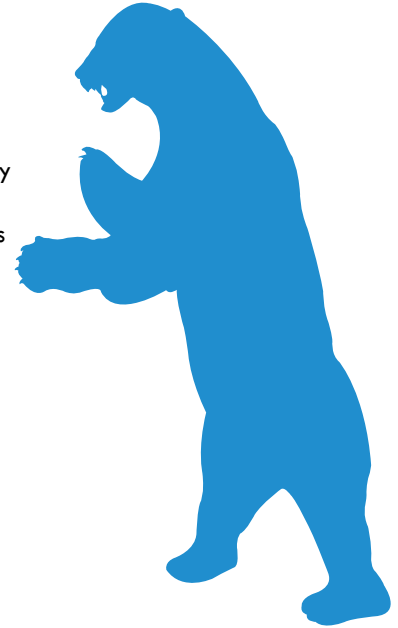


Frequently Asked Questions About The Collections

Is it real?

Most of the mounted specimens you will see at the Museum are real animals, but they are no longer alive. Children, especially young ones, often use the terms “real” and “alive” interchangeably, though the words have very different meanings. To address this confusion, we often use both terms in response to “Is it real?” or “Is it alive?” questions. For example, “That cougar is real and used to be alive, but it is no longer living.”



Why do you have collections?

Collections are an integral part of a museum’s research and education functions. Collections also serve an important role in environmental conservation efforts. The specimens in our collection are used by Academy scientists and others to study natural environments and the plants, animals, and insects that live in this region. For example, scientists might collect data from specimens to track the effects of pesticide use on a certain group of animals over time. We can then use what we learn to better understand what we see today and to plan for the future.

Specimens, whether displayed in a museum or used in educational programming, can be excellent tools for connecting people to a topic of study or interest. They also allow people to have an up-close look at something that they couldn’t otherwise access.

Where do the specimens in the collections come from?

Most of the specimens in the Chicago Academy of Sciences’ museum collections were collected between 1850 and 1950, when it was common for naturalists and other scientists to kill animals and preserve them in a collection. Today, specimens are usually collected with conservation in mind, and scientists try to minimize their impacts on natural ecosystems. If possible, scientists make use of observational data, which doesn’t require killing the animals. Scientists also collect samples from an animal, such as hairs, to obtain the animal’s DNA.

The Chicago Academy of Sciences is still adding to its collections, in large part through incidental collecting. This means that we collect specimens that are already dead when we find them. For example, if a bird flies into a window and is killed by the impact, we often preserve the bird’s body and add it to our collections. In such cases, we also record the date of collection, who collected the specimen, the location where the specimen was found, and any other important information about the surroundings or the specimen’s condition.

To find out more about how scientists at the Chicago Academy of Sciences preserve specimens, visit the *Beecher Collections Demonstration Laboratory* in the *Wilderness Walk* exhibition on Level 2.

Does the Chicago Academy of Sciences have more specimens than are on display at the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum?

Yes! In fact, fewer than 5% of the Chicago Academy of Sciences’ collections are on display at the Museum. The other specimens (almost 250,000 of them!) are stored at an off-site facility. Academy scientists and other scientists from around the country use these specimens for scientific research.

All of the Academy’s living collections (live animals) are housed and cared for at the Museum. Our balance of both living and non-living collections in our exhibitions sets us apart from many other museums, which often showcase predominantly one or the other.