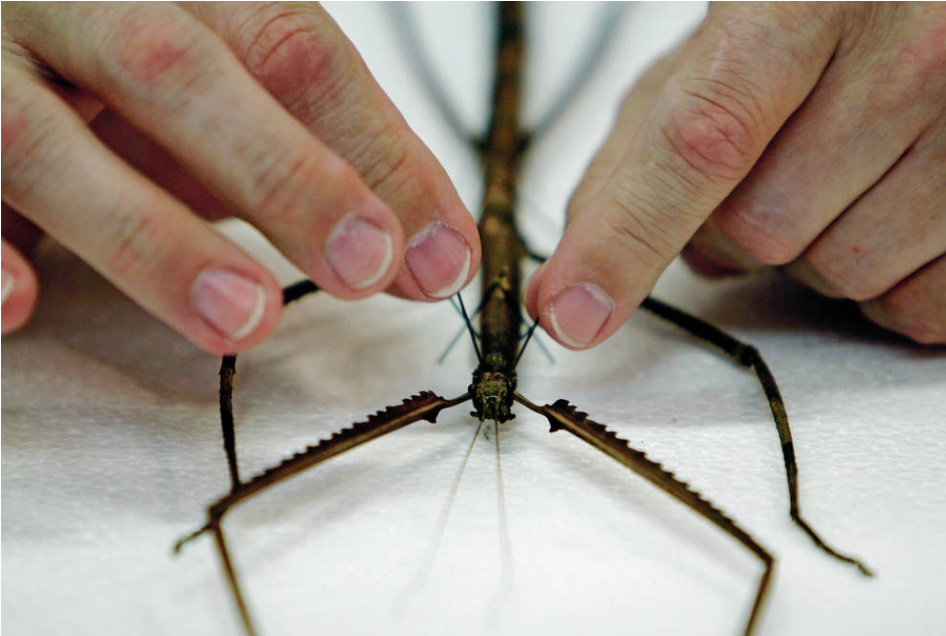


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Calling all bugophiles to the DeVargas Center

By Robert Nott | The New Mexican Jul 4, 2017 Updated Jul 4, 2017



Oliver Greer prepares a 23-inch-long walking stick insect from Borneo for display at The Harrell House Bug Museum. Luis Sanchez Saturno/The New Mexican

In his younger years, Oliver Greer screamed every time he saw a spider.

Now, he's surrounded by at least 130 arachnids, all dead, all carefully pinned and mounted in display cases in the Harrell House Bug Museum, which he runs with Wade Harrell. All told, their exhibition has about 2,400 mounted bugs, as well as a number of live ones that often interact with visitors.

And the museum just got a new resident — a 23-inch-plus walking stick insect from Borneo that Greer says is the second largest of its kind in the world. The largest, he said, is in the Insect Museum of West China. It measures about 24 inches.

"I'm fascinated by insects," Greer said. "It's hard to describe why that is. I felt compelled to create this exhibit for my own pleasure."

He bought the walking stick insect, formally known as a phobaeticus, from a dealer in Indonesia for \$211, postage included.

Greer measured, pinned and mounted his new find in a glass cabinet in the museum in the DeVargas Center. The museum also houses some 150 living creatures, reptiles, fish and insects.

Two visitors, bugophiles Caulder and Truman Evans, 13 and 10 years old, respectively, sat close by to watch Greer work. Sam the Asian water monitor lizard also kept an eye on the proceedings from behind a glass enclosure.

Caulder Evans has been visiting the museum since it opened and once held a birthday party there. He wanted to be there one recent day for the unveiling of the new resident.

"It's awesome," he said of the walking stick insect. "I've seen them 6 inches [long], but it's incredible that some could grow this big."

Truman said his arm isn't as long as the insect, and to prove his point, he compared its length to the insect's body.

Greer, who was born in San Francisco, has been attracted to bugs ever since he was a child of 10 and found a dead pepsis wasp near his home in Tiburon, Calif.

Bugs are not his career but they are his passion, he said. Greer likes the large ones, a fixation that started when he found that pepsis wasp.

"It was so big relative to my small size that an interest in big bugs started right away."

So he couldn't pass on the offer to add the walking stick bug to his collection. It's a female, and the females generally grow much larger than the males, who usually die after mating.

The females don't live much longer, Greer said. But while they live, they lay eggs — hundreds of eggs.

"Their sole purposes is to propagate their species," he said.

Humans, logging, motor vehicles and nature thin their numbers. But they don't face many predators, he said, because they're hard to swallow.

They are also hard to find. The species naturally camouflages itself in foliage and on trees. The species inhabit New Mexico. Greer and Harrell said it's likely many people walk right by them without knowing it.

"It's almost 2 feet long and you wouldn't notice it in a tree," Harrell said.

Even so, it's not the longest insect in the Harrell House collection. There's a 24-inch-long whip spider, so called because its front legs look like whips.

Some bugs are harmful to humans, including venomous spiders and centipedes and disease-carrying mosquitoes, but many others, such as beetles, butterflies and bumblebees, contribute to the earth's ecosystem and need to be valued, Greer said.

"Bugs of all kinds — insects — are the caretakers of our planet and they peacefully coexist," Greer said as he went about his work. "And the way our world is going, we have to think about that."

But it's normal for humans to fear some of them, he said — especially spiders. He's been surprised by a couple of them in his shower at home, and as a result, they have ended up in his collection.

He's working on expanding the exhibition by adding another 5,800 bugs, many of which he has at home. Then he wants to create a traveling exhibit and send it to museums across in the country.

He then wants to use the proceeds from that program to pursue another passion: filmmaking. He wants to make romantic comedies, and has already created a silent short called *Cheyenne*. He used some music from the late American jazz musician and composer Buddy Rich in the film.

Standing proudly in the middle of his exhibits, Greer flashed a smile and expansively spread his arms.

"I am the Buddy Rich of this collection," he said.

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If you go

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What: Harrell House Bug Museum

Where: DeVargas Center, 552 N. Guadalupe St.

Hours: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday, noon to 5 p.m. Sunday

Tickets, information: 505-695-8569

