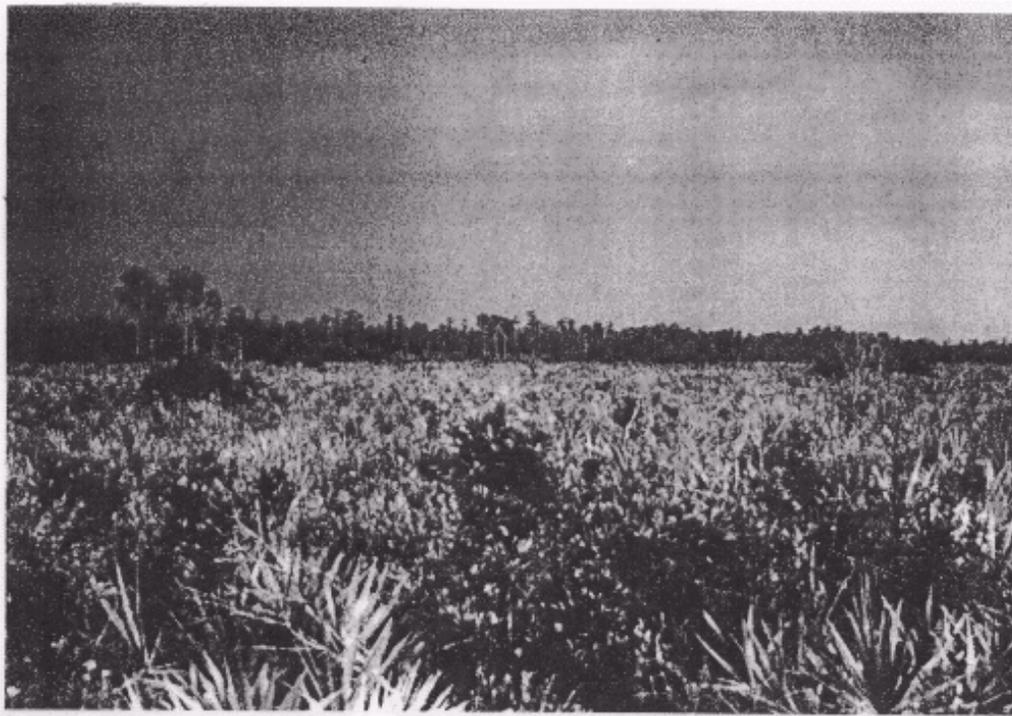

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FLORIDA'S NATURAL COMMUNITIES: Dry Prairie

by Linda Conway Deuver



Dry Prairie is probably Florida's most unexpected habitat. You've driven all the way down from New York through one sort of forest or another and here you are in central Florida. There's more and more desert-like scrub with stunted oaks and cacti. And you've been seeing Scrub Jays like the ones you remember from your trip out west. Next thing you know you're crossing open grasslands with cowboys. You always pictured Lake Okeechobee

surrounded by dark jungles traversed by mysterious Indians in dugout canoes. But this looks like Texas.

In a sense, the Dry Prairie is a piece of Texas. Once, when sea level was lower, there was a vast grassy plain extending all along the Gulf Coast. Most of it was flooded by the Gulf of Mexico when sea levels rose again and only in the west and in central Florida did the climate remain dry enough for grasslands to dominate the

landscape. Here, during the long winter-spring drought, fires sweep across the prairies and keep them from growing up into woodlands. On the average, a fire occurs in this community once every one to four our years.

There is some question as to whether the Dry Prairie should be considered a truly natural habitat, since this high a fire frequency might not occur if Indians, and later cattlemen, had not routinely burned

the prairies to improve the forage. Some observers think that the prairies are more an artifact of widespread pine logging, grazing, and unnatural burning than a system resulting from natural processes. It's hard to say whether there would be pins here if there were enough around to supply the seed. It may be that the prairies were once pine flatwoods, but hundreds of years of cattle grazing and regular burning have eliminated the trees. Perhaps the prairies burn just a little too often for the pines to handle the stress. The pine stumps definitely do get fewer and farther between as you move south towards Lake Okeechobee, so it's probably a good bet that the prairies there, near the southern end of the community's distribution, have been there longer.

What makes it so hard to decide what is prairie and what is pine flatwoods is that the understory composition is practically identical. There's really no difference in the kinds of plants in an open dry-to-mesic pine flatwoods and what you encounter in a Dry Prairie. But they both make beautiful ragged meadows of varied greens with sparks of bright colored wildflowers – especially in the fall when spires of magenta liatris and arches of goldenrod rise amongst the silvery and gold grass plumes and stunted palmettos. Typical species include saw palmetto, *Serenoa repens*; runner oak, *Quercus pumila*; scrub blueberry, *Vaccinium myrsinites*; fetterbush, *Lyonia ferruginea*; pawpaw, *Asimina* spp.; wiregrass, *Aristida stricta*; arrowfeather threeawn, *Aristida purpurascens*; broomsedge, *Andropogon virginicus*; chalky bluestem, *Andropogon capillipes*; common carpetgrass, *Axonopus affinus*; lopsided Indian grass, *Sorghastrum secundum*; liatris, *Liatis gracilis*, *L. spicata*, *L. garberi*, add other; rabbit tobacco, *Pterocaulon pycnostachyum*; pennyroyal, *Piloblephis rigidus*; Catesby lily, *Lilium catesbaei*; white sabatia, *Sabittia elliotii*; polygala, *Polygala* spp;

goldenrod, *Solidago* spp.; musky mint, *Hyptis alata*; dotted horsemint, *Monarda punctata*; and button snakeroot, *Eryngium aromaticum*.

According to Dennis Hardin, botanist for the Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI), the rare species of the Dry Prairie community are poorly known. The only species on the FNAI Special Plant list which has been documented as commonly occurring in this habit is scrub snakeroot, *Eryngium cuneifolium*, which is commonly thought of as characteristic of Scrub.

Zoologists recognize the Dry Prairie as habitat for animal species with western affinities, several of which are rare in other Florida habitats. Spotted skunks, caracaras, Burrowing Owls, Sandhill Cranes, and Grasshopper Sparrows are characteristic. These western animals traveled across the grassy coastal plains when sea level was lower, then were isolated in central Florida when habitats elsewhere along the route became unsuitable.

Cattle raising has preserved the prairies up until recently, but pressure for greater beef production may destroy them. Using Dry Prairie as moderately grazed native range, as has been done for many years, is probably one of the best ways to maintain the community. As long as pastures are periodically rotated and the range isn't overgrazed to the point that the cattle selectively eliminate the tastier and/or more delicate species, the prairie hold up well. But native grasses don't support as many cattle as "improved" pasture, so an increasing number of ranchers are plowing the prairies under and planting bahia grass instead. An even bigger threat are the orange groves that are being planted in the prairie region to the south in order to avoid the devastating freezes that have plagued the northern part of the orange-growing belt. This agricultural pressure has already destroyed so much Dry Prairie that this

must be considered on of our most threatened ecosystems.

Fortunately, we do have some nice tracts of Dry Prairie on protected lands. The best examples are on Prairie Lakes, Myakka River, and Highlands Hammock state parks, the National Audubon Society's Kissimmee Prairie Sanctuary, and the privately owned hunting and recreational lands at River Ranch and Fisheating Creek.

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