



## Virginia Living Museum's visitors find themselves surrounded by wildlife

### Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network / By Karl Blankenship

It hardly seemed a likely place for a walk on the wild side. Yet in the distance of three-quarters of a mile, the elevated boardwalk led visitors through coastal plain wetlands to mountain bobcat hideouts. Walking above streams and wetlands, and under towering trees, it was hard to believe that this was the middle of a major metropolitan area.

But at the Virginia Living Museum, visitors get to plunge into the state's major habitats—both inside and outside the museum's main building. They can also touch Chesapeake Bay creatures and actual dinosaur tracks, and wander through caves.

"The education here is very hands-on, very interactive," said Chris Lewis, the museum's director of education, as she walked along the boardwalk, which loops through 10 acres of woods, creeks and wetlands in the heart of Newport News.

The boardwalk offers visitors views of river otters, red wolves, beavers, bobcats, coyotes, deer and other animals. It also passes through an aviary filled with coastal plain birds such as pelicans, herons, egrets and ducks—just some of the 250 living species that help to provide a glimpse of the state's rich natural heritage.

"We don't name any of the animals," Lewis said. "They are all wild, and we want people to think of them as wild. We definitely don't want people to think that they make good pets."

Each animal lives in terrain similar to where it would be found in the wild. Visitors can not only get close to the animals, but may also study casts of their foot prints, letting their fingers gauge the size of a wolf track.

That's the nature of a "living museum:" to not only show, but immerse, visitors in the exhibits, allowing them to see, smell and—in many cases—even touch exhibits to understand the uniqueness of a particular place.

At the Virginia Living Museum, a member of the Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network, visitors are not only surrounded by the natural world along the boardwalk, but also in its main building which hosts a pair of two-story "habitariums," one recreating a cyprus swamp, the other a Blue Ridge mountain cove, complete with a waterfall.

And, just about everything on display in the building—from hemlock trees to paddlefish, from alligators to native lobsters—is alive. Which, Lewis said, "is a real challenge." Inside, trees and other plants have rigorous watering schedules to keep them alive, and the animals have specific diets—the opossum's diet, according to a sign in the museum kitchen, includes "roaches on a lid," while red wolves dine on everything from Science Diet to chicken wings.

Everything in the museum is native to Virginia—sort of. After all, what's native can be a matter of perspective.

It has "Maine" lobsters—which are native to Virginia. More precisely, they are found 70 miles off the coast in

the submerged Norfolk Canyon of the Continental Shelf, where they grow up to 37 pounds.

The museum has red wolves, an endangered species no longer found in the wild in Virginia, which are part of a federal captive breeding program.

The red fox is not native to the mid- Atlantic, although it has been around for so long, most people think it is. It was introduced to the region by fox hunters from Europe centuries ago.

The museum has coyotes, which were not in the state when settlers arrived, but have introduced themselves as they migrated Eastward in recent decades. "Coyotes are not technically native to Virginia, but they're moving in," Lewis noted.

And alligators are not found in Virginia today, but were here millions of years ago—and may be again, as they are inching their way up the Atlantic Coast, having reached North Carolina in recent years.

"Change is always occurring," Lewis said. "That is part of the story."

An exhibit in the planning stages will further develop that theme. The "walk through time" will take visitors along a path that will show how plant communities changed from pre-settlement through colonial times and later as people brought more and more plant species for their gardens.

Those changes, as well as everything else in the museum, can be explained by volunteers who readily engage the public with information about exhibits. "They're trained not to wait until someone asks a question," Lewis said.

Interaction is encouraged throughout the museum, which emphasizes hands-on learning. It has four "discovery centers" that allow young and old visitors alike to handle everything from furs to skulls. "We don't have a research collection," Lewis said. "We have a specimen collection that we put in the hands of visitors."

One interactive exhibit allows visitors to create their own nighttime chorus by using a push button system to choose sounds from different nocturnal creatures, and then hearing how they sound together. Another—maybe best seen before lunch—lets people do a virtual dissection of a frog.

The hands-on nature of the museum is illustrated by its butterfly garden. It not only maintains the garden for education, but the museum also participates in an international monitoring program, that has volunteers and students tagging several hundred migrating monarch butterflies. "We've had one reach Mexico," Lewis said. "We got a certificate from Monarch Watch."

The museum has 40-year-old roots, reaching to 1966 when it was opened as a nature center and planetarium. It expanded over the years, and in 1987 transformed itself into a "living museum" patterned after the renowned Arizona-Sonoran Desert Museum in Tucson. At the time, it was the only living museum East of the Mississippi—and it was an instant hit. "As soon as we opened the doors in 1987, we knew we were going to have to expand," Lewis said. So, in 2004, the nonprofit museum opened the doors on a new 62,000-square-foot building—nearly four times the size of the old museum.

The building is divided among four major galleries: the Coastal Plain Gallery, which highlights the Chesapeake and related coastal areas; the Piedmont and Mountains Gallery which highlights areas above the "fall line" that separates tidal and free-flowing rivers; the World of Darkness, which features aquatic and terrestrial species that thrive in the dark; and the Underground Gallery which reveals the world of mines, caves and other buried features.

The most eye-catching parts of the museum, though, are the pair of two-story walk-through habitariums, which recreate a Blue Ridge mountain cove and a Coastal Plain cypress swamp, from the bottom of their streams to the top of their tree canopies.

The mountain cove exhibit, for instance, features a waterfall feeding a stream stocked with three types of trout, as well as more than two dozen other species. It also has creatures such as the rare hellbender, a stream-dwelling amphibian that can live 25 years and grow 2 feet long.

A variety of spruce, fir and hemlock grow in the land, providing habitat for dozens of forest-dwelling birds, such as the scarlet tanager. The exhibit is alive with forest wildflowers in the spring.

While the large habitariums are spectacular, the museum also contains plenty of small exhibits, which allow visitors to learn about particular niches of nature. In the Coastal Plain gallery, visitors see how flounder change color to match different shades of sediment, making them almost impossible for humans—or other predators—to see. While exploring a simulated cave, visitors will encounter the pack rat which—despite its name—is very tidy, and designates different chambers of their underground homes for different uses: pantry, nursery, kitchen and bathroom.

More than a quarter million people are attracted to the museum each year. But they are not the only ones getting an education.

The museum is also the destination for 90,000 students who come for portions of their science curriculums. It has an educational staff of 11, all with backgrounds in science and teaching. And, it has its own classrooms for instruction. Children aren't the only students at the museum, though: It also offers courses for adults on everything from natural history to nature photography.

"The conservation message runs through everything in the museum," Lewis said. "We do affect the environment, we can make a difference, and education can help accomplish that."

### **Virginia Living Museum**

The museum is open daily except Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, New Year's Day.

From Labor Day through Memorial Day, it is open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday and noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. From Memorial Day through Labor Day, it is open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily.

**Admission:** \$13 for adults and \$10 for ages 3–12.

**Directions/Information:** Take Interstate 64 to exit 258-A. Take Route 17/J. Clyde Morris Blvd. for about two miles. Continue straight on J. Clyde Morris Blvd. crossing Jefferson Ave. (Route 143) when Route 17 turns left. Turn left at next traffic light. Fire station is on the right.

For information, call 757-595-1900 or visit [www.thelvm.org](http://www.thelvm.org).

For information about other sites in the Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network, visit [www.baygateways.net](http://www.baygateways.net).

### **Learn more:**

- [Virginia Living Museum](#)

### **Karl is the Editor of the Bay Journal.**

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