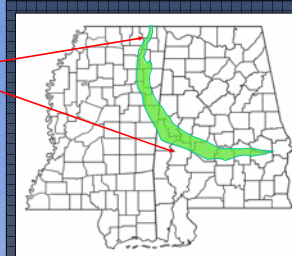


Restoring Black Land Prairies: The Black Belt Prairie Conservation and Research Institute

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INTRODUCTION

The Black Belt region of Alabama and Mississippi is a natural mix of forests, rivers, prairies and swamps. Prior to European settlement, a great tall-grass prairie extended in a 500 km crescent from Alcorn County, MS to Russell County, AL, on top of a deep layer of chalk. Fires were a frequent occurrence that maintained these tall-grass prairies. Once settled, many of these prairies were converted to agriculture which thrived on the nutrient rich organic soils. With the decline of farming activities over the last 75 years, and regional fire suppression policies, these Black Land prairies have been reduced in size and number by encroaching shrub and tree species. The remaining prairies, however, are home to many of the same grasses and wildflowers which once blanketed the Midwest, including big bluestem, Indian grass and compass plants. These grasslands were once home to the American bison and still support populations of bobwhite quail, grasshopper sparrows, and painted buntings.



Mississippi and Alabama

► The Black Land Prairie exists in a crescent stretching from northeast MS to west central Alabama

► It rests on a deep layer of chalk that was deposited during the Cretaceous Period

► This fertile soil supported intensive agriculture activities during the mid 1800's. Since then, the majority of this habitat has been used for cattle grazing.



THREATS TO BLACK LAND PRAIRIE:

► Exotic species are a major threat to remaining prairie habitat. Invaders include cogon grass (*Cylindrica imperata*), Chinese tallow (*Sapium sebiferum*) and kudzu (*Pueraria lobata*).

► Incompatible grazing practices which result in destruction of tall-grass prairie through overgrazing and increased erosion

► Habitat degradation and loss

► Lack of fire – Years of fire suppression have allowed woody species to invade prairie edges.



Coosa Prairie logged during wet season

Reintroducing fire as a restoration tool in Black Belt Prairie



An aerial view of former Black Belt prairie converted to ponds for aquaculture

THE BLACK BELT PRAIRIE CONSERVATION AND RESEARCH INSTITUTE

To raise public awareness of this disappearing resource, the Black Belt Prairie Conservation and Research Institute (BBCRI) was established as a unit of the Center for the Study of the Black Belt at The University of West Alabama (UWA) in 2007. The establishment of this institute was made possible through an agreement between The Nature Conservancy and UWA.

GOALS OF THE BBCRI

► The primary goal of The Institute is to work with The Nature Conservancy of Alabama and other partners to determine the ecological and environmental research needs of the region.

► Additionally, the BBCRI is charged with the task of identifying habitats and species unique to the Black Belt and working with state agencies to determine best ecological and environmental practices for the management and restoration of the unique habitats within the Black Belt.

► Since much of the Black Belt is privately owned, landowner involvement is critical to the prairie restoration and conservation effort. As such, establishing and maintaining relationships with private land owners and other stakeholders is imperative.



Pinnate Prairie Coneflower

Ratibida pinnata

Standing Cypress

Ipomopsis rubra

Scaly Blazing Star

Liatris squarrosa

Compass Plant

Silphium laciniatum



Purple Prairie Clover

Dalea purpurea

Celestial lily (State Critically Imperiled)

Nemastylis geminiflora

Three-flowered hawthorn (Globally imperiled)

Crataegus triflora

Old Cahaba Rosinweed

Silphium perperum

Representative wild flowers inhabiting Black Land prairies in Alabama and Mississippi

POSSIBLE PARTNERSHIPS INCLUDE

Institutions of Higher Education:

Auburn University, University of Alabama, The University of West Alabama, Auburn University at Montgomery, Judson College, Tuskegee University

Governmental Organizations:

Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Alabama Department of Environmental Management, Alabama Department of Transportation

Private Organizations:

Alabama Natural Heritage Program, Alabama Wildlife Society, Alabama Wildflower Society, The Nature Conservancy of Alabama

CONCLUSION

Through the creation of the Black Belt Prairie Conservation and Research Institute, UWA has provided a forum to promote and encourage cooperation between landowners, ecologists and state agencies seeking the common goal of restoring, preserving and protecting Black Belt Prairie. The University of West Alabama is committed to its role as an environmental steward, and will continue to be a steadfast advocate for threatened habitats in the Black Belt region of Alabama and Mississippi.