



# Hands On at the Museum

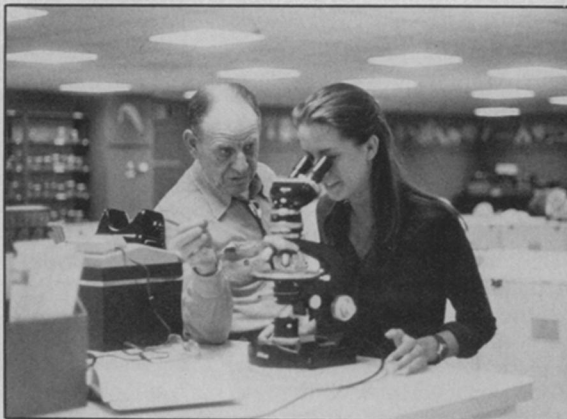
Naturalist center provides tools and specimens for amateurs to mount their own explorations

BY JULIE ANN MILLER

Between the neat glass cases of the museum and the cluttered work areas of the scientific staff, the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of Natural History has a place for the "turned-on amateur." The original idea of the Naturalist Center was to provide sample specimens and high quality equipment to allow people to identify items in their own rock, fossil, shell or insect collections (SN: 11/5/77, p. 297). But, once in operation, the center's functions grew. Although some people come in to identify finds, many do individual projects there, begin learning about a new subject or practice scientific drawing and photography. "It's a heaven for anyone who likes to piddle, and we're all piddlers at heart," says Irene Magyar, the center's manager.

Study at the center has turned treasures into stone, but has also revealed new treasures. One visitor brought in a large round object that a neighbor had called a dinosaur egg. A cut through the ball showed it was just a sedimentary rock, but one built up around a fossil snail shell. Another visitor appeared with a handed-down oddity that family lore had dubbed a mastodon tooth. And, lo and behold, a mastodon tooth it was. Among the valuable finds have been rare fossil seed pods and dinosaur footprints. Among the disappointments are arrowhead-shaped cola bottle pieces and center bones from barbecued steaks.

About 20 people use the center each day, but eventually Magyar expects that count to double. The center has the atmosphere of a library, catering mainly to adults. "You are not harassed by a million children and there are no screaming toddlers," Magyar promises. Children under 12 must be accompanied by an adult.



Main work area of center hums with individual investigations.

Photos: Julie Ann Miller



A bird watcher, who works in an office nearby, drops in to the center on his lunch hour to peruse the books and examine the drawers of stuffed bird specimens. "You can come here casually," he explains. "The collection is not as extensive as in the museum itself, but the museum normally doesn't like to have laymen look at the trays. You have to go through red tape and you need a legitimate purpose, not just curiosity."

Curiosity is the common feature among the center's visitors. Each studies quietly under the auspices of a large horse skeleton. An aspiring illustrator says the center is a good place to find specimens and working space. She spent four hours on a charcoal drawing of a young grizzly bear's skull. "I just felt like working on something this size and texture," she says.

Human bones are a popular subject at the center. Physical anthropologist Lucile St. Hoyme of the museum has organized study guides for boxes of vertebrae, tibiae and patellae labeled "the sex box," "the inside story" and "the generation gap." Among those visitors curious about identifying sex, age and disease from skeletons are premedical students, anthropology enthusiasts, students from the police academy and artists.

While some of the center's areas are complete, others are currently in a "pre-teen" stage. There are plans for a more extensive work area, an audiovisual laboratory and a photographic darkroom. Seventy volunteers, ranging in age from 15 to 75, instruct visitors on use of the microscopes and refractometer, put people in touch with scientists and demonstrate naturalist skills. The most popular demonstration so far was a taxidermist stuffing an owl that had died a natural death at the National Zoo. The volunteers, called "docents," also catalog donated collections, such as the boxes of singed monkey and camel bones that recently arrived from a University of Maryland laboratory. The Maryland researchers had decided the bones were not worth cleaning, but the Naturalist Center staff was delighted with the gift.

The emphasis of the center is now divided between local and worldwide specimens. The volunteers are putting together a special collection of fossils from the Calvert Cliffs area in Maryland, because that is a common source of specimens among Washington area collectors. The insect, plant and anthropological sections have a local emphasis, but their scope is broadening as donations by individuals, naturalist societies and museum departments expand the collections. The center will never have a collection to satisfy every questioner, but it can tempt its guests with the variety and beauty of the natural world. One frequent visitor, a musician who has turned to literature, is writing the story of the universe in haiku. □

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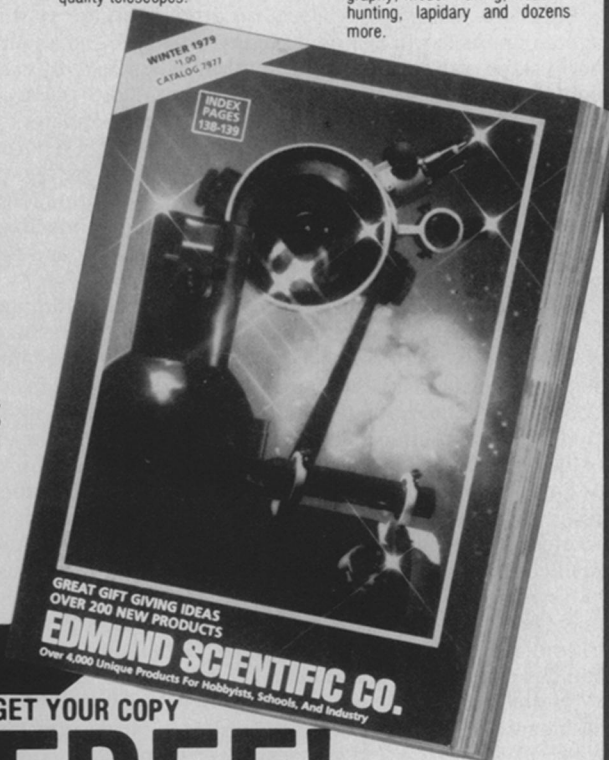


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