



## Ridgetop Heathland

**Community Code:** CT2B2B2000

**State Rank:** S2



**Concept:**

A natural or semi-natural low shrub community on bedrock that often needs management to remain open in the absence of fire. The tree canopy is absent or poorly developed. Includes but is not restricted to abandoned lowbush blueberry farms.

**Environmental Setting:**

Ridgetop Heathlands are shrublands of hills, ridgetops, and rock outcrops, sometimes instead of Acidic or Circumneutral Rocky Summits / Rock Outcrops or just below them. The exposed ridgetop environment is harsh, with intense sunlight, extreme daily and seasonal temperature variations, and bedrock at or close to the surface, resulting in nutrient-poor, droughty soils. They have a nearly continuous layer of low-growing shrubs. Some occurrences are derived from abandoned blueberry farms or grazed sites. If less than about 5000 sq. ft., an occurrence would be considered to be part of the surrounding rocky summit/rock outcrop, Ridgetop Pitch Pine - Scrub Oak Community, or Open Oak Forest/Woodland community. Without regular disturbance or management (fire or regular removal of trees), the community usually succeeds to woodland or forest, leaving mosaics of patchy occurrences along rocky ridges.

**Vegetation Description:**

Overall, diversity is low, with heath shrubs forming an extensive, dense, low shrub layer dominated by low sweet blueberry (*Vaccinium angustifolium*) with early sweet blueberry (*Vaccinium pallidum*), black huckleberry (*Gaylussacia baccata*), bearberry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*), and/or sheep-laurel (*Kalmia angustifolia*). Patches of taller shrubs may include black chokeberry (*Aronia melanocarpa*), mountain-laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) and tree saplings from the surrounding forest, particularly white pine (*Pinus strobus*), gray or white birch (*Betula populifolia* or *B. papyrifera*), or red



maple (*Acer rubrum*). Little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), poverty grass (*Danthonia spicata*) and hairgrass (*Deschampsia flexuosa*) typically occur in the sparse herbaceous layer. Three-toothed cinquefoil (*Sibbaldiopsis tridentata*) may be a characteristic species of northern occurrences.

**Differentiating Occurrences:** Ridgetop Heathlands occur on bedrock, often as semi-natural expansions of edges of rocky summit/rock outcrop communities. Identifying community types on rock outcrops is complicated by interdigitation of types and overlap of constituent species. If a community occupies a cumulative area of >5000 sq. ft. on a ridge, it may function as a separate community and be designated as such. Otherwise, small patches would be considered to be part of the variation in the prevailing community. Ridgetop Heathlands have large areas dominated by a fairly continuous cover (>50%) of low shrubs (often lowbush blueberry) and little exposed bedrock. Mosses, lichens, and grasses are present but not dominant. Rocky summit/rock outcrop communities are dominated by bare or lichen-covered rock. Ridgetop Pitch Pine - Scrub Oak Communities have scattered stunted pitch pine and dense scrub oak, and usually little bare rock. Shrub oaks and pitch pines need to be abundant, with tree oaks lacking, for the community to be pitch pine - scrub oak. Sandplain Heathlands - Inland Variant occur on sand or gravel soils, not on bedrock.

**Associated Fauna:** Ridgetops tend to be only a part of the habitat of most vertebrate animals. Lepidopteran fauna include heathland species such as the slender clearwing sphinx moth (*Hemaris gracilis*), pink sallow moth (*Psestraglaea carnosa*), and blueberry sallow moth (*Sympistis dentata*). Ravens (*Corvus corax*) are all around high elevations, especially near cliffs where they often nest.

**Public Access:** Leyden WMA, Leyden.

**Threats:** Succession, trampling along peaks and ridges near trails.

**Management Needs:** This community succeeds to forest if not burned or the trees removed on a 5- to 15-year cycle.

**USNVC/NatureServe:** Central Appalachian Pine-Oak Rocky Woodland System (Ridgetop Blueberry Heathland}. (System 201.571) and Northern Appalachian-Acadian Rocky Heath Outcrop (CES201.571): *Vaccinium angustifolium-Sorbus americana/Sibbaldiopsis tridentata* Dwarf-Shrubland (CEGL005094) and *Vaccinium (angustifolium, myrtilloides, pallidum)* Central Appalachian Dwarf-shrubland (CEGL003958) (Central Appalachian System only).