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SPOTLIGHT

New IMAX nature film has its premiere at St. Louis Science Center

Daniel Neman | Post-Dispatch

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A moose goes for a wade in a scene in the IMAX film "Secrets of Great Salt Lake."

photos Courtesy of SK Films

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At one point in the new IMAX film at the St. Louis Science Center, we get a close-up view of a coyote taking an egg from a bird's nest. It's the sort of shot that, when you see it, you ask yourself 'How did they get that shot?'

“Patience,” says Tyler Mifflin, director of “Secrets of Great Salt Lake.” “You just sit there next to the nest and hope the coyote would come.”

But more than patience is involved, of course. In a nature documentary such as this one, the filmmakers have to research the animals they hope to photograph as well as their predators and prey.

“That’s a lot of patience, a lot of research, but also a lot of luck getting some of these sequences,” he says.

“Secrets of Great Salt Lake” will have its world premiere Oct. 17 at the St. Louis Science Center’s IMAX theater, and will continue showing there for several months.

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The 45-minute film begins with a natural event 18,000 years ago that is thought to have created the Great Salt Lake in Utah and discusses how the lake is, vitally, fed by three freshwater rivers. It explores how, in recent years, the water level of the lake has fallen substantially, which threatens its thriving ecosystem.



The Great Salt Lake, in Utah, is a place of endless beauty and a fragile, but resilient, ecosystem.

Courtesy of SK Films

And then it shows how disparate groups of people — scientists, farmers, the indigenous community and idealistic youth — are all working together to ensure that the lake's water returns to its former high levels.

“You don't really see consensus on how we solve these challenges all the time, but it's what is happening in Utah, and it's really inspiring,” Mifflin says.

“My goal with the film was to for people to take away a sense of hopefulness about the future in the Great Salt Lake, and to have a desire to learn more about the watershed, understand how watersheds work, how we're all interconnected to watersheds.”

Watersheds are regions where all the water in the area flows into a given lake or river, and from there eventually into the ocean.

Because the Great Salt Lake is so salty, many people are of the impression that it does not sustain life. But actually the lake provides a habitat for a large and remarkably diverse amount of wildlife, both in the lake and throughout the watershed.

Mifflin and his crew spent a total of eight months, scattered throughout an 18-month period, capturing images of this wildlife. They wanted to show the lake and its environs in all four seasons, which meant anticipating where the animals might be and spending all day, if necessary, wearing camouflage and hiding in blinds to get the perfect shot.

One of Mifflin's favorite sequences follows two mountain lion cubs as they leave their den to go out hunting for perhaps the first time. They end up stalking a massive bull elk in an example of ambition overwhelming ability.

He is also particularly fond of some of the shots his team got of birds in flight, including swans and pelicans.

"With some of the cameras and drones, we were able to be right beside these big flocks of birds flying. It really makes you feel like you're flying with them right there. You can (almost) literally reach out and touch some of them," he says.

But wildlife is not the film's soul focus. Humans enjoy the region, too, especially those who participate in winter sports. The Wasatch Mountains are close to the lake, creating a weather pattern that results in what ski and snowboard enthusiasts consider perfect snow.

To show that side of the lake's features, the film presents some world-class and Olympic athletes snowboarding and skiing down the pristine snow.

Another human side of the story is the indigenous population, which has called the lake its home for 12,000 years. The film includes a traditional healing ceremony that is performed to restore the lake's water levels to its previous heights.

The lake reached its lowest level ever a few years ago, when the crew was filming. It was so low that land bridges appeared, allowing predators to cross from the shore to some of the islands that had been teeming with wildlife.

But the water level has risen again, at least to some extent, with the coalition of people working together to determine the best uses for the water in the watershed. It is a development that leaves Mifflin hopeful.

“We wanted this film to be fun, entertaining and give people a sense of optimism,” he says.



Experts say growing demand for water, drought, and impacts from climate change are taking a toll on the Great Salt Lake in Utah.

If you go

What: "Secrets of Great Salt Lake"

When: 10 a.m., 12 p.m. and 2:30 p.m. Thursdays-Mondays (closed Tuesdays and Wednesdays). Hours may change after November

Where: St. Louis Science Center, 5050 Oakland Blvd.

How much: \$11.50, \$9.50 for children (ages 2-12), seniors (60 and older) and military; free for Science Center members and children under 2

More info: slsc.org/omnimax-films/secrets-of-great-salt-lake

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