

Millers River Environmental Center exhibit to combine nature, imagination

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ATHOL — The inaugural exhibit in what its creators say will be a space where natural history, art and fantasy combine is being held Friday at the Millers River Natural History Museum and Laboratory in the Millers River Environmental Center.

“We want to experiment with new ways to get people, including kids, interested in learning about natural history,” said Royalston artist Donald Shambroom. “We want the idea of fantasy and imagination in there. It will be artists collaborating with naturalists. It will be a permanent place where, ongoing, we’ll have new exhibits and we’ll bring in students to experiment with diorama and video with the landscape behind it.”

The new exhibit space is the brainchild of Mr. Shambroom, leaders of the North Quabbin Trail Association and the Athol Bird and Nature Club.

Mr. Shambroom said he was inspired to create the work after conversations with the founder of the bird and nature club, Robert Coyle.

The club, which this year is celebrating its 50th anniversary, has space at the Millers River Environmental Center that Mr. Shambroom thought he could add to.

“It houses a great collection of taxidermy birds, but it wasn’t organized, it was in disarray,” he said. “The main floor wasn’t being

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used and you couldn’t see the display cases. Now people will be able to see these collections for the first time and see them well.”

The trail association then joined the effort, coordinating volunteers to reinvent the space.

“This just started a journey and opened a door as part of our cultural development,” said association president Bob Curley. “Our mission, at the core, is about stewardship. I saw this as an opportunity to do what we do for the outdoors, for this organization. It’s a natural evolution, as we develop. The bird and nature club, they had the utilities, and now we’re bringing the old together with the new. We thought, let’s get crazy, we have the opportunity, so let’s make something for this region. All the raw material is here. Our motto is being free thinkers and having courage, and we’re taking that and running with it.”

During Friday’s event, there will be three

exhibits for guests to explore. Mr. Shambroom’s work “Garnet Cabinet” was inspired by private collections of natural artifacts.

“Before natural history museums, people in the 1800s and 1900s would have cabinets in their houses with things they’d collected,” he said. “They called them wonder cabinets. That was the beginning of the whole natural history idea. (The exhibit is) two small rooms, but they look like a large cabinet ... It’s sort of an imaginary place, but you can walk into it.”

The trail association will also be conducting guided displays.

“You feel like you’re actually on the trails as you go up and down the stairs,” Mr. Shambroom said.

Following the exhibit opening on Friday, the Millers River Natural History Museum and Laboratory will be open to the public on Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 10 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. The center is located at 100 Main St. in Athol.

Over the winter, Mr. Shambroom said the group is planning to make improvements to the center and is planning to unveil a new exhibit in the spring.

For more information on the Millers River Natural History Museum and Laboratory and the upcoming exhibit, visit www.atholbirdclub.org.

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