

Meet the man behind Woodland Park Zoo's life-size dinosaurs exhibit | The Seattle Times

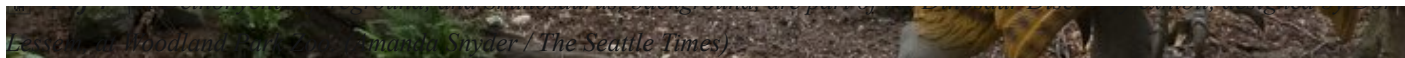
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Life

Meet the man behind Woodland Park Zoo's life-size dinosaurs exhibit

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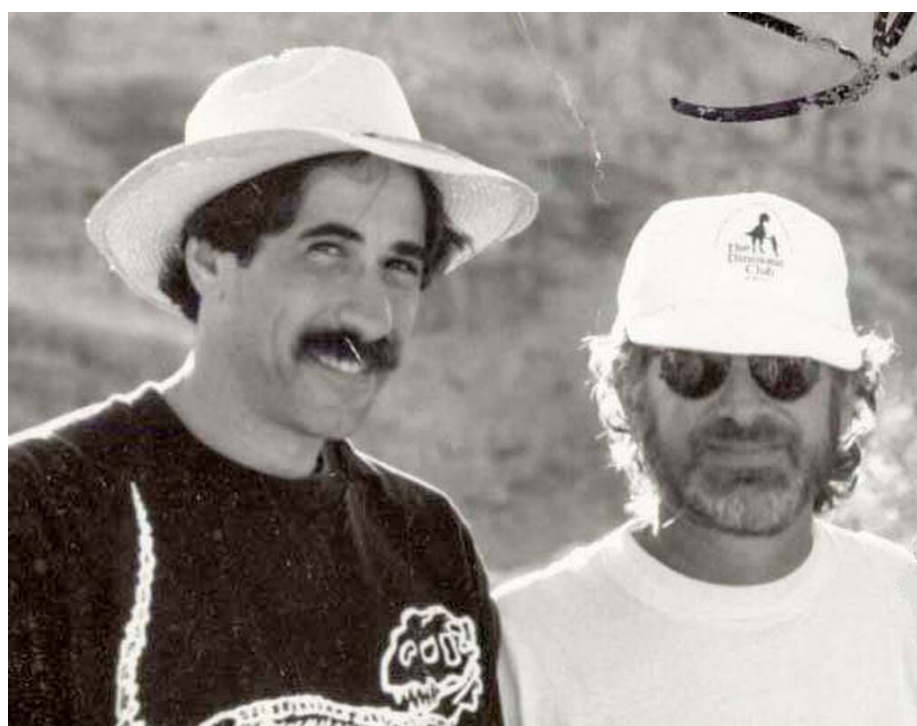


By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Special to The Seattle Times

If you haven't been to the zoo since the pandemic started, some of its latest additions might surprise you. From a 35-foot-tall Brachiosaurus to a feathered feeding frenzy, the zoo's newest exhibit introduces visitors to species that lived more than 100 million years ago.

This summer, 22 life-size animatronic dinosaurs have [taken up residence](#) in the Habitat Discovery Loop at Woodland Park Zoo. The robots are placed in naturalistic scenes that reflect what is known of dinosaur behavior in a special temporary exhibit called Dinosaur Discovery. The exhibit was designed by Don Lessem, the science adviser for the film "Jurassic Park" and president and CEO of Dino Don Inc. His Pennsylvania-based company builds accurate dinosaur reconstructions for museums and zoos across the country.



“We wanted to bring an exciting new experience to the zoo this summer season for families to enjoy together,” said Woodland Park Zoo Chief Financial Officer Michele Smith. “People of all ages can learn about life as it was millions of years ago, walking among dozens of massive, roaring, breathtaking prehistoric giants. Plus, dinosaurs have a connection to many of the animals at our zoo that are living here today, like birds and raptors.”

Lessem was a science writer for The Boston Globe when he was assigned a story about some colorful characters shaking up the paleontology world.

“I never went back to the newspaper,” says Lessem. Since then he has written dozens of children’s books about dinosaurs, including “National Geographic Kids Ultimate Dinopedia.”

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China, he saw the village where most of the world's animatronic dinosaurs are made.

“Ladies with X-ACTO knives and couch cushions make them by hand there,” he said.

Lessem thought he could do better. He relies on paleontologists to provide anatomical details for full-sized, scientifically accurate reconstructions while he designs the exhibits to demonstrate dinosaur behaviors. The science is solid, but Lessem says that's not the point.

“It's more about what people feel than what they learn. There are lots of ways to learn about dinosaurs. This is the only way to see them and get that feeling of awe and wonder at their unrivaled scale and bizarre appearance. That's what captivates kids and adults who haven't lost the capacity to get excited about things,” he said. “And teenagers, who think dinosaurs aren't cool anymore, they see them and change their minds.”



Don Lessem with his wife, Valerie Jones, and their dinosaur robots on ABC's "Shark Tank." (Shark Tank / ABC Television)

prize. The [You Bet Jurassic](#) podcast is aimed at adults, but is generally appropriate for kids.

Dinosaur Discovery

Through Sept. 6; Woodland Park Zoo, 5500 Phinney Ave. N., Seattle; \$5 plus zoo admission; 206-548-2500, zoo.org/dinosaurs

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