

August 14, 2025

Recent letter sent by Dennis Albert, former
lead ecologist for the Michigan Natural Features
Inventory.

Dear Governor Whitmer,

I'm asking that you help protect Sibley Prairie, the largest remaining prairie remnant in Michigan. Since about 1990 Michigan's conservation community has been trying to get protection for Sibley Prairie, a roughly mile-square block of southeast Michigan's largest, 25-square-mile prairie/savanna complex. The site was large enough to support bison, the last of which was shot just east of Sibley prairie in 1882. I initiated the first survey of Sibley Prairie in the late 1980s. With the upcoming auction of the Fritz property in late August, this will likely be the last chance to secure the largest, most significant parcel of remaining prairie land in Michigan.

I was the lead ecologist for Michigan Natural Features Inventory from 1987 until 2004, when I moved with my wife to positions at Oregon State University. I participated in surveying and recommending some of Michigan's largest and best-known natural areas and preserves, including The Nature Conservancy's Eastern Upper Peninsula Bioreserve, large sites on the Keweenaw Peninsula, and island preserves in Lakes Michigan, Huron, and Superior. I still consider Sibley Prairie one of the most significant ecological and historical sites in Michigan.

I visited the site first in the late 1980s during February, when we were trying to get Sibley considered as a mitigation site for the expansion of Detroit Metropolitan Airport into a large area of lakeplain prairie, and even through the ice we were able to recognize several state-protected rare plants. Further summer surveys exposed the full botanical diversity, and we recommended Sibley Prairie for Land Trust acquisition. The site was approved, but Fritz Industries, the primary owner was not interested in selling, so only small, scattered properties were protected.

Why do I consider this site important to Michigan? My original enthusiasm for the site was based on it containing several rare plants, and that enthusiasm grew as I wandered through the diverse upland oak woodland, upland and wetland prairies, and swamp forests and marshes. Within a few hundred feet of busy Telegraph Road, one could be surrounded by a magical garden of asters, goldenrods, lupine, ironweed, milkweeds, mountain mint, coreopsis, Indian plantain, prairie dock, lobelia, and many more, within a matrix of tall Indian grass, cord grass, and big bluestem. A gardener's delight, emulated in many of the Europe's most famous botanical gardens. Sibley Road Prairie's importance was linked to botanical diversity, which expanded as we recognized its importance for rare prairie insects, threatened turtles, and its importance for migrating songbirds. A visit to the Flat Rock Museum documented the historic presence of bison.

In my last few years of working in Oregon's prairies and savannas, my understanding of Sibley's significance has grown. In Oregon I studied 400-year-old oaks that documented

recurring Indian fire management that left fire scars from the 1700s until the 1830s, when the Kalapuya bands were decimated by European diseases and then forced onto reservations. Since then, I have met the Kalapuya descendants who introduced me to the subtle tastes of the native food plants growing beneath the oaks – cat's ear, yampah, ookow, and many others. I now realized that Sibley Prairie was similarly linked to thousands of years of Indigenous management by the local Wyandotte and possibly Pottawatomi tribes. While the 400-year-old oaks of Oregon may be missing, the diverse prairie flora and fauna still provides a connection to these earliest Michiganders, who harvested plants for food, medicine, and fiber, and hunted the abundant waterfowl and mammals. There are likely descendants of the Wyandotte peoples in SE Michigan who know some of the Indigenous history or who could begin relearning that history at Sibley.

And other aspects of our early history are included at Sibley; of course the earliest history is geological, with dozens of low dunes and beach ridges persisting between Inkster, Sibley, King, and Telegraph Roads. Along the north edge of the Sibley tract, narrow French Claims (ribbon farms) link us to the early French influence in the Great Lakes region. Territorial Road links us to the earliest conflicts with England and the challenges to settlement within the massive Black Swamp at the east edge of Lake Erie. Bela Hubbard's original survey of the Monroe and Wayne County prairies while Michigan was still a territory references the influence of beaver on the drainage conditions and reminds us of why the French had originally settled in the area. And finally, in my dissertation research in the early/mid 1980s, I encountered numerous Black farmers eking out a living in the landscape within and surrounding the Greater Sibley prairie, but when I returned a few years later this landscape was beginning to be suburbanized, with poor farms and farmers replaced by massive homes raised on fill above the poorly-drained prairie and old fields. **All of this history and ecology could be part of a southeast Michigan prairie preserve, enriching our view of Michigan.**

Local models: State and local governments in Ohio and Illinois, as well as The Nature Conservancy led the effort to secure and manage similar lakeplain prairie sites and showcased the prairies and oak openings, combining recreational and biodiversity objectives. To date, Michigan's recognizing the importance and embracing the opportunities of these prairie/savanna landscapes has been much more localized.

I'm enclosing a few photos that demonstrate the botanical diversity and beauty of Michigan's nearby prairies and a photo of the last bison, looking a bit worse for wear. I'm also enclosing some images of similar sites around Chicago and Toledo, sites that share many of the same plant and insect species found at Sibley. I've visited the prairies and woodlands in both states on multiple occasions and seen the enthusiasm of local residents and volunteers, as well as visitors from afar.

I think that this may be our last opportunity to protect and restore Sibley prairie. I hope that Michiganders are up for the challenge.

Sincerely,

Dennis Albert, ecologist

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PHOTOS FROM NEARBY SOUTHEASTERN MICHIGAN PRAIRIES:



Lakeplain prairie flora, St. John's Marsh, Algonac, St. Clair County



Lakeplain wet-mesic prairie, Wayne County MI's last bison shot near Sibley, 1882

COMMON PRAIRIE PLANTS AT SIBLEY PRAIRIE:



Prairie dock



Purple milkweed

Photo via prairiemoon.com



Ironweed



Prairie coneflower and bee-balm (bergamot)

CHICAGO WILDERNESS – OAK WOODLAND AND PRAIRIE



Chicago Oak Openings – diagram of prairie flora

NEARBY TOLEDO METROPARKS AND TNC OAK OPENINGS AND PRAIRIES:



Toledo Metroparks – Oak Openings



Toledo Metroparks - Oak Opening Sand Dunes Trail



Kitty Todd Nature Preserve, Toledo, Ohio Oak Openings