In April, the Imperial Valley Desert Museum in Ocotillo began the installation of the permanent exhibit that has been in the process of design and fabrication for more than a year.

Currently, one of the most completed areas of our new exhibit is the entrance, which introduces the visitor to our “Land of Extremes.”

The Land of Extremes interactive allows visitors to view panoramic images of the Valley projected onto a screen. This feature is still being tested, but the corner and you will come face to face with a local from the area: a desert bighorn.

There are currently two animal statues in the exhibit, both so lifelike that they might be mistaken for real animals. Here’s a look behind the scenes at what will surely be touched frequently. Our animals were made in Weldon Exhibits’ workshop in conjunction with the rocks that would be their domain. An animal that will stand where it can be touched, like our Borregos, has rods in its feet allowing it to fit a rocky perch that was designed in the workshop. The lion was put into place when she reached the museum. The lion’s tail was a separate piece attached later, allowing for last-minute adjustments to the rocks as well as the tail for the maximum realistic effect.

Some parts of our animals are made with common materials. Glass eyes give the Borrego his soulful gaze, and the mountain lion’s whiskers are made from fishing line. Cement, epoxy patty and rice are used to make layers of muscle and fur, with stronger materials used if the animal will be touched frequently. Our Borregos were designed with the idea that he would probably be touched a lot, he will endure a lot of wear and tear.

The mountain lion, on the other hand, was built separately to fit a rocky perch that was designed in the workshop. The lion was put into place where she reached the museum. The lion’s tail was a separate piece attached later, allowing for last-minute adjustments to the rocks as well as the tail for the maximum realistic effect.

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Behind the bighorn

The desert bighorn sheep can be found throughout the San Jacinto Mountains, the Coyote Mountains and run up to the Mexico. Museum visitors can occasionally catch a glimpse of one as they drive up the Ivanpah Mountains toward San Diego. Bighorns prefer rocky, open terrain where they can keep a watchful eye out for predators and easily escape. Their sharp-edged, convex-shaped hooves with a soft inner pad allow them to nimble race up rocky slopes and run away.

Unlike most desert animals, bighorns are diurnal — meaning they are most active during the day, although during the hottest part of the day they will usually rest near water.

Looking at lions

Mountain lions, also known as pumas, panthers and cougars, are native to North America. It is believed that about half of California is prime mountain lion habitat: from sea level up to 10,000 feet in elevation.

They particularly like mountain areas but are extremely adaptable and can be found from the desert to the coast, in mountains and forests. The big cats are solitary and roam enormous territories instead of fixed ranges, making it impossibly to accurately know their exact population.

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife estimate that there are between 4,000 and 6,000 mountain lions throughout California.

Can you picture it?

Mountain lion is the bighorn, and you have to look up to see her. The Desert Borrego exhibit, however, is specifically designed as a photo opportunity — we hope to plan a social media campaign as the exhibit is tested and opened. The rocks and other materials used to build the sheep is very resilient — like what would be used to plaster a house. Take a photograph of yourself with the sheep and post it to your Facebook or Twitter page. We predict these Sheep Selfies (#Shelfies) will be a big hit with kids and adults of all ages.

Neal V. Hitch is director of the Imperial Valley Desert Museum.