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New and permanent

Museum exhibit gets buggy

By Brian Maffly
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Christy Bills is trying to set up her tarantula friend Ginger on a blind date with a male named Gilligan, but first she must find a videographer to record "the event" - in the name of science, of course.

Gilligan won't survive long after sowing his reproductive assets, while Ginger could go on to live a quarter century. The saga of the brown tarantulas, named after characters from a certain campy 1960s television sitcom, hint at what you can see and learn at the Utah Museum of Natural History's first permanent living exhibit, Bugs Alive!

The exhibit opens Saturday, the same day the museum shows its vast hidden collections to the public in a one-day event, which this year focuses on bats, bones and bugs.

"What's in the Basement' is the one chance each year that the public has to see the overwhelming majority of the collections that we don't have room to display," said museum executive director Sarah George. "The exhibits in our current building on Presidents Circle allow us to show less than 1 percent of our 1.2 million objects. We'll be able to display so much more in the new museum, but until then this is the best way to see these amazing collections. And, our scientific staff are available throughout the day to talk to the public about their new research discoveries."

Bugs Alive! displays about 20 species from the phylum *Arthropoda* - or joint-legged invertebrates, such as insects, spiders, crustaceans and myriapods. Many are native species; some are specimens Bills "rescued" from the foothill location where the museum recently broke ground for its new home. Brown tarantulas, *Aphonopelma iodium*, abound in the Wasatch foothills. But you won't see females, who hunker in burrows, while the males come out to hunt.

"Ginger is a beauty," Bills says, showing off the big, fuzzy spider lurking at the bottom of a dirt-filled Plexiglas box. Gilligan is in another box, itching so badly to mate that he had pushed a weighted lid off. "The males are the ones you see. They reach sexual maturity after eight or nine years, then mate and die."

Bills, the museum's entomology collections manager who curated the bug exhibit, is "excited about showing people things that are native but they don't know live here."

She points out wingless wasps (found in the desert, where bee biodiversity abounds) and Jerusalem crickets (common in the stateside Zion, despite the Old World name). Millipedes, Bills says, inhaling, "have this wonderful woody smell. It's very therapeutic to hold them."

The Sonoran Desert centipede isn't so cuddly, a fact that is suddenly evident when Bills tosses it a cricket. The predatory myriapod contracts its body around the hapless creature and, in a split second, the centipede goes from lunch to munch.

Her exhibit, set up on the second floor, will include some mounted insects from the museum's 180,000-specimen entomology collection. The living portion will change as the need arises, a prospect that causes the curator anxiety.

"You can never say who's going to stay alive or show up," Bills says. "It's weird. You get attached. What's best for the bugs is not best for the exhibit."

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What's in the Basement: Bugs, Bats and Bones

What: The Utah Museum of Natural History's annual tour of its stored holdings, including about 1.2 million specimens.

When: Saturday,

9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the museum on the University of Utah's Presidents Circle.

Price: \$6, \$3.50 for children 3 to 12 and seniors.

Highlights: Opening of the live arthropod exhibit, Bugs Alive!

» **The herbarium uncovers the interconnected world of plants, bugs and fire.**

» **The anthropology department reveals the role insects played in past cultures.**

» **The paleontology department displays fossilized bugs, insects preserved in the La Brea Tar Pits, and bones that bugs gnawed prior to fossilization.**

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museum executive director

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