

Zoo's Latest Jewel Opens to Public

By JONATHAN DEVIN | The Memphis News

Wide open spaces and a trio of mountain mammals comprise the Memphis Zoo's newest expansion exhibit, Teton Trek, a tribute to Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming. The \$16 million exhibit will open to the public Saturday.

"It's a tremendous opening," said Drew Smith, communications specialist for the zoo. "It takes your breath away."

Teton Trek is on the eastern end of the zoo near its most recent addition, the Northwest Passage. The exhibit features grizzly bears, which haven't been seen at the zoo in several years, and gray wolves and elk, which are newcomers to the zoo.

Trumpeter swans and sandhill cranes from the zoo's existing exhibits also have a new home in the Trek.

Plans for the four-acre exhibit were originally drawn up in 2005. Construction began in February 2008. Architect Ace Torre of New Orleans designed the exhibit.

Smith said the emphasis on geographic environment has been central to the planning of new exhibits. Whereas earlier exhibits such as Cat Country and Primate Canyon exhibit only one family of animals, newer exhibits including China, the Northwest Passage and Teton Trek exhibit varied mammals, birds and sea life from one part of the world.

"We went from this idea of a menagerie where you have the various categories of animals to setting the stage and letting people experience different parts of the world," Smith said.

Teton Trek opens with a circular series of fountains, the largest of which represents the Old Faithful Geyser, in front of the exhibit's rental hall, which was fashioned after Yellowstone's Old Faithful Inn.

Wooden furniture inside the cabin was created by the same designer who made the historic inn's furniture. The cabin also houses a massive stone fireplace, touch-screen nature activities for children, projected wildlife photography on flat-screen light panels, and a second-story gallery with a view resembling that of Yellowstone Falls.

An elliptical boardwalk ushers attendees through an indoor underwater trout-viewing area, over a series of streams occupied by the swans and cranes, across the waterfall that spills into the grizzlies' field, and between a partially wooded area for the elk and gray wolves to run.



EXHIBIT OPENS: The \$16 million expansion exhibit Teton Trek opens Saturday at the Memphis Zoo. The exhibit, which replicates the natural wonder and manmade beauty of Yellowstone National Park, features grizzly bears, elk and gray wolves. -- PHOTOS BY JONATHAN DEVIN



The grizzlies' field contains a golf course-like sand pit and fallen logs for the bears to play with. They also can fish for trout in the stream.

Zoo members were able to preview the exhibit last week. Smith said Teton Trek, which has been a part of the zoo's master plan for more 20 years, should increase public interest in the zoo.



"Any time you open a new exhibit we get a bump in attendance," he said. "We're expecting at least to break 900,000 again."

The exhibit was paid for entirely by private and corporate donations.

"We never start an exhibit without being fully funded and we started in February 2008 so we might have just beat the punch on the economy," Smith said.

Fundraising for Teton Trek and the Northwest Passage were interrupted when the zoo got the opportunity to house a pair of giant panda bears on loan from China for 10 years. Future plans include an exhibit of the Zambezi River in Africa and the Chickasaw Bluff, a boardwalk through a portion of Overton Park's Old Forest.

Zoo-goers will have a bit of a trek to reach Teton Trek, one of the farthest exhibits from the main entrance, but a more direct pedestrian and tram route has been opened, which will be decorated with children's art.

"Compared to other zoos, we're not one of the largest, but our trams get a lot of use," Smith said.