Born in New York City, Theodore Roosevelt may have seemed an unlikely candidate to become one of the nation’s greatest defenders of wildlife and wild lands. While in office, he set aside hundreds of millions of acres of public lands, including five national parks, four game preserves, 51 bird refuges, 18 national monuments, and 150 national forests which he created or expanded. No other president has matched Roosevelt’s record in preserving wilderness and wildlife or in managing this country’s natural resources—forests, lands and water—through legislation, executive action, and public persuasion.

Roosevelt developed a sharp ear for birds and a love for the outdoors as a child, nurtured by summers on Long Island and family trips to the Hudson Valley and the Adirondacks. Before turning to politics—and returning to New York State to become a legislator—he studied the natural sciences at Harvard. By the time he became president in 1901 (a time of tension between growing public interest in nature exploration and the encroachment on wild spaces by industrial interests), Roosevelt was uniquely prepared to channel his appreciation of nature into public policy.

He also had allies: a group of influential advisors that included naturalists John Muir and John Burroughs, forester Gifford Pinchot, and museum ornithologist Frank Chapman, who helped guide his farsighted public policies.

The enduring legacy of a nearsighted, asthmatic New York boy who would...
become Conservation President is celebrated in a two-story memorial at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), which reopened this fall after an extensive, $40 million renovation supported in large part by state and local funds. Originally designed by John Russell Pope and dedicated in 1936, the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial—which includes the Museum’s Central Park West entrance, the Theodore Roosevelt Rotunda, and the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Hall—serves as New York’s official memorial to its 33rd Governor and the nation’s 26th President.

In the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Hall on the Museum’s first floor, visitors learn about Roosevelt’s life via new exhibits that include interactive elements featuring historical photos and films, cultural artifacts, and objects from the Museum’s collections—some on display for the first time. Roosevelt’s life is portrayed in four stages: as the Young Naturalist whose curiosity about the natural world and science was awakened during childhood and adolescence; as the Firsthand Observer who dealt with the near-extinction of bison during his ranching days in the American West; as the Conservation President, who was the first to make environmental conservation a priority in his administration; and as the Lifelong Explorer whose passion for natural history and adventure continued long after he left office. There are also four meticulously restored dioramas that tell the story of Roosevelt’s life: the old New York of his ancestors; the Adirondacks he visited as a boy; his cattle ranch in the western Badlands; and the bird sanctuary near his beloved home in Oyster Bay, New York.
At the center of the hall is a new bronze sculpture of Roosevelt as he looked during a 1903 camping trip to Yosemite with John Muir—a trip that eventually led to inclusion of Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias into Yosemite National Park. A new bronze floor medallion features bison grazing in Roosevelt National Park in North Dakota encircled with another poignant declaration Roosevelt made in 1912: “There can be no greater issue than that of conservation in this country.”

The extensive project restoring the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial at the AMNH included a complete restoration of the Museum’s famous Central Park West façade, now illuminated for the first time in decades. The Theodore Roosevelt Rotunda—known to many Museum visitors as the entrance with the iconic Barosaurus and Allosaurus exhibit at its center and itself a New York City interior landmark—was also fully

Left: For more than a year, a team of professionals worked to restore the specimens in the Museum’s Hall of Mammals. Here, Museum artist Stephen Quinn uses a special dye to put the finishing touches on an Alaskan bear.

Above: Roosevelt’s “fringed buckskin tunic or hunting shirt” appears to have hardly been worn, and is now on display in the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Hall.
renovated. Painter William Andrew Mackay’s historic murals, which depict milestones in Roosevelt’s public life—the building of the Panama Canal; the 1905 Treaty of Portsmouth between Russia and Japan, for which he became the first American to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1906; and his 1909-1910 expedition to Africa—were carefully conserved and returned to view this fall.

Visitors to the museum will also be delighted by recent renovations to the Jill and Lewis Bernard Family Hall of North American Mammals, which in its own and especially vivid way celebrates Roosevelt’s conservation legacy. Each diorama in this iconic hall, which first opened in 1942, offers a snapshot of North America’s rich environmental heritage, and includes landscapes and species that have been preserved in large part due to policies Roosevelt initiated.

Guarding the entrance to the Theodore Roosevelt Rotunda is a favorite exhibit among visitors: the Barosaurus protecting its young from the attacking Allosaurus.
For more than a year, a team of artists, conservators, taxidermists, and designers worked to restore this historic hall through a myriad of specialized tasks, from re-coloring faded fur of the storied specimens to repairing background paintings originally done by celebrated diorama artists such as James Perry Wilson and Belmore Browne. The Museum’s Exhibition Department developed new text and graphics that offer visitors the latest scientific information about North American species and ecosystems that range from the Alaskan brown bear in the tundra to the jackrabbit in the Arizona desert.

Several of the dioramas re-create scenes from national parks Roosevelt signed into being or national monuments he declared, including Crater Lake National Park, part of Grand Canyon National Park (which Roosevelt set aside as Grand Canyon National Monument), and Devils Tower National Monument. The large diorama about bison vividly depicts the enormous herds that once roamed our country. While living as a rancher in the Badlands of what is now North Dakota, Roosevelt witnessed firsthand the wholesale destruction of these enormous animals. Bison once numbered in the tens of millions in North America, but slaughtered for their meat and hides, the population fell to only about 1,000 animals by the 1880s. As President, Roosevelt created two big game preserves to save the buffalo from extinction: Montana’s National Bison Range and Oklahoma’s Wichita Game Preserve, where, in 1907, 15 bison bred at New York’s Bronx Zoo were released with the intent to repopulate the prairie. This and subsequent efforts brought the bison back from the brink of extinction.

The newly renovated Theodore Roosevelt Memorial commemorates one of the greatest conservation leaders in our nation’s past, and is reason alone to visit the American Museum of Natural History. Whether you’re a first-time visitor, or a repeat customer, there are plenty of other exhibits to see and programs to experience at this New York City museum, including the new Hall of Mammals. So the next time you’re in the City, or if you’re looking for a place to escape, be sure to check out the American Museum of Natural History—you won’t be disappointed.

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The American Museum of Natural History is located in New York City on Central Park West at 79th Street. It is open daily from 10 a.m. - 5:45 p.m., except for Thanksgiving and Christmas when it is closed.

Museum artists and conservators worked tirelessly to restore background paintings. This one (originally done by William Andrew Mackay in 1935) depicts the building of the Panama Canal and is located in the Rotunda.
With the reopening of the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial on October 27, AMNH launched a year-long series of special programs examining the lasting legacy of Theodore Roosevelt’s conservation work. The approximately $40 million restoration project was completed with significant private and public support, including $23 million from the Empire State Development Corporation and $11.5 million from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and the Council of the City of New York. The lead architect for the refurbishment and enhancement of the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial was Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates, while museum artist Stephen C. Quinn and mammalogist Ross D. E. MacPhee (a curator in the Museum’s Division of Vertebrate Zoology) oversaw the updates done in the Hall of Mammals.

David Hurst Thomas, a curator in the Museum’s Division of Anthropology, serves as supervising curator for the Roosevelt exhibition which draws on the expertise of Roosevelt biographers Douglas G. Brinkley and Patricia O’Toole, who served as consultants.

For more information about exhibits or events at the Museum, visit www.amnh.org.