

The Rock River Hill Country Natural Division

Characteristics

The Rock River Hill Country Natural Division of north-central and northwestern Illinois is a region of rolling topography drained by the Rock River. Prairie formerly occupied the larger expanses of level uplands, with forest equally abundant along water courses and in the dissected uplands.

Major Habitats & Challenges

Forests - fragmentation (patches small and isolated), invasion by exotic species, excessive deer browse, housing development, clearing of riparian forest

Open Woodland/Savanna - improper grazing, lack of fire, housing developments

Grasslands - fragmentation, conversion to agricultural production, dominated by exotic species, loss of small dairy farms is reducing hay and pasture land use

Wetlands - Most wetlands are found along Pecatonica River and most are farmed. groundwater alteration from commercial development, diversion of streams/runoff from wetlands

Lakes & Ponds - Most are human-made and suffer from sedimentation and the impacts of runoff.

Streams - increase in pollutants (sediment, nutrient, thermal, bacterial) causing loss of biodiversity, channelization, clearing of riparian vegetation

Caves - accelerated flow of runoff

Primary Communities - housing developments, quarries

Opportunities

The natural division is served by the Sugar-Pecatonica Ecosystem Partnership of the C2000 Program. Efforts to protect bottomland forests along the Pecatonica River can be expanded, and donations of conservation easements on private forest lands should be promoted. Cooperation with the Illinois Department of Transportation will restore habitat on the U.S. Highway 20 by-pass right-of-way.

Grassland is the most prevalent habitat in the division, much of it in the Conservation Reserve Program. Dominated by smooth brome, improved management and composition is needed to provide quality wildlife habitat. The Prairie Preservation Society of Ogle County

works to protect natural areas and remnant prairies. Restoration of degraded open woodland and savanna has high potential with proper use of grazing, prescribed fire and removal of invasive plants.

Management Guidelines

Landscapes

Forest - Increase by about 14,400 acres. Forested blocks of at least 500 acres should be inventoried and prioritized for addition or linking to other forests blocks. Expand and improve bottomland forest habitat. Encourage sound management practices to promote healthy upland forests through landowner education/assistance, prescribed burning, timber stand improvements, and exotics control (mechanical, chemical, or fire). Forests should grade into open woodland or savanna habitats on adjacent uplands.

Open Woodland/Savanna/Barrens - Increase by about 15,000 acres. Pro-actively manage existing habitat and restore degraded habitats with prescribed fire, proper grazing, and exotic species control (mechanical, chemical, or fire). Savanna or open woodland habitats should be encouraged in isolated woodlots under 15 acres in size.

Grassland - Increase by about 52,000 acres. Manage rural grasslands for diverse structure and composition with prescribed fire, proper grazing, soil disturbance, and exotics control (mechanical, chemical, or fire) to support native species. Establish grassy buffers and terraces to reduce agricultural runoff and erosion from construction sites into waterways.

Wetland - Increase by 1,500 acres. Establish buffer between wetlands and adjacent agricultural land to prevent herbicide runoff and sedimentation.

Natural Communities

Dolomite prairie, groundwater fed wetlands (fens), white pine groves, dolomite cliff communities (Pine Creek)

Critical Species

Brook trout, timber rattlesnake, red-shouldered hawk, bald eagle, sandhill crane, red-headed woodpecker, cerulean warbler, sedge wren, American redstart, Bell's vireo, Blanding's turtle, northern harrier, short-eared owl, Franklin's ground-squirrel, river otter, endangered prairie species limited to dolomite prairie, redroot, star flower

Emphasis Game Species

walleye (Rock River), brown trout (cold-water streams), northern bobwhite, white-tailed deer, wild turkey

Non-game Indicator Species

Forest - red-eye vireo, scarlet tanager

Open Woodland/Savanna - tufted titmouse, great crested flycatcher, red-headed woodpecker, Cooper's hawk

Grassland - western meadowlark

Wetland - willow flycatcher

Streams - spotted sandpiper, mussels

Recreational Opportunities

Hunting (forest game, upland game), fishing (including native and naturalized trout), hiking, wildlife viewing

Educational / Interpretive

Burpee Natural History Museum, Camp Benson, Boy/Girl Scout Camps, Park District & Forest Preserve District sites, Jane Addams Land Foundation/Parkland Trail, Audubon Societies, Prairie Preservation Society of Ogle County, Sand Bluff Bird Observatory, Wildflower Walkabouts, numerous nature centers

Natural Resource Commodities

Forest products, hunting/fishing opportunities, nature-based tourism

Conservation Opportunity Areas

Sugar-Pecatonica River

Protected lands - Winnebago County forest preserves, Rock Cut State Park

Priority resources - high quality stream, wetlands

Partners - Winnebago County Forest Preserve District, Sugar-Pecatonica Ecosystem Partnership, The Natural Land Institute, Illinois Department of Natural Resources

Nachusa-Franklin Creek-Castle Rock-Lowden Miller

Protected lands – Nachusa Grassland, Franklin Creek Natural Area, Castel Rock State Park, Lowden-Miller State Forest, White Pines Forest

Priority resources – Nachusa Grasslands, over 2,500 acres of prairie remnants and restorations, is one of the largest remaining prairie landscapes in Illinois. The forested area along the rock River at Castle Rock and Lowden Miller is the largest forest in the region, and hosts a highly diverse nesting community of Neotropical migratory birds.

Partners – The Nature Conservancy, Illinois Department of Natural Resources

Rock River

Priority resources – high quality stream

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