14280

West Gulf Coastal Plain Northern Calcareous Prairie

BpS Model/Description Version: Aug. 2020

Update: 5/30/2018

Vegetation Type

Herbaceous

Map Zones

37, 44

Geographic Range

The blackland region of Arkansas occurs in the West Gulf Coastal Plain in Clark, Hempstead, Howard, Little River, Nevada and Sevier Counties. Found in map zone (MZ) 37 in ECOMAP (Cleland et al. 2007) section 231E, subsection K.

Biophysical Site Description

This region is characterized by gently rolling topography. Blackland prairies and woodlands within this region do not occur contiguously. These communities are found in discrete areas where blackland soils have formed from calcareous substrates.

The surface rock in the blackland region belongs to the Upper Cretaceous formation. The types of rock or parent material that support blackland communities include Arkadelphia marl, Nacatoch sand, Saratoga chalk, Marlbrook marl, Annona chalk, and Brownstown marl. The topography in the blackland region is gently rolling to nearly level with most slopes less than 12%. In some areas, such as Nacatoch Ravines Natural Area (NA) and Saratoga Landing NA, slopes approach 50%. At White Cliffs NA a 50ft chalk cliffline soars above the Little River. The elevation in the blackland region ranges from 165ft above moisture sensitivity level (msl) in the floodplains and streams to 800ft above msl on the ridge tops in the northern part of the region. Average elevations are between 300-600ft above msl (Roberts 1979).

Historically, blackland soils were characterized by a deep mantle of calcareous black soil high in organic matter that is found over a substrate of Cretaceous chalk or marl with variable amounts of sand, gravel and acidic clay lenses. However, because blackland soil is prone to erosion, in areas that have been intensively managed the topsoil has eroded exposing olive-colored clayey subsoil. Severe erosion is common and areas are characterized by gullies, sometimes exceeding 35ft in depth, with exposed chalk or marl that is mostly unvegetated. Blackland soils vary from well-drained and moderately well-drained to poorly-drained clays, silty clays, silty clay loams and fine sandy loams. The soils are normally excessively dry in summer and many have a high shrink-swell potential (Roberts 1979, Foti 1989a, Foti 1989b, USDA Soil Conservation Service 1987 and 1975). The prairies and sparse woodlands occur on the tight, high pH soils that are generally unfavorable to root penetration (vertisols or chalk hardpans), and in barrier-free landscapes that are prone to extensive and frequent fire.

The blackland soil and geology of Arkansas was largely described by Owen (1860) in his Geological Reconnaissance of the Middle and Southern Counties of Arkansas. The counties where blackland soil occurs and through which Owen traveled include Sevier, Hempstead, Clark and Pike. The best exposed and developed Cretaceous formations he reported occurred in Hempstead County. In general he described the soils that cover Cretaceous strata as very rich, black, and fertile. Where blackland soil occurred on the tops of ridges in rolling country the soil was frequently eroded and exposed pure Cretaceous subsoil that was considerably less fertile. Where the bedrock surfaced the ground was also less fertile, but bois-d’arc and haw flourished even on these bare outcrops. Owen reported seeing fossils everywhere which he interestingly assumed remained from former freshwater lakes, ponds and pools despite the marine qualities of some of the species. There is one mention of cretaceous limestone in a ravine about four miles from Paraclifty where coarse gravel partially covers the bedrock. This is the current location of the Ashgrove Cement plant. In Clark County Owen described rich woods surrounded by drier lands dominated by post oaks. In one region of Pike County (T8S R26W S4) white oaks were dominant on Cretaceous limestone and marl surface rock.

Vegetation Description

Early descriptions of the blackland region of Arkansas by Thomas Nuttall, early settlers, and the original land surveyors, provide some clues as to what the pre- and early settlement vegetation and landscape were like. Openings on ridges occurred within woodlands interspersed with tree-lined drainages. There were extensive areas with thin groundcover (prairies, probably grazed) and shrubby trees. Prairies and barrens occurred on thin calcareous soils over chalk and marl deposits.

Blackland prairie flora typically consists of 3-6ft tall grasses and a diverse mix of forbs which flower at various times throughout the growing season. The flora is dominated by little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) and Indian grass (*Sorghastum nutans*). Important associate grasses include dropseed (*Sporobolus clandestinus*), eastern gamma grass (*Tripsacum dactyloides*), bushy bluestem (*Andropogon glomeratus*), and three-awn grasses (*Aristida* spp.). Common forbs present are goldenrods (*Solidago* spp.), asters (*Aster* spp.), sunflowers (Helianthus spp), evening primrose (Oenothera biennis), coneflowers (Echinacea spp), prairie clovers (*Dalea* spp.), milkweeds (*Asclepias* spp.), compass plant (*Silphium laciniatum*), blazing stars (*Liatris* spp.), and many others (Roberts 1979, Foti 1989a, Foti 1989b, Zollner and Simon 1997).

Post and chinquapin oaks (*Q. muehlenbergii*) grew on ridges with thin soil over marl and chalk. Post oaks were also found either dense or in savanna-like stands over fragipans where the soil was poorly drained. Bois-d’arc (*Maclura pomifera*) was found on dry calcareous ridges with dense thickets of sumac, persimmon (*Diospyros virginiana*), and greenbriar (*Smilax* spp.) (Hutchinson 1985).

Degraded blackland prairies show increased abundance of eastern red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) and other woody species such as persimmon, white ash (*Fraxinus americana*), winged elm (*Ulmus alata*), Carolina buckthorn (*Rhamnus caroliniana*), deciduous holly (*Ilex decidua*), flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*), and rusty blackhaw (*Viburnum rufidulum*) due to intensive grazing and long-term fire suppression (Roberts 1979, Foti 1989a, Foti 1989b, Zollner and Simon 1997).

Blackland woodlands occur on dry to more mesic sites and consist of a fairly open canopy with a well-established herbaceous layer. In AR, dry calcareous woodlands are dominated by chinquapin oak (*Quercus muhlenbergii*) with sedges (*Carex* spp.), grasses (*Graminae* spp.) and various forbs dominating the herbaceous layer. Shumard’s oak (*Quercus shumardii*) and nutmeg hickory (*Carya myrsticformis*) with sedges and grasses in the herbaceous layer dominate mesic woodlands.

BpS Dominant and Indicator Species

Species names are from the NRCS PLANTS database. Check species codes at http://plants.usda.gov.

Disturbance Description

The blackland region of southwest Arkansas has a long history of human habitation. Humans have dramatically changed the landscape according to how they use natural resources for their livelihood. Prior to European settlement, native Americans dwelled in small camps and villages throughout the blackland region. They repeatedly burned the landscape to clear the woodlands for ease in hunting and probably defense. They farmed portions of the bottoms and planted bois D’arc trees, prized for their strength and flexibility (Young and Hofmann 1995, Sabbo 1992).

Fire is the most important ecological process maintaining the distribution, composition, and diversity of blackland prairie, woodland, and forest communities. The prevalence of fire on the Gulf Coastal Plain has been well documented (Albert 1981, Pyne 1982, Foti and Glenn 1990). An examination of Arkansas Forestry Commission records indicate a prevalence of lightning ignited fires occurring from mid-July through October (Foti and Glenn 1990). Historically, fires occurred both naturally and anthropogenically in the region. Anthropogenic fires could have occurred in any season but early records of aboriginal burning reference September through December (Young and Hoffman 1995, Lottinville 1980).

Climate and fire played a role in the distribution of the blackland prairie communities. Fires were more frequent and intense during droughts, and lead to prairie expansion by eliminating or reducing woody species. During droughts, fires may have crept farther into the lowland blackland communities, reducing the density of woody species, and shifting the composition toward herbaceous wet-mesic and wet prairie species. During periods of high soil moisture, fires were probably not as frequent or intense, enabling woody vegetation to increase in distribution (Roberts 1979).

The season of fires also shifts species composition within communities. In woodland communities, pine and cedar are most susceptible to fall fires, while hardwoods are generally most susceptible to spring fires. In prairie communities, spring burns appear to stimulate grasses, while fall fires stimulate forb species (Pyne 1982).

The lack of fire in the blackland prairies and woodlands of southwest Arkansans, in addition to heavy grazing has resulted in the encroachment of eastern red cedar and other woody vegetation, and a decline in herbaceous vegetation density and extent (Roberts 1979).

Almost no information exists on the role of extirpated or extant grazers and browsers on blackland prairie and woodland communities. In general, grazing animals like bison and elk historically played a significant role in the composition of prairie communities. Native grazers typically moved into recently burned areas, selecting tender grass sprouts and possibly shifting the prairie vegetation composition toward forb species. Areas were grazed intensively for short periods and then allowed to rest for many years while the grazing animals moved to other areas. Native browsers reduced woody growth which favored herbaceous species.

Fire Frequency

Fire interval is expressed in years for each fire severity class and for all types of fire combined (All Fires). Average FI is the central tendency modeled. Percent of all fires is the percent of all fires modeled in that severity class. Minimum and Maximum FIs show the relative range of fire intervals as estimated by model contributors, if known.

Scale Description

Large patch

Adjacency or Identification Concerns

Issues or Problems

Widespread conversion to non-native pasture and hay meadow. Degraded blackland prairies often display increased abundance of non-native introduced pasture species such as tall fescue (*Festuca arundinacea*), bermuda grass (*Cynodon dactylon*), black medic (*Medicago lupulina*), clovers (*Trifolium* spp.), and yellow and white sweet clover (*Melilotus* spp.). Much of the blacklands show areas of extensive and intensive erosion and in places no top soils remains.

Native Uncharacteristic Conditions

Today eastern red cedar forest or Bois'd Arc Woodland may occur in fire-suppressed areas.

Comments

This model was developed for MZ44 and was later adopted for MZ37 without changes. This model was copied from MZ44 8/16/2007 by Brendan Ward.

Succession Classes

**Mapping Rules**

Succession class letters A-E are described in the Succession Class Description section. Some classes use a leafform distinction where a qualifier is added to the class letter: Brdl (broadleaf), Con (conifer), or Mix (mixed conifer and broadleaf). UN refers to uncharacteristic native or a combination of height and cover that would not be expected under the reference condition. NP refers to not possible or a combination of height and cover which is not physiologically possible for the species in the BpS.

**Description**

Class A 50 Early Development 1 - All Structures

Indicator Species

Description

Blackland prairie flora typically consists of grasses and a diverse mix of forbs which flower at various times throughout the growing season. Blackland prairie flora is dominated by little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), and Indian grass (*Sorghastum nutans*). Important associate grasses include dropseed (*Sporobolus clandestinus*), eastern gamma grass (*Tripsacum dactyloides*), bushy bluestem (*Andropogon glomeratus*), and three-awn grasses (*Aristida* spp.). Common forbs present are coneflowers (*Echinacea* spp.), prairie clovers (*Dalea* spp.), milkweeds (*Asclepias* spp.), compass plant (*Silphium laciniatum*), blazing stars (*Liatris* spp.), and many others (Roberts 1979, Foti 1989a, Foti 1989b, Zollner and Simon 1997).

*Maximum Tree Size Class*  
None

Class B 3 Mid Development 1 - Closed

Indicator Species

Description

Degraded blackland prairies show increased abundance of eastern red cedar and other woody species such as persimmon, white ash, winged elm, Carolina buckthorn, deciduous holly (*Ilex decidua*), flowering dogwood, Rough-leaved dogwood and rusty blackhaw due to intensive grazing and long-term fire suppression (Roberts 1979, Foti 1989a, Foti 1989b, Zollner and Simon 1997).

*Maximum Tree Size Class*  
None

Class C 46 Late Development 1 - Open

Indicator Species

Description

Post oak, shumard's oak, chinkapin oak, shortleaf pine (*Pinus echinata*), nutmeg hickory, and bur oak (*Quercus macrocarpa*) are the dominant tree species. Open savanna with grassy understory, including a diverse understory, including, little bluestem, and Indian grass, dropseed (*Sporobolus* spp.), eastern gamma grass, bushy bluestem, and three-awn grasses (Roberts 1979, Foti 1989a, Foti 1989b, Zollner and Simon 1997).

*Maximum Tree Size Class*  
Large 21-33" DBH

Class D 1 Late Development 1 - Closed

Indicator Species

Description

Bois-d’arc was found on dry calcareous ridges with dense thickets of sumac, persimmon (*Diospyros virginiana*), and greenbriar (*Smilax* spp.) (Hutchinson 1985). On xeric to dry-mesic soils, may be almost pure astern red cedar. Closed canopy with midstory of shade tolerant species. Sparse herbaceous layer, sometimes only *Carex cherokeensis*.

*Maximum Tree Size Class*  
Large 21-33" DBH

Model Parameters

Deterministic Transitions

Probabilistic Transitions

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