

Mastodon bones discovered in Michigan's thumb region

Kim Kozlowski, The Detroit News

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(Photo: Levi Stroud)

The most complete ice age mastodon skeleton found in Michigan in decades was recovered last weekend by a team of University of Michigan researchers and teachers (<https://twitter.com/JamesErickson11>) in Tuscola County in the state's thumb region.

The recovery, formally announced Monday, was a male mastodon (<http://ns.umich.edu/Releases/2016/Oct16/mastodon.html>) — extinct relatives of elephants — and likely lived 11,000 to 13,000 years ago.

About 60 to 70 percent of the mammal's skeletal mass was recovered, which included more than 75 complete or near complete bones. Among them: the mastodon's long limb bones, shoulder blades, pelvis skull, many vertebrae and most of its ribs.



About 60 to 70 percent of the mammal's skeletal mass was recovered. (Photo: Levi Stroud)

Pieces from about 300 mastodons have been found in Michigan over the decades but fewer than 10 were as complete as the one found during a four-day dig (https://twitter.com/JamesErickson11/status/787430750803075073/photo/1?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw) that ended Sunday at the Fowler Center for Outdoor Learning near Mayville.

"This is the most complete Michigan mastodon skeleton in many decades (<https://twitter.com/JamesErickson11>)," said Daniel Fisher, who is also a professor in the UM Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences and in the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology.

"The last time a mastodon this complete was found in Michigan was in the 1940s. That was the Owosso mastodon (<http://www.shiawasseehistory.com/mastodon.html>), the mature female skeleton mounted at the UM Museum of Natural History. As I recall, she was about 80 percent complete."

The bones — to be known as the Fowler Center Mastodon — will be donated to the Museum of Paleontology (<https://lsa.umich.edu/paleontology>).

"A big part of the Fowler Center's mission is to enhance personal growth through outdoor adventures that provide an opportunity for learning by doing. And that's exactly what this partnership with local teachers and UM researchers is all about," said Kyle Middleton, executive director of the Fowler Center, which provides year-round camping for people with developmental disabilities and special needs.

The bones were first discovered two years ago eroding from a stream bank. Fisher said initial studies of the bones suggested the mastodon's carcass may have been processed by early human hunters or scavengers.

His team will wash and examine the bones for evidence of human butchery or other postmortem modifications. The bones will undergo radiocarbon analysis to determine date of death within a century or less, and roots of the animal's wisdom teeth will be examined to determine season of death.

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