

Ridgetop Heathland

State Rank: S2 - Imperiled



Ridgetop Heathland with little bluestem and invading trees on a former blueberry farm. Photo: Chris Buelow, NHESP.

Description: Ridgetop Heathlands are shrublands of hills, ridgetops, and rock outcrops, sometimes instead of Acidic or Circumneutral Rocky Summit/Rock Outcrops, or just below them. The exposed ridgetop environment is harsh, with intense sunlight, extreme daily and seasonal temperature variations, and with 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 <5000 sq. ft., an occurrence would be considered to be part of the surrounding Rocky Summit/Rock Outcrop, Ridgetop Pitch Pine - Scrub Oak, or Open Oak Forest/Woodland community. Without regular disturbance or management (fire or regular removal of

Ridgetop Heathland is 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 sparse.

trees), the community usually succeeds to woodland or forest, leaving mosaics of patchy occurrences along rocky ridges.

Characteristic Species: Ridgetop Heathlands are composed of low-growing plants, including several species that can reproduce clonally. Overall diversity is fairly low, with heath (blueberry family) shrubs forming an extensive, dense low shrub layer dominated by low sweet blueberry, early sweet blueberry, black huckleberry, bearberry, and/or sheep-laurel. Patches of taller shrubs may include black chokeberry, mountain-laurel and tree saplings from the surrounding forest, particularly white pine, gray or white birch, or red maple. Little bluestem, poverty grass and hairgrass typically occur in the sparse herbaceous layer. Three-toothed cinquefoil may be a characteristic species of northern occurrences.



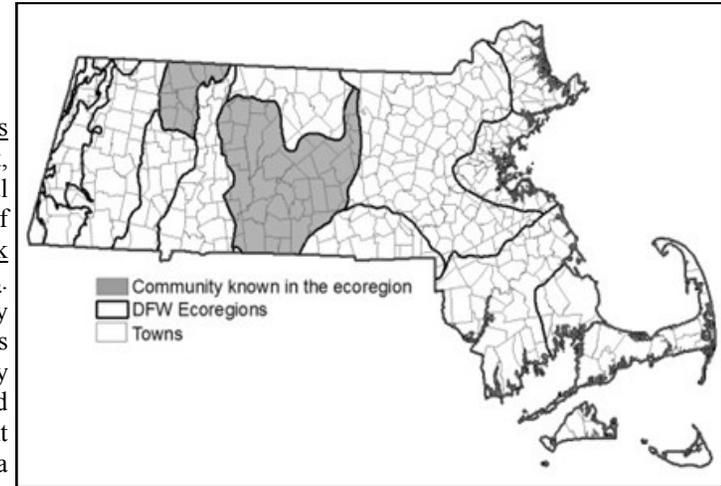
Low sweet blueberry, typical plant in Ridgetop Heathlands. Photo: Patricia Swain, NHESP.

Differentiating from Related Communities:

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 mixing of types and overlap of constituent species. If a community occupies a

cumulative area of 5000 sq. ft. on a ridge it may be mappable, 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 not dominant. Acidic 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 few tree oaks for the community to be pitch pine - scrub oak. Scrub Oak Shrublands are dominated by dense shrub oaks with no pines and few other trees. Sandplain Heathlands - Inland Variant occur on sand or gravel soils, not bedrock.



Habitat for 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 clearing sphinx moth, pink sallow moth, and the delisted blueberry sallow moth.

Examples with Public Access:

Leyden WMA, Leyden.



Linear Ridgetop Heathland with dense lowbush blueberries. Photo: Chris Buelow, NHESP.

