

A Peaceable Kingdom: Tales Of Humans And Other Big Creatures

R. Brent Lyles

A young chief, who was unafraid, said that he would go to the forest and see why the wolf howled. He took his bow and arrows and went. He worked his way through the thick undergrowth, toward the place where the wolf wailed. Soon he saw it in a little clearing in front of him. As he went toward the wolf, it opened its mouth in a snarl. Its ears lay flat on its head. The young chief knew this danger signal but he showed no fear...

—Indian folktale retold by Allan A. Macfarlan

All over the world, from the largest industrial cities to the tiniest rural villages, animals and animal symbolism figure prominently in the stories we tell each other. In tales like the one above, animals are portrayed as strong protectors, scary creatures of the night, spiritual or sacred figures, distant cousins, and in many other personae—often several at once. And, although we may spend our whole lives without ever actually seeing one, from a very young age we know of animals like the timber wolf, the polar bear, and the rhinoceros. Our parents teach us about them, about their ways and their lives, often injecting a moral or cautionary lesson into the stories. Be steady like the tortoise, not hasty like the hare; watch out for wolves in disguise.

As we grow, we learn that some of these stories are fanciful tales about real animals, while in others both the stories and the creatures—like the unicorn or the dragon—are imaginary. We learn to distinguish the parts of the tales that are based on fact from those that are mythical, fabulous, or fantastic. Later on, when we have children of our own, we pass the stories along, often changing them subtly in ways we may not even be conscious of. In this way, animals form a significant source of continuity in our cultural heritage; the tales we tell our children reflect not only our moral values and beliefs, but often our attitudes towards nature and the diversity of wildlife in our part of the world.

With this in mind, the Peabody Museum presents **LARGE AS LIFE: A PEABODY BESTIARY**, an exhibition which explores the folklore and ecology of a number of impressive and fascinating animals from the Museum's collections. Included among these are predatory cats from four different continents, two nearly-extinct species of birds, three bears, a majestic timber wolf, an odd crocodylian from India, and even a giant squid. We are also very excited to announce the return of Old Bill, a Greater Indian rhinoceros donated to the Museum in 1926, last seen on display here in 1988. With only one exception, each of these animals has played an important role in folkloric tradition, and each has its own unique place in nature. In **LARGE AS LIFE**, the animals' natural roles and cultural roles are linked.

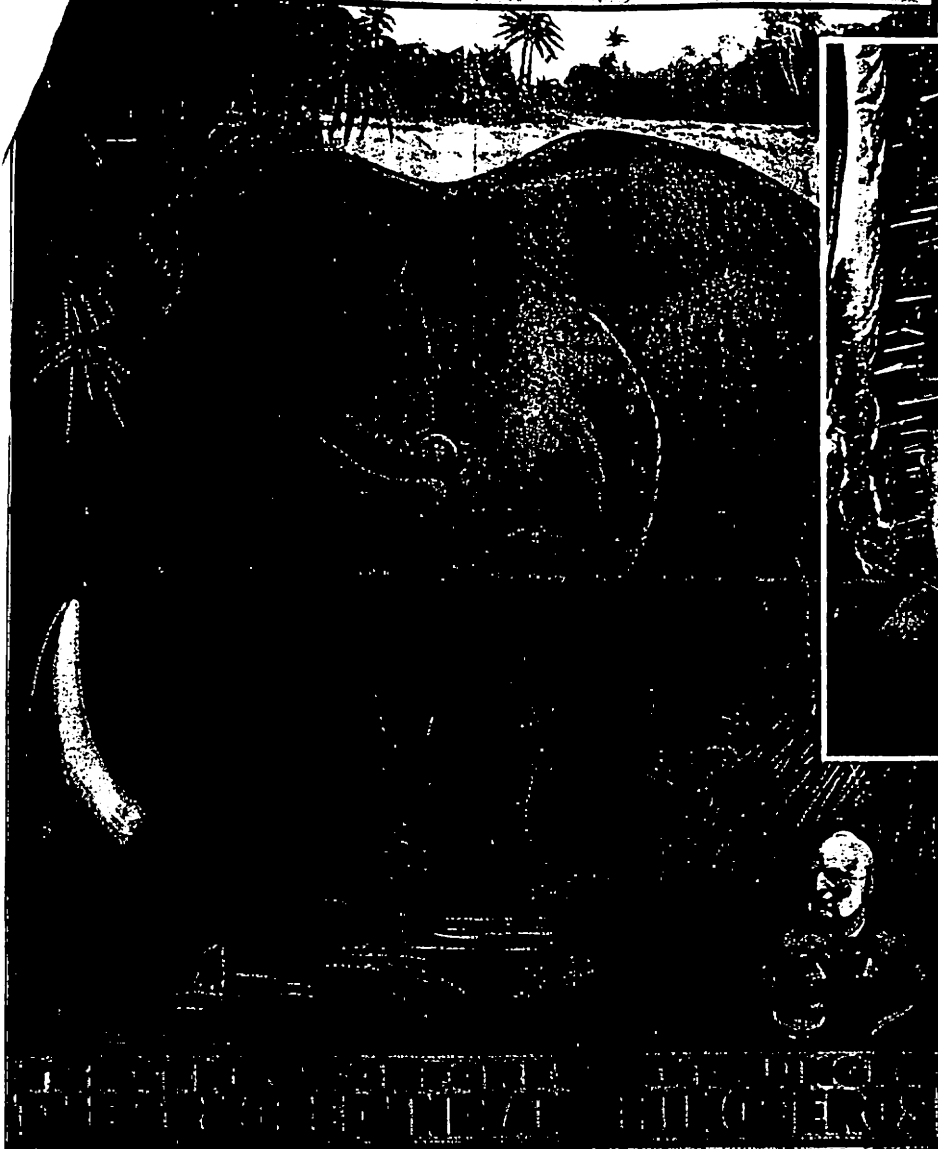
The Rhino Who Ran Away With The Circus

Each of the specimens that forms part of **LARGE AS LIFE** has its unique place in the history of the Peabody Museum, but none is more remarkable than that of Old Bill, the Greater Indian rhinoceros. Old Bill lived his life as a performer first with the Adam Forepaugh & Sells Bros. Circus and later with the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, touring the country between 1907 and 1926. Circus rhinos were not uncommon, but toward the end of the nineteenth century fewer and fewer were seen, as poaching and hunting took their toll on natural populations. Eventually, only the largest circuses could afford the risk and cost of importing and caring for a rhinoceros; Indian rhinos were particularly expensive, due to their rarity and large size. The Ringling Bros., operating out of Baraboo, Wisconsin, probably paid over \$5,000 for Old Bill; at one point during his career they declined an offer of \$30,000 for him.

Old Bill traveled hundreds of thousands of miles during his years with the circus. He had his own wagon car—somewhat of a luxury for circus animals—and was said to enjoy apples, onions, and hot mash. Popular accounts describe him as something of a philosopher, peacefully resigned to his life as a showman and deeply appreciative of the simple things in life, a good meal and the occasional frisky cavort around his wagon. Since he was usually rather subdued, these infrequent dances were quite a sight, and they shook his wagon like "a veteran passenger coach on a bend when the engineer is late and trying to make up a little time."¹

In his years with the Ringling Bros., Old Bill was the only greater Indian rhinoceros in an American circus, and there has been none since. When he died in 1926, he was 22 years old and weighed in at about 2500 pounds. The cause of his death is unknown, but was probably related to asthma; he died in Texas, during the night on a trip from Dallas to Fort Worth.

P.T. Barnum had often donated the bodies of rare animals to museums and so, by prior arrangement, the Ringling Bros. donated Old Bill to Yale's Peabody Museum of Natural History. Upon Bill's death a Peabody representative was rushed to Texas. The body, which had been put on ice, was packed away for shipment to Connecticut. The hide was eventually stretched over a mold of Old Bill's body; the skeleton was assembled separately to be displayed in its own exhibit. For **LARGE AS LIFE**, extensive repairs were necessary, as the mold and skin had been damaged by humidity fluctuations in the Museum's storage rooms, but the end result is definitely worth the trip.



Left. *Glory Days*—a poster for the Adam Forepaugh-Sells Bros. Circus, 1910, highlighting Old Bill. Courtesy of the Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

Above. Old Bill, the Greater Indian rhinoceros, being restored by Peabody Museum Preparator Michael Anderson. Several months, hundreds of pins, and much hard work went into the restoration of this specimen. Photo by William K. Sacco.

Like Old Bill, many of the other animals in **LARGE AS LIFE** were given to the Peabody Museum. The black, brown, and polar bears, for instance, were all donated. Times have changed however, and over the years the Peabody, like museums everywhere, has modified its policies governing the donation of animals. An open policy can encourage illegal hunting and poaching, even if indirectly. Thus, some of the specimens donated in the past, which now form part of the Peabody's collections, would probably be refused under today's stricter guidelines. As a result, the Peabody Museum has an extensive collection of animals from around the world that could not be replicated today; some of the finest among these are exhibited in **LARGE AS LIFE**.

All Creatures Dangerous And Endangered

One of the most exquisite animals in **LARGE AS LIFE** is the jaguar (*Panthera onca*). In nature, jaguars range from Central America well into South America, where they

live in a variety of habitats, hunting smaller animals and sometimes fish. Jaguars are extremely threatened throughout their entire distribution, and their long-term prospects for survival are dim. Pressure from poachers, who sell its fur for black-market products, constitutes one of the major threats to the jaguar's survival. They are also killed by ranchers out of an exaggerated fear for their livestock's safety.

The biggest threat to the jaguar, however, is the destruction of its habitat by human activity. Despite efforts to save the forests and other natural habitats roamed by the jaguar, hundreds of acres are lost every day. The jaguars and the other native animals with which they share these habitats are deprived of their livelihood and indirectly killed in the process.

Sadly, it is the largest animals, such as the jaguar, that are most affected by this loss of habitat, because of their greater need for food and larger home ranges. A similar pattern can be observed in western North America, where the brown bear can today be found in

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