



The Outdoors Heads Uptown

ARTICLE AND
PHOTOS BY
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The seven-year Arkansas nature center tour has reached its final stop: Little Rock.

It began in Pine Bluff with the 2001 opening of the Gov. Mike Huckabee Delta Rivers Nature Center. Next was the Forrest L. Wood Crowley's Ridge Nature Center in Jonesboro in 2004.

Then came the Janet Huckabee Arkansas River Valley Nature Center near Fort Smith in 2006.

The Witt Stephens Jr. Central Arkansas Nature Center opened Dec. 17 on a little more than 3 acres in the bustling River Market

District. Its 16,000 square feet are wedged between the Arkansas River and the Museum Center, along the Arkansas River Trail, west of the Clinton Presidential Center and east of Riverfest Amphitheater. It's easily reached via a pedestrian bridge on President Clinton Avenue, next door to the Clinton Museum Store.

Unlike the other three nature centers, this one's in a very urban setting, although possi-

A black bear watches over the nature center's Big Woods.

bilities for outdoor education are unlimited. Of course, the staff will present numerous programs for school groups and other visitors. The center also will be used for teacher workshops, special events, meetings, and boater and hunter education courses.

“The center will act as a portal for visitors to learn about the wide range of fish and wildlife recreational opportunities in our state,” said Neil Curry, director of the center. “Individuals will see many ways they can also enjoy and support conservation in the state.”

All four nature centers were built with funds from the 1/8-Cent Conservation

Sales Tax – Amendment 75 – which was passed by voters in 1996 and went into effect in 1997. Admission to nature centers is free.

“Arkansans told us in 1996 that they wanted more educational opportunities and experiences for wildlife-related and other outdoors topics,” said Arkansas Game and Fish Commission Director Scott Henderson.

Witt Stephens Jr. of Little Rock has been a long-time advocate for Arkansas wildlife and conservation. He served on the AGFC from 1993-2000 and was firmly behind the sales tax.

“I think I speak on behalf of many individuals when I say that the opening of this facility is a truly great event for Little Rock, this region and the entire state of Arkansas,” Stephens said. “I am certainly proud and very honored to be associated with such a remarkable resource for our state.”

Outdoor Themes

The other nature centers follow themes. This center is about the Arkansas outdoors and the role that the AGFC has played in conserving its resources.

Frank Zaremba of Lyons/Zaremba is the man behind the Little Rock exhibits.

“The center is an amalgam of nature centers we have designed for the National Audubon Society, state Audubon societies, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service centers and various aquariums, so it’s not like any one.”

The displays bring together many aspects of Arkansas.

“There are so many unique and interesting features to our state,” Henderson said. “Our goal is to provide an environment that will educate individuals with casual interest and those individuals who want to explore deeper into its history. Plus, we’ve

really worked hard to make it fun for all ages. The nature center is designed to host school groups and engage children and adults in active learning experiences.”

Arkansas has six natural divisions that have featured roles in the new nature center:

- Arkansas River Valley
- Coastal Plain
- Crowley’s Ridge



Neil Curry, director of the nature center, places an artificial snake along the aquarium bank.

Witt Stephens Jr. Central Arkansas Nature Center

602 President Clinton Ave.
Little Rock, AR 72201

(501) 907-0636

www.centralarkansas-naturecenter.com

Open

8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m.

Tuesday-Saturday
1 p.m.-5 p.m. Sundays

Closed

Mondays
And Dec. 24-26

Frank Zaremba of Lyons/Zaremba Inc. helps with the installation of exhibits.



- Mississippi Delta
- Ouachita Mountains
- Ozark Plateau

Exhibits reveal how these drastically different areas helped shape the course of conservation in Arkansas, and how they affect wildlife and fisheries management today.

A model of the state with satellite imagery is the first exhibit visitors encounter. At the push of a button, features such as major rivers and the range of elk are outlined with laser light. A lounge area with window views of the river encourages people to relax and select reading material or maps to learn more about Arkansas.



Allyson Neely, an AGFC museum program specialist, treats water in the nature center's aquarium before fish are released.

Main Event

Beyond the map is a larger room packed with displays.

“The exhibit hall contains an aquarium cross section of Arkansas, ranging from the Ozarks to the Delta,” Curry said.

An aquarium with a series of five pools contains representative fish from all regions except Crowley’s Ridge. Inside are bass, sunfish, catfish, gar and many others. The tank, which is bound to be a favorite among school groups, runs along the north side of the building and overlooks the Arkansas River.

The aquarium pools reflect a seep in the Ozark hills, a stream in the Ouachita Mountains, the diverse waters of the Arkansas River Valley, slow-moving creeks of the

Coastal Plain and the bayous and swamps of the Mississippi Delta. A bench lines the low aquarium wall so visitors can get nose to nose with the residents.

Viewing Room

The long series of aquariums leads into a theater with seating for up to 60 people. “A Bright Future” – a 10-minute film about wildlife conservation in Arkansas – is the main attraction, although other films will be shown. Between films, images of members of the Arkansas Outdoor Hall of Fame will appear.

“We had imagined that people would gravitate to the aquariums and the Arkansas conservation cases before seeing “A Bright Future,” Zaremba said. “It’s a good overview of what the AGFC does and how they do it. Leaving the theater, they can better understand the AGFC divisions and learn more through the interactive videos.

After seeing “A Bright Future,” visitors walk through a trapper’s cabin set in a forest, complete with hides, cot, tools and all the “trappings.” The Big Woods display wraps around a curved wall outside the theater, with a bear, birds and other critters hidden in the swamp.

Along the south wall is an extensive collection of antique fishing lures, as well as a display featuring the life of Ronald “Rollie” Rimmel, known as “Papa Duck,” who died in 2006.

Conservation Cases

One side of three freestanding cases is devoted to three major divisions of the AGFC – Enforcement, Fisheries and Wildlife Management. These displays feature not only artifacts and artwork, they are highlighted by interactive monitors that allow visitors to delve deep into the history behind the divisions and find out how they work.

The other side of the cases holds a timeline of conservation in Arkansas, starting with explorers in 1540 and running through settlers, “The Bear State,” the end of Arkansas as a frontier state, early conservation and “The Natural State.” The timeline also includes interactive monitors that go below the surface of the exhibits.

“These (display cases) were difficult to realize

and depended on collaboration with many people from AGFC,” Zaremba said. “I think Neil (Curry) did a remarkable job coming up with most of what you see.

“My favorite part of the center is again the showcases. I think the story of Arkansas’s incredible natural resources, the almost complete loss of those resources and the work of the AGFC since 1915 to restore The Natural State and its diversity is inspiring. I hope it comes through to visitors.”

Visitors who might do a little shopping as they leave the exhibit hall.

“A nature gift shop will have items themed to our programs so that guests can remember their visits again and again,” Curry said.

Another building on the grounds has office space for the staff and a classroom/meeting room. Since it’s situated on the Arkansas River Trail, the center makes a good base for exploring nature and the city.

“The center offers great views of the Arkansas River, in addition to having a wealth of fish and wildlife that are already here,” Curry said. “Over 70 species of birds have been sighted. Muskrats and beavers are often seen in the backwater areas of the river. There are large numbers of water turtles that bask on every available log along the riverbank. The surrounding grounds will have native plantings to attract wildlife from butterflies to hummingbirds, and will change with the seasons.”

Community Support

The other three nature centers couldn’t be as effective without help from the community. That’s true in Little Rock, too.

“Our education staff is recruiting volunteers to assist in interpreting our exhibits, providing visitor assistance and presenting programs,” Curry said. “The center is much more than just the building. It will keep growing with involved citizens who will use the Arkansas River bank and other wetland projects in the area as our outdoor classroom.”

Because of its urban setting and the number of visitors to the River Market District, this nature center will have diverse visitors.

“There’s something for everyone to enjoy at the nature center,” Henderson said. “One of the things we’ve really strived to do with

The stories of early wildlife in Arkansas, including buffaloes and prairie chickens, are part of the Conservation Timeline.



our exhibits and our curriculum is provide an atmosphere and experience that interests all people who are intrigued by the geology, wildlife and natural history of Arkansas.

“Thanks to the passage of the 1/8-Cent Conservation Sales Tax, we were able to give Arkansans wonderful facilities like the Witt Stephens Jr. Central Arkansas Nature Center.” **AW**

Many mounted animals – such as this alligator snapping turtle – are placed among exhibits.

