

Maritime Erosional Cliff Community

State Rank: S2 - Imperiled



Maritime Erosional Cliff. Great Brewster Island, Boston Harbor Islands National and State Park. Photo: National Park Service.



An actively eroding sand cliff. Photo: Caleb Slater.

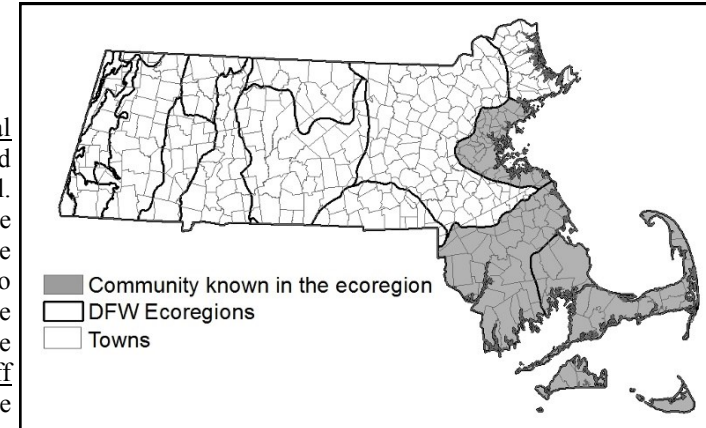
Description: The Maritime Erosional Cliff Community occurs on cliffs being actively eroded by the sea – storms particularly cause dramatic changes. The seaward-facing unconsolidated cliff faces above beach strand communities are in the salt spray zone where wind and salt spray constantly dry the vegetation. The cliffs themselves may be glacial deposits best developed on terminal moraines usually with mixed material – boulders, gravel, sand, and lenses of clay. There are also cliffs of sand from glacial outwash or dunes. The unconsolidated cliff material generally does not hold water, which combined with the wind, produces a very dry environment. Freshwater flowing through the cliff material may emerge as seepage at the base. With the constant erosion there is little soil development on the cliff face. Maritime Erosional Cliffs may be 100 ft. (~33m) or more high above the ocean and beach below.

Characteristic Species: The Maritime Erosional Cliff Community generally has extremely sparse vegetation that is typical of surrounding areas: shrubs and vines may include Poison ivy, Virginia creeper, wild rose, bayberry, sweet fern, beach plum, black cherry, huckleberry, bearberry, catbriar or the non-native bush honeysuckles or multiflora rose. Scattered herbaceous plants include native seaside yarrow and non-native yarrow, non-native mugwort, and other “weedy” species typical of disturbed areas. Some sites have dense non-native vegetation. Common horsetail and non-native orache may grow in seepy bases of erosional cliffs.

The Maritime Erosional Cliff Community has extremely sparse vegetation on cliffs being actively eroded by the sea.

Differentiating from Related Communities:

Maritime Erosional Cliffs are made of mixed unconsolidated material. Maritime Rock Cliffs are bedrock. Both are in the salt spray zone next to the ocean. The vegetation of the Maritime Erosional Cliff Community is sparse and species are typically weedy species from the surroundings. The substrate is steep and close to vertical in places, and usually is actively eroding.



Habitat for Associated Fauna: Bank Swallows nest in the top parts of the cliffs. Migrating Peregrine Falcons regularly perch on and hunt from upper part of cliffs during the fall migration.

Examples with Public Access: Maritime Erosional Cliffs are extremely fragile and visitation is discouraged due to potential for erosion from disturbance.



Maritime Erosional Cliffs, along island shore. Photo: MassWildlife.



Maritime Erosional Cliff. Photo: Caleb Slater.

