

Ecological Site Description

Loamy Backslope Woodland

F109XY015MO

- (*Quercus alba* - *Quercus muehlenbergii*/*Cercis canadensis*/*Elymus virginicus* - *Schizachyrium scoparium*)
- (white oak – chinkapin oak/red bud/Virginia wildrye – little bluestem)

An Ecological Site Description (ESD) is a reference document of ecological knowledge regarding a particular land area (ecological site). An ESD describes ecological potential and ecosystem dynamics of land areas and their potential management. Ecological sites are linked to soil survey map unit components, which allows for mapping of ecological sites. (**NOTE:** *This is a “provisional” ESD, and is subject to change. It contains basic ecological information sufficient for conservation planning and land management in Missouri. After additional information is developed and reviewed, a “Correlated” ESD will be published and will be available via the Web Soil Survey <http://websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov> .*)

Major Land Resource Area: 109 – Iowa and Missouri Heavy Till Plain

Introduction

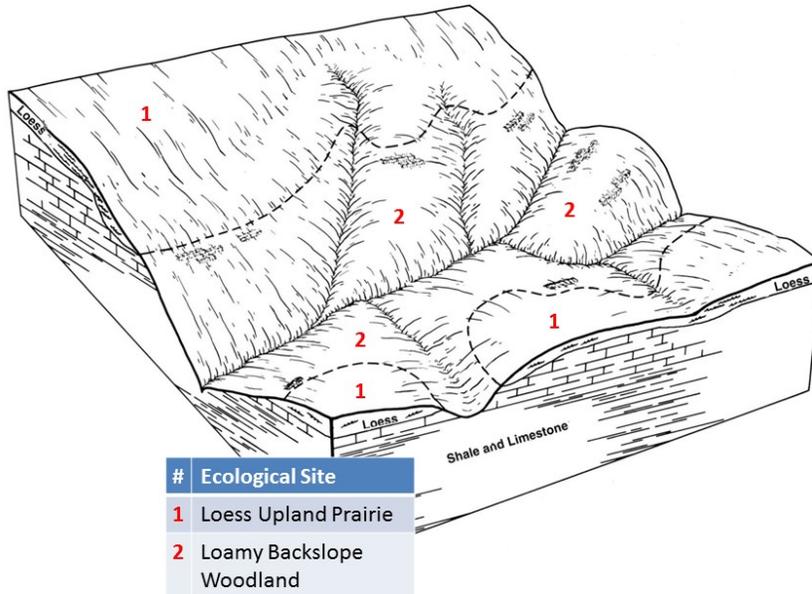
The Iowa and Missouri Heavy Till Plain (area outlined in red on the map) is an area of rolling hills interspersed with interfluvial divides and alluvial valleys. Elevation ranges from about 660 feet along the lower reaches of rivers, to about 980 feet on stable interfluvial summits in southern Iowa. Relief is about 80 to 160 feet between major streams and adjacent interfluvial summits. Most of the till plain drains south to the Missouri River via the Grand and Chariton River systems, but the northeastern portion drains southeast to the Mississippi River. Loess caps the pre-Illinoian aged till on interfluvial summits, whereas the till is exposed on side slopes. Mississippian aged limestone and Pennsylvanian aged sandstone and shale crop out on lower slopes in some areas.



Loamy Limestone Exposed Backslope Woodlands are within the green areas on the map (Missouri portion only; Iowa distributions are currently under review). They occupy the southerly and westerly aspects of steep, dissected slopes, and are mapped in complex with Loamy Protected Backslope Forest ecological sites. Loamy Backslope Forests and Woodlands are not extensive, occurring mainly in NW Livingston County and NE Clark County along the bluffs of the Des Moines River. Soils are deep over limestone bedrock.

Physiographic Features

This site is on upland backslopes with slopes of 18 to 35 percent. It is on exposed aspects (south, southwest, and west), which receive significantly more solar radiation than the protected aspects. The site receives runoff from upslope summit and shoulder sites, and generates runoff to adjacent, downslope ecological sites. This site does not flood.



The adjacent figure (adapted from Abney, 2002) shows the typical landscape position of this ecological site, labeled “2” on the figure. The site is typically downslope from the Loess Upland Prairie ecological site. Upland Drainageway ecological sites are directly downslope (not shown on the diagram).

Soil Features

These soils are underlain with limestone bedrock at 40 to 60 inches deep. The soils were formed

under woodland vegetation, and have thin, light-colored surface horizons. Parent material is slope alluvium and residuum weathered from limestone, overlying limestone bedrock. They have silt loam surface layers, with loamy or clayey subsoils that have low to moderate amounts of chert gravel and cobbles. They are not affected by seasonal wetness. Soil series associated with this site include Bucklick.

Ecological Dynamics

Information contained in this section was developed using historical data, professional experience, field reviews, and scientific studies. The information presented is representative of very complex vegetation communities. Key indicator plants, animals and ecological processes are described to help inform land management decisions. Plant communities will differ across the MLRA because of the naturally occurring variability in weather, soils, and aspect. The Reference Plant Community is not necessarily the management goal. The species lists are representative and are not botanical descriptions of all species occurring, or potentially occurring, on this site. They are not intended to cover every situation or the full range of conditions, species, and responses for the site.

The soils of Loamy Backslope Woodlands limits the growth of trees and supports an abundance of native grasses and forbs in the understory. They may contain small glade complexes. While more productive than adjacent glades these sites have only a moderately tall (50 to 70 feet) white oak and chinkapin oak dominated a semi-open overstory, with occasional northern red oak. Shrubs were scattered within a dense matrix of native grasses and forbs. Characteristic plants in the ground flora can be used to gauge the restoration potential of a stand along with remnant open-grown old-age trees, and tree height growth. Protected slopes are generally more productive and have higher densities of white oak and northern red oak in the canopy.

Fire played an important role in the maintenance of these systems. It is likely that these ecological sites, along with adjacent glades and woodlands burned at least once every 5 years. The protected

slopes site burned less frequently (estimated 10 to 25 years) and with lower intensity. These periodic fires kept woodlands open, removed the litter, and stimulated the growth and flowering of the grasses and forbs. They would have also further limited the growth and dominance of trees, especially eastern redcedar. During fire free intervals, woody species would have increased and the herbaceous understory diminished. But the return of fire would have re-opened the woodlands and stimulated the ground flora. In the long term absence of fire, woody species, especially hickory and eastern red cedar have encroached into these ecological sites. Most of these ecological sites today are dense, and shady with a greatly diminished ground flora. Removal of the younger understory by chainsaw and the application of prescribed fire have proven to be effective restoration methods.

Loamy Backslope Woodlands were also subjected to occasional disturbances from wind and ice, as well as grazing by native large herbivores, such as bison, elk, and deer. Wind and ice would have periodically opened the canopy up by knocking over trees or breaking substantial branches off canopy trees. Grazing by native herbivores would have effectively kept understory conditions more open, creating conditions more favorable to oak reproduction and sun-loving ground flora species.

Uncontrolled domestic grazing has also impacted these communities, further diminishing the diversity of native plants and introducing species that are tolerant of grazing, such as buckbrush, gooseberry, and Virginia creeper. It also promotes the invasion of Eastern red cedar. Grazed sites have a more open understory. In addition, soil compaction and soil erosion from grazing can be a problem and lower site productivity.

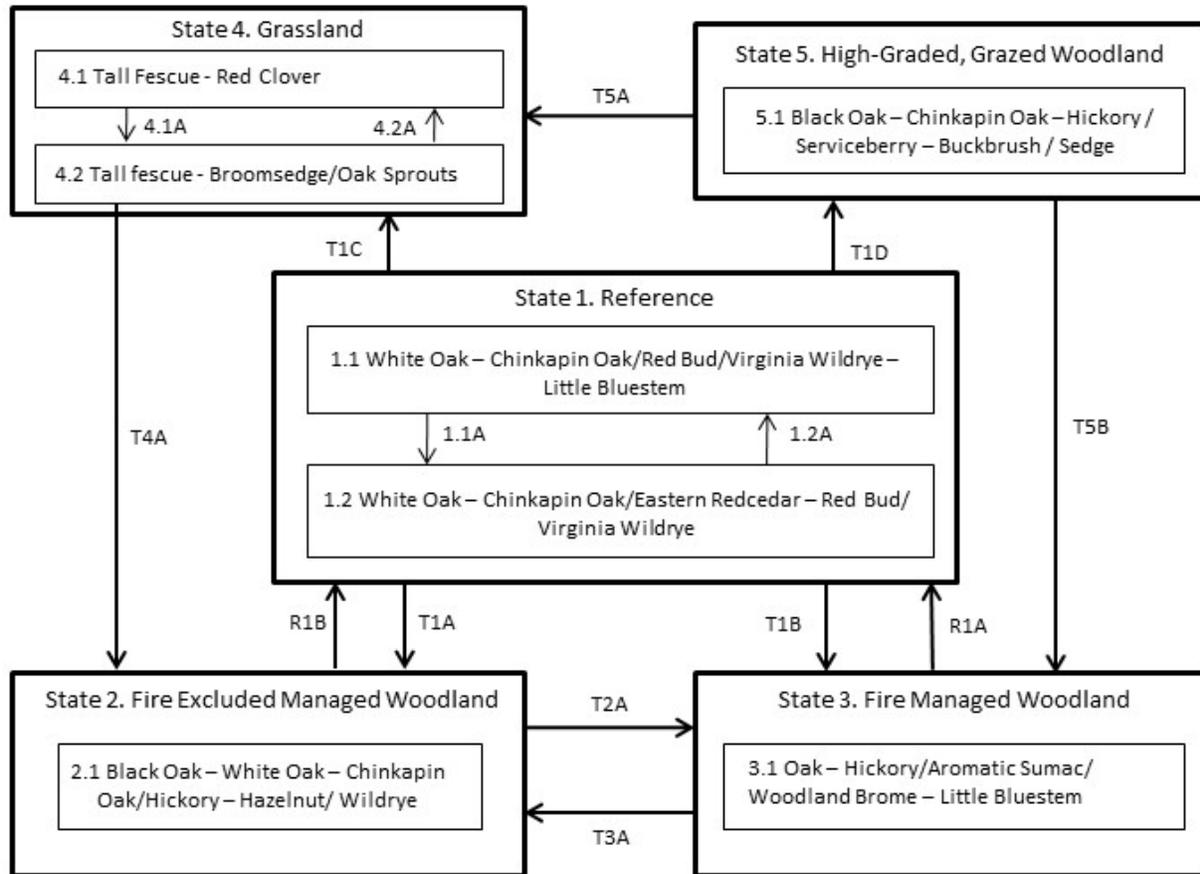
These ecological sites are moderately productive, especially when compared to loess covered units. Oak regeneration is typically problematic. Maintenance of the oak component will require disturbances that will encourage more sun adapted species and reduce shading effects.

Single tree selection timber harvests are common for this ecological site and often results in removal of the most productive trees (high grading) in the stand leading to poorer quality timber and a shift in species composition away from more valuable oak species. Better planned single tree selection or the creation of group openings can help regenerate and maintain more desirable oak species and increase vigor on the residual trees. Clearcutting also occurs and results in dense, even-aged stands dominated by oak. This may be beneficial for existing stands whose composition has been highly altered by past management practices. However, without some thinning of the dense stands and application of prescribed fire, the ground flora diversity can be shaded out and diversity of the stand may suffer.

A State and Transition Diagram is depicted in Figure 1. Detailed descriptions of each state, transition, plant community, and pathway follow the model. This model is based on available experimental research, field observations, professional consensus, and interpretations. It is likely to change as knowledge increases.

Figure 1: State and Transition Diagram

Loamy Backslope Woodland, F109XY024MO



Code	Activity/Event/Process
T1A	Even-aged management
T1B	Fire suppression; uneven-age management
T2B	Prescribed fire; thinning; grazing management
T1C, T5A	Clearing; pasture planting
T1D	Poorly planned harvest; uncontrolled grazing
T2A	Prescribed fire; forest stand improvement
T3A	Even-age management; fire exclusion
T4A	Tree planting; long-term succession; no grazing
T5B	Forest management; no grazing; fire

Code	Activity/Event/Process
1.1A	No disturbance (10+ years)
1.2A	Disturbance (fire, wind, ice) < 10 years
4.1A	Over grazing; no fertilization
4.2A	Brush management; grassland seeding; grassland management

Code	Activity/Event/Process
R1A	Prescribed fire; extended rotations
R1B	Forest stand improvement; extended rotations; prescribed fire

Ecological States

State 1: Reference

The historical reference state for this ecological site was old growth, oak woodland. The reference state was dominated by white oak and chinkapin oak. Maximum tree age was likely 150 to 200 years. Periodic disturbances from fire, wind or ice maintained the woodland structure and diverse ground flora species. Long disturbance-free periods allowed an increase in both the density of trees and the abundance of shade tolerant species. Two community phases are recognized in the reference state, with shifts between phases based on disturbance frequency. Reference states are rare today. Many sites have been converted to grassland (State 4). Others have been subject to repeated, high-graded timber harvest coupled with uncontrolled domestic livestock grazing (State 5). Fire suppression has resulted in increased canopy density, which has affected the abundance and diversity of ground flora. Some former reference states have been managed as woodlands with fire (State 2) or without fire (State 3).

State 2: Fire Excluded Managed Woodland

These stands will slowly increase in more shade tolerant species and white oak will become less dominant. These woodlands tend to be rather dense, with a sparse understory and ground flora. Thinning can increase overall tree vigor and improve understory diversity. However, in the absence of fire, the diversity and cover of the ground flora is still diminished. Without periodic disturbance, stem density and fire intolerant species, like sassafras and hickory, increase in abundance. Prescribed fire along with a more open canopy can transition this state to a Fire Managed Woodland state (State 3).

State 3: Fire Managed Woodland

The Fire Managed Woodland state results from managing woodland communities (States 2) with prescribed fire and canopy thinning,. This state can resemble the Reference State, but with younger maximum tree ages, more open canopies and lower ground flora diversity. Cessation of prescribed fire will allow transition to various managed woodland states.

If controlled grazing is introduced to this state, a silvopasture system can be created. Opening of the canopy may need to occur to allow sufficient light levels to exist for suitable grazing needs.

State 4: Grassland

Conversion of woodlands to planted, non-native cool season grassland species such as tall fescue is common for this region. Steep slopes, surface fragments, low organic matter contents and soil acidity make grasslands harder to maintain in a healthy, productive state on this ecological site.

Two community phases are recognized in the grassland state, with shifts between phases based on types of management. Poor management will result in a shift to *Community 4.2* that shows an increase in oak sprouting and increases in broomsedge densities. If grazing and active pasture management is discontinued, the site will eventually transition to State 2 from this phase.

State 5: High-Graded, Grazed Woodland

States that were subjected to repeated, high-grading timber harvests and uncontrolled domestic grazing transitioned to a High-Graded, Grazed Woodland state. This state exhibits an over-abundance of hickory and other less desirable tree species, and weedy understory species such as

buckbrush, gooseberry, poison ivy and Virginia creeper. The existing vegetation offers little nutritional value for cattle, and excessive cattle stocking damages tree boles, degrades understory species composition and results in soil compaction and accelerated erosion and runoff.

Two common transitions from this state are woody clearing and conversion to State 5, grassland or removing livestock, limited harvesting, and allowing long term succession to occur to some other woodland state.

Reference State Plant Community

Canopy Trees

Common Name	Botanical Name	Cover % (low-high)	Canopy Height (ft)
WHITE OAK	<i>Quercus alba</i>	30-60	60
BLACK OAK	<i>Quercus velutina</i>	30-60	70
CHINKAPIN OAK	<i>Quercus muehlenbergii</i>	10-30	60
POST OAK	<i>Quercus stellata</i>	10-30	50
SHAGBARK HICKORY	<i>Carya ovata</i>	10-20	50
NORTHERN RED OAK	<i>Quercus rubra</i>	10-20	70

Shrubs

Common Name	Botanical Name	Cover % (low-high)	Canopy Height(ft)
AROMATIC SUMAC	<i>Rhus aromatica</i>	10-20	5
AMERICAN HAZELNUT	<i>Corylus americana</i>	10-20	5
DWARF HACKBERRY	<i>Celtis tenuifolia</i>	10-20	3
RED BUD	<i>Cercis canadensis</i>	10-20	12

Forbs

Common Name	Botanical Name	Cover % (low-high)
YELLOW PINPERNEL	<i>Taenidia integerrima</i>	5-20
ORANGE PUCCOON	<i>Lithospermum canescens</i>	5-20
BENT MILK VETCH	<i>Astragalus distortus</i>	5-20
BUTTERFLYWEED	<i>Asclepias tuberosa</i>	5-20
ELM-LEAVED GOLDENROD	<i>Solidago ulmifolia</i>	5-20
POINTED LEAF TICK-TREFOIL	<i>Desmodium glutinosum</i>	5-20
EASTERN BEEBALM	<i>Monarda bradburiana.</i>	5-20
PURPLE CONEFLOWER	<i>Echinacea purpurea</i>	5-20
HAIRY SUNFLOWER	<i>Helianthus hirsutus</i>	10-30
BLAZING STAR	<i>Liatris aspera</i>	5-20

Grasses and sedges

Common Name	Botanical Name	Cover % (low-high)
SLENDER WOODLAND SEDGE	<i>Carex digitalis</i>	10-20
OVAL-LEAF SEDGE	<i>Carex cephalophora</i>	10-20
LITTLE BLUESTEM	<i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i>	10-30
WOODLAND BROME	<i>Bromus pubescens</i>	10-20
BOTTLEBRUSH GRASS	<i>Elymus hystrix</i>	10-20
VIRGINIA WILDRYE	<i>Elymus virginicus</i>	10-30

Site Interpretations

Wildlife

- Oaks provide hard mast for wildlife; scattered shrubs provide soft mast; frequent bedrock outcrops provide reptile habitat and a patchier ground flora.
- Sedges and native grasses provide green browse; native grasses on dry sites provide cover and nesting habitat and a diversity of forbs provides a diversity and abundance of insects.
- Post-burn areas can provide temporary bare-ground – herbaceous cover habitat important for turkey poults and quail chicks.
- Bird species associated with Loamy Limestone Woodlands include Indigo Bunting, Red-headed Woodpecker, Eastern Bluebird, Northern Bobwhite, Summer Tanager, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Whip-poor-will, Chuck-will’s widow, and Red-eyed Vireo.
- Reptiles and amphibians associated with mature Loamy Limestone Woodlands include: ornate box turtle, northern fence lizard, five-lined skink, coal skink, broad-headed skink, six-lined racerunner, western slender glass lizard, prairie ring-necked snake, flat-headed snake, rough earth snake, red milk snake, western pygmy rattlesnake, and timber rattlesnake.

Forestry

- Management: Estimated site index values range from 55 to 60 for oak. Timber management opportunities are fair to good. Create group openings of at least 2 acres. Large clearcuts should be minimized if possible to reduce impacts on wildlife and aesthetics. Uneven-aged management using single tree selection or small group selection cuttings of ½ to 1 acre are other options that can be used if clear cutting is not desired or warranted. Using prescribed fire as a management tool could have a negative impact on timber quality, and should be used with caution on a particular site if timber management is the primary objective. Favor white oak, chinkapin oak, northern red oak, and black oak.
- Limitations: No major equipment restrictions or limitations exist. Erosion is a hazard when slopes exceed 15 percent. On steep slopes greater than 35 percent, traction problems increase and equipment use is not recommended.

Glossary

Backslope – a hillslope profile position that forms the steepest and generally linear, middle portion of the slope.

Backswamp – marshy or swampy, depressed areas of flood plains between natural levees and valley sides or terraces

Calcareous – the presence of calcium carbonate in the soil parent material within the rooting zone; relatively alkaline

Claypan – a dense, compact, slowly permeable layer in the subsoil having much higher clay content than the overlying material

Chert – hard, extremely dense or compact crystalline sedimentary rock, consisting dominantly of interlocking crystals of quartz

Cliff – a significant vertical, or near vertical, rock exposure

Dolomite – a type of sedimentary rock that is a carbonate mineral composed of calcium magnesium carbonate

Drainageway – the upper most reach of a stream channel system characterized by little meandering

Dry – a site where soil moisture is limiting during the growing season; low available water capacity

Dune – a low mound, ridge, bank or hill of loose, wind-blown sand

Exposed – steep, south and west-facing slopes, which are warmer and drier than other slope aspects

Flatwoods – a type of woodland that occurs on soils with a root restricting subsoil layer within 20 to 30 inches, resulting in very slow runoff and ponding that remains saturated for most of the winter and early spring months but dries out and becomes very dry in the summer months; plants that grow there must be adapted to both conditions

Floodplain – the nearly level plain that borders a stream and is subject to inundation under flood-stage conditions

Footslope – a hillslope position at the base of a slope where hillslope sediment (colluvium) accumulates

Forest – a vegetative community dominated by trees forming a closed canopy and interspersed with shade-tolerant understory species

Fragipan – a dense, brittle subsoil horizon that is extremely hard and compact when dry

Glade – open, rocky, barren vegetative community dominated by drought-adapted forbs and grasses, typically with scattered, stunted woody plants

Igneous –bedrock formed by cooling and solidification of magma. Granite and rhyolite are typical igneous bedrocks in Missouri

Limestone – a type of sedimentary rock composed largely of calcium carbonate

Loess – material transported and deposited by wind and consisting predominantly of silt-size particles

Loamy – soil material containing a relatively equal mixture of sand and silt and a somewhat smaller proportion of clay

Marsh – a type of wetland that is dominated by herbaceous rather than woody plant species

Moist – a site that is moderately well to well drained and has high available water capacity, resulting in a well-balanced supply of moisture (neither too dry nor too wet).

Mudstone – blocky or massive, fine-grained sedimentary rock in which the proportions of clay and silt are approximately equal

Natric – a soil horizon that displays a blocky, columnar, or prismatic structure and has a subhorizon with an exchangeable-sodium saturation of over 15%

Outwash – stratified sediments of sand and gravel removed or “washed out” from a glacier by melt-water streams

Prairie – a vegetative community dominated by perennial grasses and forbs with scattered shrubs and very few trees

Protected – steep, north- and east-facing slopes, which are cooler and moister than other slope aspects

Residuum - unconsolidated, weathered, or partly weathered mineral material that accumulates by disintegration of bedrock in place

Riser – a component of terraces and flood-plain steps consisting of the steep side slope; the escarpment

River hills – a geographic area characterized by thick, dissected loess deposits, formed immediately adjacent to the edges of the Missouri and Mississippi River floodplains

Sandy – a coarse-sized soil containing a large mixture of sand and gravels and a somewhat smaller proportion of silts and clays with excessive drainage

Sandstone – a sedimentary rock containing dominantly sand-size particles

Savanna – grasslands interspersed with open-grown scattered trees, groupings of trees, and shrubs

Shale – a sedimentary rock formed from clay, silty clay, or silty clay loam deposits and having the tendency to split into thin layers

Shallow – a site with bedrock within 20 inches of the surface

Shoulder – the slope profile position that forms the convex surface near the top of a hill slope; it comprises the transition zone from summit to backslope

Sinkhole – a closed, circular or elliptical depression, commonly funnel-shaped, characterized by subsurface drainage and formed either by dissolution of the surface of underlying bedrock or by collapse of underlying caves within bedrock

Summit – the top or highest area of a hillslope

Swale –shallow, closed depressions irregularly spaced across a floodplain or terrace with an irregularly undulating surface.

Swamp – an area of low, saturated ground, intermittently or permanently covered with water, and predominantly vegetated by shrubs and trees.

Talus – rock fragments of any size or shape (usually coarse and angular) derived from and lying at the base of a cliff or very steep rock slope.

Terrace – a step-like surface, bordering a valley floor that represents the former position of a flood plain

Till – dominantly unsorted and unstratified soil material deposited directly by a glacier

Upland – a general term for the higher ground of a region, in contrast with a low-lying, adjacent land such as a valley or floodplain

Wet – a somewhat poorly, poorly or very poorly drained site that has an oversupply of moisture during the growing season

Woodland – a highly variable vegetative community with a canopy of trees ranging from 30 to 100 percent closure with a sparse midstory and a dense ground flora of grasses, sedges and forbs

References

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