

Heard the news?

Metro Parks consider bringing bison back to central Ohio prairie

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By [Mark Ferenchik](#)

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buying bison or having them donated.



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These bison at Darby Dan Farm might have some company if the Franklin County **Metro Parks** approve bringing a herd to Prairie Oaks or Battelle-Darby Creek park.

Darby Dan Farm, which is next to Battelle-Darby Creek **Metro Park**, has 13 bison. Park officials have contacted the Galloway farm about



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Soon, you might spy bison grazing in a **Metro Park** on what's left of the western Franklin County prairie.

Franklin County **Metro Parks** is considering bringing bison to either its Prairie Oaks or Battelle-Darby Creek **parks** by 2010, Executive Director John O'Meara said.

Prairie Oaks might be the lead choice. It has 400 acres of restored prairie on the Madison County side of the park west of Big Darby Creek, O'Meara said.

Long ago, Ohio had prairies teeming with herds of elk and some bison, he said. This is an opportunity to bring some of that history back for visitors to see.

It's also a way to boost park attendance, said O'Meara, who will be asking voters to approve an operating levy next year.

O'Meara called the project "very preliminary." But he said the idea has been around for a while and it's one that he thought the new nonprofit **Stewards of Metro Parks** group could pursue as one of its first projects. The **stewards** are volunteers who advocate and raise money for the **parks**.

"This was one project we wanted to partner with **Metro Parks** on," said Paul Bingle, **stewards** president.

Bingle suggested that his group could recruit volunteers to help build the fence to enclose the bison, construct boardwalks or viewing platforms, or even develop a program for children to collect money to support the herd.

Park officials have contacted Darby Dan Farm and The Wilds about buying bison or having them donated, but they have not made any decisions.

"We talked about the potential," said Nicole Cavender, chief programmatic officer for The Wilds. "We'll be happy to guide them through our animal expertise, giving them bison if they need them."

The Wilds has 79 bison in a 600-acre pasture and 13 more in other sites throughout the preserve.

Darby Dan Farm, which is next to Battelle-Darby Creek **Metro** Park, has 13 bison.

The **stewards** group also is suggesting bluebird houses.

That idea came from the group's secretary, Amy Bostic. She worked with her brother, who leads a farmers' cooperative in Marion, to place bluebird houses throughout the state.

"Bluebirds get in, and they'll come back every year," she said.

Prairies are a good habitat for bluebirds, away from wooded areas where house wrens live. Wrens make homes of the boxes, the Ohio Bluebird Society said.

Ohio is home to as many as 80,000 bluebirds, said Bernie Daniel of the Ohio Bluebird Society.

Bluebirds aren't rare in Ohio -- they're in every county -- but they are losing habitat, said Jim McCormac, with the Ohio Division of Wildlife.

"They're birds of meadows and the country, so urbanization does them in."

Metro Parks already has more than 300 bluebird boxes in its **parks**, including more than 80 at Highbanks **Metro** Park in Delaware and Franklin counties.

The **stewards** group is starting out with "wow" projects, hoping to attract members, **Metro Parks** spokeswoman Peg Hanley said.

"Bison is big and bold."

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Editorial: Something to see

Bison on the Metro Parks prairies would bring dramatic piece of Americana to life

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"Bison is big and bold."

Truer words never were spoken, and that's why the Franklin County Metro Parks system's idea to showcase a few members of America's iconic megafauna species on restored prairies at Prairie Oaks or Battelle-Darby Creek park is so exciting.

Metro Parks spokeswoman Peg Hanley made the statement regarding the desire of a new nonprofit group, Stewards of the Metro Parks, to launch projects that will build support for and excitement around the parks.

The group also is considering building bluebird boxes for the prairie sections. That, too, is a worthy project; the songbirds are losing habitat throughout Ohio as urban development eats away at the meadows they frequent.

Bluebird boxes in wooded areas are less successful because forest-loving wrens tend to take them over; prairies are the best place for the boxes.

But, as prairie-appropriate attractions go, nothing comes close in "wow" factor to bison, in all their massive-headed, prehistoric-looking glory.

This raises a delicate point: On the spectrum of Franklin County Metro Parks, which encompass the scenic beauty of Highbanks' forested ravines, Clear Creek's rugged Appalachian foothills and the refinement of Inniswood Metro Gardens, the visual charms of Prairie Oaks and the prairie sections of Battelle-Darby Creek are, well, not as obvious.

Even in its fullest glory, a prairie is a thing of subtle beauty; a prairie restoration in progress is even plainer.

What better way to give visitors an inkling of the dramatic role the prairie played in American history -- along with something really cool to look at -- than to repopulate a patch with its grandest beasts?

Bear in mind that bison played a relatively small role in Ohio.

Unlike the High Plains, Ohio's prairies lose all potential nutrition in the winter, so bison -- along with deer and elk -- were only seasonal visitors, spending their winters in the woods, where they could find bark and buds on which to survive. Ohio never saw the massive bison herds that darkened the Western plains.

Nevertheless, bison we had, and bison we could have again if the Metro Parks support group and the parks system can work out a deal to acquire and accommodate some.

The Wilds nature preserve and the private Darby Dan Farm are possible sources of the animals. The Stewards group has offered to recruit volunteers to help build enclosures and boardwalks or viewing platforms.

Safety and legal liability should be considered. A metro park likely wouldn't have the foot-traffic volume or supervision that the Columbus Zoo can provide. But that institution, along with the Wilds, could provide plenty of expertise on the healthy confinement and safe display of bison.

Here's hoping to see them roam a metro park soon.