

Highbush Blueberry Thicket

State Rank: S4 - Secure



Highbush Blueberry Thicket behind an Acidic Shrub Fen. Photo: Patricia Swain, NHESP.

Description: Highbush Blueberry Thickets occur as a border thicket around more open peatlands or coastal plain ponds, and within small, basins or seasonally flooded zones within larger wetlands. This community is influenced by a strongly fluctuating water table with flooded conditions in spring and early summer followed by a drop in the water table below soil surface usually by late summer. The sphagnum mat is variable: it can be thick and stable on peat or as a shallow organic layer often over sand. Or there may be moss on hummocks at the base of shrub stems with unstable muck in the surrounding hollows.

Characteristic Species: Highbush Blueberry Thickets are tall-shrub peatlands dominated by dense highbush blueberries with swamp azalea, winterberry, sweet pepper-bush, and scattered red maple as common associates. Typical short shrubs include leatherleaf, sheep laurel, and dwarf huckleberry. The variable herbaceous layer tends to be sparse. Cinnamon, royal, marsh, and sensitive ferns can be locally

Highbush Blueberry Thickets are dominated by tall, dense shrubs, primarily members of the blueberry family, on hummocky sphagnum moss. These acidic peatlands are generally wetter and more mineral-enriched than bog communities.

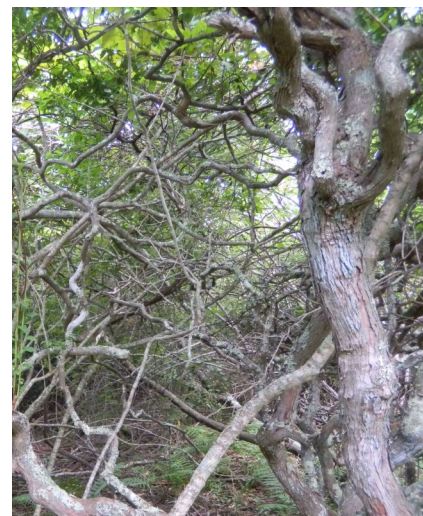
abundant, with Virginia chain-fern, pitcher plants, marsh St. John's-wort, three-leaved Solomon's seal, wild calla, northern water-horehound, and threeway sedge. A layer of peatmoss is common and varies in cover.



Highbush blueberry in flower at the edge of a pond. Photo: Patricia Swain, NHESP.

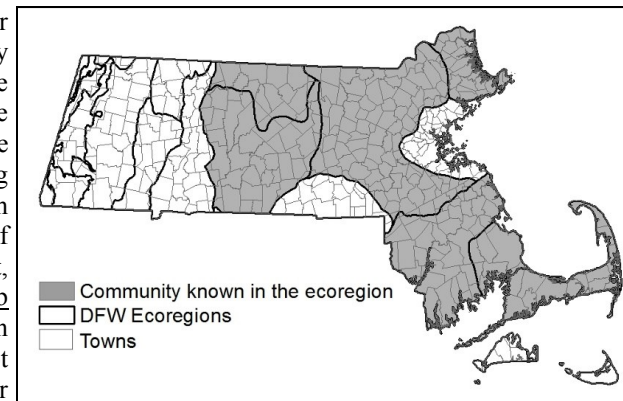
Differentiating from Related Communities: The physical and biological characteristics of Highbush Blueberry Thickets, Acidic Shrub Fen, Shrub Swamp, and Fresh/Brackish Tidal Shrubland, overlap and intergrade. They all lack tree cover (<25% canopy cover); they are all dominated by dense shrubs on wet substrates. Highbush Blueberry Thickets are tall-shrub fens, dominated by

highbush blueberries or other members of the blueberry family, on peat or at least have sphagnum at the base of the shrubs. Acidic Shrub Fens are dominated by low growing shrubs, along with sphagnum moss and herbaceous species of varying abundance on wet, often weak peat. Shrub Swamps lack peat, are often quite diverse, and are not dominated by blueberries or other ericaceous plants. Fresh/Brackish Tidal Shrublands are dense to open shrublands along tidal sections of coastal rivers.



Dense, old, highbush blueberry trunks. Photo: Patricia Swain, NHESP.

Habitat for Associated Fauna: The dense shrubs of Highbush Blueberry Thickets provide protected nesting habitat for many migratory songbirds, with ample fruit available during the critical fledging



season for young birds. In the winter when the surface is frozen, browsers, including New England Cottontail, have easy access to the shrubs and protection in the dense thickets.

Examples with Public Access: Punkhorn Parklands (town), Brewster; Briar Swamp - Dogtown Commons (town), Rockport; Quaboag WMA, East Brookfield.



Edge of a blueberry thicket on a coastal plain pondshore. Photo: Patricia Swain, NHESP.

