

SAVE SIBLEY PRAIRIE COALITION



PRESS RELEASE

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American Bison.

“O GIVE ME A HOME WHERE THE BUFFALO ROAM?” Where could that be? Kansas? Wyoming? Montana? Or until the late 1800s, how about southeast Michigan’s Wayne County? At one time there were such extensive grassland prairies in southern Michigan, including in Wayne County, that

American Bison were quite common. They were hunted and sold for livestock by the thousands, their skulls piled up into huge mounds. In fact, the last known American Bison in Michigan was shot in 1882 in Brownstown Township in the area now known as Sibley Prairie.

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A large pile of American bison skulls at the Michigan Carbon Works, Detroit. ca. 1880s, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library. <https://olddetroit.tumblr.com/post/4427007873/bison-skulls>



<https://www.pexels.com/id-id/foto/tumpukan-tengkorak-bison-yang-menampilkan-teksur-alami-28896329/>

Sibley Prairie is a rare wetland ecosystem known as a Lakeplain Prairie. Once a part of the vast



grassland stretching across southeastern Michigan, it has been largely lost to agriculture and development, leaving only a few scattered remnants that still provide vital habitat for several rare and endangered species. The largest remaining tract—a 440-acre parcel in Brownstown Township, near the historic site where Michigan's last bison was killed—was nearly lost to development when it was scheduled for auction in late August.

At the last moment, the Michigan Land Conservancy was able to negotiate an option to purchase the 440-acre Sibley Prairie property in time to stop the auction. One benefactor came through with a million-dollar loan

which helped seal the deal. "This was a remarkable achievement, yet it presents a major challenge," noted Jack Smiley, President of the Conservancy. "The conservation community now has one year to raise \$6 million so that this irreplaceable natural resource can be protected in perpetuity."

Several conservation groups have formed the Save Sibley Prairie Coalition to meet the challenge, including Michigan Land Conservancy, Michigan Botanical Society, Ducks Unlimited, Detroit Bird Alliance, Thumb Land Conservancy, Sierra Club, Friends of the Rouge, Legacy Land Conservancy and Wayne County Conservation District. Additional partners are being sought as well.

To start the fundraising campaign the Coalition set a year-end goal of \$500,000. So far, over \$200,000 in pledges and donations have been received, with over \$100,000 coming from members of the Michigan Botanical Society. The Detroit Bird Alliance has committed \$30,000 towards the effort, noting that the group had fought development plans for this property 25 years ago. The balance has come from hundreds of smaller donations. The Coalition plans to reach out to foundations, corporations and individuals, with naming rights available for a major sponsor. "All it takes is one visionary donor to make the difference," said Smiley, "someone ready to create a living legacy that will safeguard Sibley Prairie forever."

Dennis Albert, now an ecology professor at Oregon State University, was lead ecologist for the Michigan Natural Features Inventory (MNFI) when he initiated the first survey of Sibley Prairie in the late 1980s. During his tenure at MNFI, from 1987 to 2004, Albert surveyed and recommended 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

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Keweenaw Peninsula, and islands preserves in Lakes Michigan, Huron and Superior. “I still consider Sibley Prairie one of the most significant ecological and historical sites in Michigan,” he said.



Turkey foot or Big Bluestem grass.



Tall Coreopsis



Viceroy Butterfly on Dense Blazing Star.

Sibley Prairie is one of the most biodiverse ecosystems in Michigan. It harbors not only the largest remnant of Lakeplain Prairie in the state, but also upland oak woodland, rare oak savannah, swamp forest, and marshes. In a recent letter to Governor Whitmer, urging its protection, Albert wrote that 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.” He continued, “A gardener’s delight, emulated in many of the most famous botanical gardens.”

Sibley Prairie’s botanical diversity—which includes 158 acres of high-quality marsh and forested wetlands—supports numerous rare plant species, including prairie Indian-plantain (*Arnoglossum plantagineum*), tall green milkweed (*Asclepias hirtella*), and eastern prairie fringed orchid (*Platanthera leucophaea*). This diversity hosts a myriad of insects, rare butterflies and moths including Duke’s Skipper (*Euphyes dukesi*), a state-threatened butterfly, threatened turtles, and grassland birds such as Meadowlarks, Bobolinks and Indigo Buntings that are experiencing steep population declines.

Through public support, the Save Sibley Prairie Coalition aims to provide a safe haven for these species, while expanding outdoor recreation opportunities where people live and work—right in heavily urbanized Wayne County, Michigan’s most populous county.

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Dennis Albert is amazed that the property is still available. "It's remarkable that this land hasn't been developed over all of these years," he said. "I think this may be our last opportunity to protect and restore Sibley Prairie."

For more information, or to donate to Save Sibley Prairie, go to the Coalition's website at: SaveSibleyPrairie.org.

Note: All photos are by Jim Bull unless otherwise noted.

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