabama Department of Conservation’s Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries and the U.S. Department of Interior Fish and Wildlife Service be given a display area. The concept behind the idea was to give visitors some information about how conservation in Alabama and the nation has evolved over the years. A large wall display explains the Pittman-Robertson Act and the role hunters have in funding restoration and management of numerous species of wildlife.

“We’re thrilled with the opportunity to share information about our programs with the public,” said Corky Pugh, director of the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division. “Most people probably aren’t aware of the diverse jobs handled by our fisheries biologists, wildlife biologists and enforcement officers. The display touches on each of these aspects.”


A big screen television in the Conservation display area continuously plays an exciting video about Alabama’s diverse outdoors. Another wall depicts Division

personnel performing their jobs. A display case holds uniforms worn by Conservation officers over the years.

Alabama’s “Conservation Pioneers” are featured on another wall. Many who visit the museum are not familiar with names like Col. E.F. Allison, Mist’ Fred T. Stimpson, Dr. Homer Swingle, James S. Radcliff and Capt’n Ed Powell. However, we have all benefited from the efforts of these pioneers to conserve wildlife populations and improve the management of our natural resources. “We want to familiarize visitors with the Alabamians who are responsible in large part for the abundance of our state’s wildlife, fisheries and forestland,” said Pugh. “These men were the backbone of Alabama’s early conservation efforts. Without them we would not be where we are today.”

## **Conclusion**

Although the museum has a new home, don’t expect Mann to abandon his venture. He and his family are on the museum’s Board of Directors and have a very keen interest in its future. “I will stay involved the rest of my life,” Mann said.

Recently Mann was inducted into the Alabama Sports Hall of Fame, one of many honors he holds. While he is considered one of the state’s leading outdoorsmen, he doesn’t forget where the future lies. Mann is extremely involved in mentoring young people and recruiting new hunters and anglers. He speaks to numerous groups of young people and shares with them the value of proper management and wise use of natural resources. He’s pleased with the reaction he gets from the children and believes the future looks bright. “I think the world’s going to be in good hands.” 

## **Mann Wildlife Learning Museum & The Montgomery Zoo**

### **Location**

The Zoo and the Mann Museum are located south of Northern Blvd. between Lower Wetumpka Rd. and Coliseum Blvd. Access to the Zoo and Museum is available from Northern Blvd., Vandiver Blvd. or Fairground Rd.

### **Hours**

Daily: 9 a.m. - 5 p.m.

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