

A Morning at the Museum

By Dennis Knight

I remember a trip to the Colorado Museum of Natural History in Denver's City Park when I was a toddler. I was there many more times growing up, and have made visits in later years with my boys. I decided this morning to drive over and renew old memories at Montview and Colorado.

The institution traces its roots to the work of Edwin Carter, a pioneer naturalist devoted to the study of Colorado birds. The building itself dates to 1908 and had major expansions in 1940, 1968 and 1983. It's now the Denver Museum of Nature & Science and the largest natural history museum in the western United States. It's a wonderful place full of everything from musk ox to Mars rovers, and it deserves days of wandering and wondering, not just the few hours people usually spend.

There are entire wings devoted to space exploration, mummies, gems and minerals, good health, insects and butterflies, birds, and dinosaurs. All too much for a brief essay, so today I'm concentrating on the very nucleus of the institution, those grand dioramas depicting wildlife in their natural habitats all over the world. This June morning I will sit and contemplate various displays and imagine them coming to life.

It's a crisp winter morning, and bison are right there in front of me on a high point overlooking Rocky Flats. A bull idly watches a cow rolling on the snowy ground, heavily insulated in her furry coat. I can almost hear her grunts of appreciation as she scratches her back on the friendly, rough terrain. A jack rabbit camouflaged for winter stands alert among the beasts. It's his domain for the moment, but he is about to spring for a new one as his big ears detect the shriek of a golden eagle soaring above.

I move to another window, and I'm mesmerized by a mountain lion hovering over the white-tailed deer she has carried home to her babies, a magnificent dinner for this sunny afternoon in the foothills. Four spotted kittens rush to the feast. They will never know their father, who left mom after a brief courtship in the manner of his dad and fathers before him. The descriptive museum signs are full of information like that but usually go unread in favor of the beautiful scenes portrayed.

A diorama of bighorn sheep in the Tarryall area of South Park shows these kings in all their glory. It is fascinating to see the three dimensional model of their feet, toes spread and pointed with rubbery inner pads to grip narrow, steeply inclined surfaces and buffer the impact as they leap from protrusion to protrusion, sometimes dropping twenty feet. The bighorns of Colorado were decimated by disease in the late nineteenth century and first four decades of the twentieth, when in 1940 a new herd was introduced in the Tarryall Mountains. The healthy sheep we now see in Rocky Mountain National Park, Mount Evans and other parts of the state descended mostly from that Tarryall herd.

Elk with handsome racks bark in a grove, enjoying the tasty white skin of the plentiful aspen. Barking doesn't directly harm the tree, but there is a risk of infection as it heals. Every trunk in the grove displays a history of black scars. If you push the button below the diorama you hear an elk bugle, and momentarily another bull answers, eagerly taking the challenge to a duel. Push it a couple more times and you're ready to lock horns yourself.

As the first hour of the museum's morning proceeds, the halls fill with young families and I enjoy the enthusiasm of children as they dart to and fro in the hall, their eyes briefly catching fascinating things like a snake or an owl in the corner of some diorama. Their attention span is so brief that I really can't identify with them or put myself in their place. I suppose I was that way too as a four year old at the museum, but if so, I don't understand how I have such complete mental impressions of grizzlies, polar bears, walrus and turtles. A lot must register in those nanoseconds.

My trips to the Denver Museum of Nature and Science are too infrequent. Perhaps I should buy a season pass and spend a few of my free mornings and afternoons there. I'll explore outer space in the inner spaces, squint at the sparkling gems upstairs, and walk again with the dinosaurs. I really should plunder that traveling exhibit of real pirates. The stars of the Gates Planetarium would remind me of sleeping under the Wyoming sky. All of that is waiting, but I suspect every future trip will still include some time at the dioramas. How much could a senior membership be?