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E.T. WALRUS SCULPTURE UNVEILED AT POINT DEFIANCE ZOO & AQUARIUM

Life-sized bronze honors the memory of one of the zoo's most famous residents

TACOMA, Wash. – Several months ago, Friday Harbor sculptor Matthew Gray Palmer knelt on the deck of the Rocky Shores exhibit at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium watching walrus.



He held a small piece of clay between his thumb and forefinger, working it into a shape as zookeepers fed the zoo's walrus.

Within minutes, Palmer produced a lifelike keychain-sized miniature clay walrus, complete with bristle-like notches for its whiskers.

That brief meeting helped him get a good grounding in walrus anatomy. And when combined with photographs of Pacific walrus E.T., the sculptor's hands turned magical.

Metro Parks Board of Commissioners President Andrea Smith, Zoo Society Executive Director Larry Norvell and Senior Staff Biologist Lisa Triggs, who cared for E.T. for more than two decades, unveil a 2,150-pound sculpture of the much loved walrus at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium Monday morning. E.T. died in 2015 at age 33.

Palmer's life-sized bronze sculpture of E.T., who came to Tacoma as an orphaned calf and motivated generations of visitors to learn about his species, was unveiled Monday morning at the entrance to Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium.



Gasps of delight and applause greeted the likeness of the loveable walrus as Metro Parks Tacoma Board of Commissioners President Andrea Smith, Zoo Society Executive Director Larry Norvell and Senior Staff Biologist Lisa Triggs tugged off a cloth to reveal the bronze glistening in the morning sunlight.

Children in the audience hopped and fidgeted, barely able to contain their excitement as they waited for the ceremony to conclude so they could see the big bronze animal up close and compare the sizes of their relatively small hands with his big flipper.

“It’s absolutely beautiful,” said Senior Staff Biologist Lisa Triggs, who cared for E.T. over the course of two decades. “Matthew (Palmer) brought the essence of E.T. out in a bronze sculpture. It’s amazing.

“He was the best walrus ever,” she added, “and our entire staff is grateful that this sculpture of him will welcome visitors to Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium for many years to come.

The zoo is currently home to three Pacific walruses, Joan, Basilla and Kulusiq.

The Zoo Society raised \$100,000 of the \$148,500 total sculpture budget from businesses and community members. Remaining costs were funded through Metro Parks Tacoma’s public art program and the zoo’s bond fund budget.

Though the 2,150-pound sculpture doesn’t weigh as much as E.T., who could bulk up to more than 4,000 pounds just before mating season, it is slightly larger than the actual walrus.



Top: a young boy high-fives the newly unveiled bronze E.T. sculpture.

Above: The real E.T. often raised his flipper in what appeared to be a wave. The staff biologists who cared for him taught him to present his flippers for inspection as part of his health care.

He sits on a soft pad at the zoo’s Front Gate – a perfect spot for high-fiving and photo taking.

E.T. lived at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium from shortly after he was found stranded and alone by oil workers on Alaska’s North Slope in 1982 until his death at age 33 in 2015. Along the way, he wowed people from across the state and around the world with his engaging personality. His repertoire of vocalizations, ranging from a loud, piercing whistle to growls, roars, bellows, clacks and even a bell, made him an international internet sensation, with millions of YouTube fans.

Once Palmer designed the artwork in clay at his studio on San Juan Island it was cast in bronze. The completed sculpture arrived at Point Defiance Zoo late last week.



Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium staff biologists who cared for E.T. get an up close look – and feel – for the newly unveiled sculpture of the iconic walrus, who came to Tacoma as an orphaned calf and was loved by zoo visitors for more than three decades.



Senior Staff Biologist Lisa Triggs cared for E.T. for more than two decades.

The bronze E.T. is about 5 percent larger than the real walrus. Including the rock on which he resides, the bronze E.T. is about 6 feet high by 10.6 feet long and 8 feet wide.

“It is always a challenge to capture the subtleties of an animal that was known for so long, by so many who had deep personal bonds with him,” Palmer said. “Lisa Triggs was not only a wealth of information about walruses and their features but also specifically E.T.’s features and even more so his personality.

“This knowledge and experience, as well as the love and caring that lives on, was a tremendous asset in creating the sculpture. It is this energy that is, hopefully, contained in the sculpture and will be recognized by all who see it.”

Zoo Society Board President Sue Mauermann expects people will instantly fall in love with the piece.

“This gorgeous sculpture will forever be a reminder of the sheer joy people found while watching E.T. swim and seeing him interact with visitors through the Rocky Shores viewing window,” she said. “We are thankful for the dozens of families and individuals who stepped up and donated to our fund-raising campaign so that we could appropriately celebrate the life of this magnificent animal who meant so much to the residents of the Puget Sound region.”

Board of Commissioners President Smith said she’s eager to introduce the bronze E.T. to her granddaughters, 4-year-old Colby and 1-year-old EvaMarie.

“They’re going to love him,” she said. “E.T touched our hearts in a rare and special way. Generations of zoo visitors grew to know and love Pacific walrus through this gentle giant. Now future generations will, too. We are thrilled to welcome our beloved E.T. back to the zoo.”

Triggs concluded her comments this way:

“This is a happy day,” she said, “because we have many wonderful memories to share.” “We believe this sculpture will inspire even more people to cherish walrus and other marine mammals – and then to take conservation action that will help animals in the wild.”

About Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium and walrus conservation

Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium has provided a home for walrus for more than three decades. The zoo long has been a leader in walrus conservation initiatives and scientific research about the animals. The Zoo Society’s Dr. Holly Reed Wildlife Conservation Fund has allocated thousands of dollars for walrus conservation efforts on Round Island, Alaska.

In recent years, Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium staff members have engaged in studies and aided other researchers to:

- Investigate the physical characteristics and mechanisms that allow walrus to produce a variety of unique sounds
- Assess variations in food consumption and body conditions of walrus, using Pacific walrus as a model
- Identify a reliable blubber measurement to assess body condition in marine mammals, using Pacific walrus as the model
- Assess variations in food consumption and body conditions of walrus

“The zoo also has provided leadership in and undertaken studies to improve our understanding of walrus reproductive biology,” Zoo General Curator Karen Goodrowe Beck said.

“Each of these studies helps marine mammal experts and other researchers better understand these magnificent mammals,” Triggs said. “The more we learn about them, the more we can help wild walrus as they adapt to changing climates and altered landscapes.”

For more information, go to www.pdza.org/pacificwalrus

About the artist



Matthew Gray Palmer was selected through a competitive process from among 22 artists who applied to create the E.T. sculpture. He is a self-taught sculptor who began what would ultimately become his life’s work at age 8 by creating life-sized creatures out of available materials like newspaper and masking tape.

By age 25, he was a full-fledged monument sculptor, creating a life-sized horse and boy called The Still Point for the Buckeye Ranch. In the past several years, he has created sculptures for the National Park Service at Arches National Park in Moab, Utah, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks in California and Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve in Louisiana. He also installed a life-sized African Elephant at Virginia Zoo in Norfolk. His projects also include works for Mammoth Cave National Park, Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, Utah’s Hogle Zoo and the University of Kentucky.

In applying to create the E.T. sculpture to stand in front of Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, Palmer said: “To celebrate a beloved and cherished ambassador to the natural world, one as endearing and generational as E.T. is a wonderful opportunity. ... In my work I seek to interpret our human physical, emotional, and spiritual relationship to the natural world through a wide range of strategies. Much of my work integrates science and art with the ultimate goal of providing a holistic, meaningful experience for the audience and this memorial to E.T. is an excellent fit with these aims.”

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Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, the Northwest’s only combined zoo and aquarium, practices and promotes responsible stewardship of the world’s resources through education, conservation, research and recreational opportunities. The zoo, a division of Metro Parks Tacoma, is accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA) and the Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums (AMMPA).

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