

When dinosaurs walked the zoo

An exhibit brings some ancient Texas inhabitants to 'life' - with roars, growls and swinging tails

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Five little girls lean against the fence at the Fort Worth Zoo, peering up at a dinosaur. Yes, a dinosaur, with shifting brown eyes, a row of sharp teeth and a long tail that swings back and forth.

The dinosaur starts to growl. Their eyes grow wide.

"It's just fake," somebody's mom calls out reassuringly. "It's mechanical."

But then that scaly brown creature launches into an all-out roar, moving its head as if it just spotted them, and all five girls jump back, squealing. They run away in a fit of giggles, looking back to be sure they weren't followed. They're pretty sure dinosaurs died a long time ago -- this one can't be real -- but they're not sure enough to bet their lives on it.

Starting Saturday, there'll be a lot more kids having close encounters with the prehistoric: this spiny, claw-footed dinosaur -- an Acrocanthosaurus -- and 14 others will be scattered all over the zoo. A new temporary exhibit, "Dinosaurs Unleashed," brings the prehistoric into the present with life-size animatronic dinosaur replicas.

The realistic models were created for the zoo by Billings Productions, a McKinney company that builds animatronic dinosaurs for exhibits, parks and museums all over the country. They are placed in and around the animals that live at the zoo today, and -- here's a science lesson -- you can often see the connections between the zoo's animals and their ancestors. The Brachiosaurus, for example, has a long, giraffelike neck, and the Deinonychus, an 8 1/2-ton prehistoric croc, bears a striking resemblance to the zoo's own saltwater crocodile.

You'll probably stumble upon these creatures one by one, each time feeling a little surprised. Over by the lions, for instance, is the sturdy, stocky Torosaurus. It has its own small habitat, where it moves its enormous head, opening its mouth, and grunts. Its big eyes move from side to side, searching for you, and then it bellows out a roar.

Just past the Museum of Living Art, you'll find the Brachiosaurus. Its small head balances on a long neck that stretches into the treetops, and it turns its head curiously to look at passers-by on the zoo's main path.

And then there's the green, clawed, hissing Deinonychus; its tail flips in the grass as it swipes its claws in the air, showing off its long rows of teeth.

These are Texas dinosaurs: All of the 15 creatures in "Dinosaurs Unleashed" lived in these parts, and their fossilized remains were found in Texas -- some as far as Big Bend, others as nearby as Glen Rose. And it's hard not to want to touch them. Some of them even seem to be breathing, their flexible bodies moving with their heads and tails. Their eyes peer at you, seeming to meet your gaze. They look just real enough for their noises and sudden movements to be alarming.

Near the Crocodile Cafe, there's a swarm of kids gathered near a Protohadros that peeks in through the trees. Kids strain against the low fence, desperately stretching their arms out, trying to feed it leaves from a nearby tree. It moves its head back and forth, moving its eyes, patiently standing there as the kids struggle to touch it. (There's ultimate proof that these creatures aren't real: No living creature would stand still for that much affection.)

And yes, the zoo now has a T. rex. In fact, there's a baby T. rex, too, and they're standing together with their big green eyes, sharp teeth and comically tiny arms. They're not along a major zoo thoroughfare, but they're worth seeking out. (Hint: If you ride the Yellow Rose Express train, you'll pass right by them, not 10 feet away.)

Nobody can bring dinosaurs back to life, but "Dinosaurs Unleashed" comes awfully close. You can learn about the region's dinosaurs -- how they lived, what they ate, and how they are related to today's animals. Best of all, you'll see for yourself what it might have been like to meet these creatures face-to-face. Even if it makes you giggle and run away.

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