

## THE STATE FOSSIL IS A GIANT

Mastodons are on the move again.

Thanks mainly to the students at Slauson Middle School in Ann Arbor, the long-extinct mammal was named the Michigan state fossil in April of 2002. This magnificent creature once lived all over Michigan and North America. It disappeared about 10,000 years ago, but its bones are still being studied by paleontologists (pay-lee-on-TAHL-uh-jists), or fossil scientists.

“Generally, several new Michigan sites are reported each year, and we study a number of them,” said Dan Fisher, a paleontologist at the University of Michigan. One of the most complete mastodon skeletons ever found — a female — is at the U-M Exhibit Museum of Natural History. Discovered in 1944 near



Owosso, east of Flint, about 95 percent of its bones are real. The rest are plaster replicas.

Near the skeleton is a cast of eight male mastodon footprints. The original prints were discovered by Fisher in 1992 in some sand near Ann Arbor. They were part of a track of about 30 prints, the longest and best mastodon trail ever found!

**Bonus question:** Only one other Michigan animal, also extinct, was about the same size as the mastodon. What was it?

**Answer:** The woolly mammoth, another elephant-like mammal, though there were a lot fewer of them.

“We found these huge depressions and started joking about how they were mastodon tracks,” Fisher told the Yak in 1996, when the cast was unveiled.

“But as soon as we began to see a pattern, we realized there was no explanation for it. They were mastodon tracks. It was very exciting.”

The cast is in a darkened area, with a spotlight shining on it. It looks so real you feel as if a mastodon walked through the museum right before you got there.

The real prints, which were too fragile to dig up, were carefully reburied. Mastodons forever! Congratulations to all those involved in the campaign to have one of our two largest native animals officially recognized.

By Patricia Chargot



PHOTO BY PER KJELDSEN

This nearly-complete mastodon skeleton is at the University of Michigan Exhibit Museum of Natural History. A female, it was found near Owosso, about 60 miles north of Ann Arbor.