

Ecological site R107XA203IA

Calcareous Till Exposed Backslope Prairie

Last updated: 5/21/2020
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General information

Provisional. A provisional ecological site description has undergone quality control and quality assurance review. It contains a working state and transition model and enough information to identify the ecological site.

MLRA notes

Major Land Resource Area (MLRA): 107X—Iowa and Missouri Deep Loess Hills

The Iowa and Minnesota Loess Hills (MLRA 107A) includes the Northwest Iowa Plains, Inner Coteau, and Coteau Moraines landforms (Prior 1991; MDNR 2005). It spans two states (Iowa, 89 percent; Minnesota, 11 percent), encompassing approximately 4,470 square miles (Figure 1). The elevation ranges from approximately 1,700 feet above sea level (ASL) on the highest ridges to about 1,115 feet ASL in the lowest valleys. Local relief is mainly 10 to 100 feet. However, some valley floors can range from 80 to 200 feet, while some upland flats only range between 3 and 6 feet. The eastern half of the MLRA is underlain by Wisconsin-age till, deposited between 20,000 and 30,000 years ago and is known as the Sheldon Creek Formation. The western half is underlain by Pre-Illinoian glacial till, deposited more than 500,000 years ago and has since undergone extensive erosion and dissection. Both surfaces are covered by approximately 4 to 20 feet of loess on the hillslopes, and Holocene alluvium covers the till in the drainageways. Cretaceous bedrock, comprised of sandstone and shale, lies beneath the glacial material (USDA-NRCS 2006). The vegetation in the MLRA has undergone drastic changes over time. Spruce forests dominated the landscape 30,000 to 21,500 years ago. As the last glacial maximum peaked 21,500 to 16,000 years ago, they were replaced with open tundras and parklands. The end of the Pleistocene Epoch saw a warming climate that initially prompted the return of spruce forests, but as the warming continued, spruce trees were replaced by deciduous trees (Baker et al. 1990). Not until approximately 9,000 years ago did the vegetation transition to prairies as climatic conditions continued to warm and subsequently dry. Between 4,000 and 3,000 years ago, oak savannas began intermingling within the prairie landscape, while the more wooded and forested areas maintained a foothold in sheltered areas. This prairie-forest transition ecosystem formed the dominant landscapes until the arrival of European settlers (Baker et al. 1992).

Classification relationships

U.S. Forest Service Ecological Subregions: North Central Glaciated Plains (251B) Section, Outer Coteau des Prairies (251Bb), Northwest Iowa Plains (251Bd) Subsections (Cleland et al. 2007) U.S. EPA Level IV Ecoregion: Loess Prairies (47a) (USEPA 2013) National Vegetation Classification – Ecological Systems: Northern Tallgrass Prairie (CES205.686) (NatureServe 2015) National Vegetation Classification - Plant Associations: *Andropogon gerardii* – *Hesperostipa spartea* – *Sporobolus heterolepis* Grassland (CEGL002202) (NatureServe 2015) Biophysical Settings: Northern Tallgrass Prairie (BpS 4214200) (LANDFIRE 2009) Natural Resources Conservation Service – Iowa Plant Community Species List: Prairie, Northern Mesic Tallgrass (USDA-NRCS 2007) Iowa Department of Natural Resources: Blacksoil Tallgrass Prairie (INAI 1984) Minnesota Department of Natural Resources: Ups13d Dry Hill Prairie (Southern) (MDNR 2005)

Ecological site concept

Calcareous Till Exposed Backslope Prairies are located within the green areas on the map (Figure 1). They occur on south and west-facing upland backslopes on slopes greater than 20 percent. The soils are Mollisols and Entisols that are well drained and deep, formed in calcareous glacial till. These fine-loamy soils experience moisture deficits during the growing season most years and frequent deficits during times of droughts (MDNR 2005; NatureServe 2015). The historic pre-European settlement vegetation on this site was dominated by herbaceous species typical of a midgrass prairie. Little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium* (Michx.) Nash) and sideoats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula* (Michx.) Torr.) are the dominant grass species of Calcareous Till Exposed Backslope Prairies. Other grasses that may occur include composite dropseed (*Sporobolus compositus* (Poir.) Merr. var. *compositus*), big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii* Vitman), and Indiangrass (*Sorghastrum nutans* (L.) Nash) (MDNR 2005). Forbs typical of an undisturbed plant community associated with this ecological site include purple prairie clover (*Dalea purpurea* Vent.), blacksamson echinacea (*Echinacea angustifolia* DC.), and tall blazing star (*Liatris aspera* Michx.) (Drobney et al. 2001; MDNR 2005). Shrub cover is sparse, with western snowberry (*Symphoricarpos occidentalis* Hook.) and leadplant (*Amorpha canescens* Pursh.) the most commonly encountered species (MDNR 2005). Fire is the primary disturbance factor that maintains this site, while drought and herbivory are secondary factors (MDNR 2005; LANDFIRE 2009).

Associated sites

R107XA202IA	Calcareous Till Upland Prairie Glacial till on uplands that are shallow to calcium carbonates including Moneta and Steinauer
R107XA204IA	Calcareous Till Protected Backslope Savanna Glacial till on north and east facing upland backslopes with slopes greater than 20 percent that are shallow to calcium carbonates including Cornell, Moneta, Steinauer, and Soils that are moderately deep to carbonates

Similar sites

R107XA211IA	Footslope Prairie Footslope Prairies are derived from colluvium and occur at the bottom of Calcareous Till backslope ecological sites
R107XA204IA	Calcareous Till Protected Backslope Savanna Calcareous Till Protected Backslope Savannas are similar in parent material but occur on north and east aspects on upland backslopes
R107XA206IA	Outwash Upland Prairie Outwash Upland Prairies are derived from glacial outwash and have a lower soil fertility resulting in a similar, but sparser, plant community.

Table 1. Dominant plant species

Tree	Not specified
Shrub	Not specified
Herbaceous	(1) <i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i> (2) <i>Bouteloua curtipendula</i>

Physiographic features

Calcareous Till Exposed Backslope Prairies occur on south and west-facing upland backslopes on slopes greater than 20 percent (Figure 2). They are situated on elevations ranging from approximately 649 to 1801 feet ASL. The site does not experience flooding but rather generates runoff to adjacent, downslope ecological sites.

Figure 1. Figure 1. Location of Calcareous Till Exposed Backslope Prairie ecological site within MLRA 107A.

Figure 2. Figure 2. Representative block diagram of Calcareous Till Exposed Backslope Prairie and associated ecological sites.

Table 2. Representative physiographic features

Hillslope profile	(1) Backslope
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Slope shape across	(1) Convex
Slope shape up-down	(1) Convex
Landforms	(1) Upland > Hillslope
Runoff class	High to very high
Elevation	200 – 550 m
Slope	20 – 50 %
Water table depth	150 – 200 cm
Aspect	W, NW, S, SW

Climatic features

The Iowa and Minnesota Loess Hills falls into the hot humid continental climate (Dfa) Köppen-Geiger climate classification (Peel et al. 2007). In winter, dry, cold air masses periodically shift south from Canada. As these air masses collide with humid air, snowfall and rainfall result. In summer, moist, warm air masses from the Gulf of Mexico migrate north, producing significant frontal or convective rains. Occasionally, hot, dry winds originating from the Desert Southwest will stagnate over the region, creating extended droughty periods in the summer from unusually high temperatures. Air masses from the Pacific Ocean can also spread into the region and dominate producing mild, dry weather in the autumn known as Indian Summers (NCDC 2006).

The soil temperature regime of MLRA 107A is classified as mesic, where the mean annual soil temperature is between 46 and 59°F (USDA-NRCS 2006). Temperature and precipitation occur along a north-south gradient, where temperature and precipitation increase the further south one travels. The average freeze-free period of this ecological site is about 157 days, while the frost-free period is about 134 days (Table 2). The majority of the precipitation occurs as rainfall in the form of convective thunderstorms during the growing season. Average annual precipitation is approximately 32 inches, which includes rainfall plus the water equivalent from snowfall. The average annual low and high temperatures are 36 and 58°F, respectively (Table 3).

Climate data and analyses are derived from 30-year averages gathered from two National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) weather stations contained within the range of this ecological site (Table 4).

Table 3 Representative climatic features

Frost-free period (characteristic range)	130 days
Freeze-free period (characteristic range)	150-150 days
Precipitation total (characteristic range)	790 mm
Frost-free period (actual range)	130 days
Freeze-free period (actual range)	150-150 days

Precipitation total (actual range)	790-810 mm
Frost-free period (average)	130 days
Freeze-free period (average)	150 days
Precipitation total (average)	790 mm

- (1) CHEROKEE [USC00131442], Cherokee, IA
- (2) SIOUX RAPIDS 4 E [USC00137726], Sioux Rapids, IA

Influencing water features

Calcareous Till Exposed Backslope Prairies are not influenced by wetland or riparian water features. Precipitation is the main source of water for this ecological site. Infiltration is slow to moderate (Hydrologic Groups B, C) for undrained soils, and surface runoff is high to very high. Precipitation infiltrates the soil surface and percolates downward through the horizons unimpeded by any restrictive layer. The Dakota bedrock aquifer underlying this ecological site is typically deep and confined, leaving it generally unaffected by recharge (Prior et al. 2003). Surface runoff contributes some water to downslope ecological sites (Figure 5).

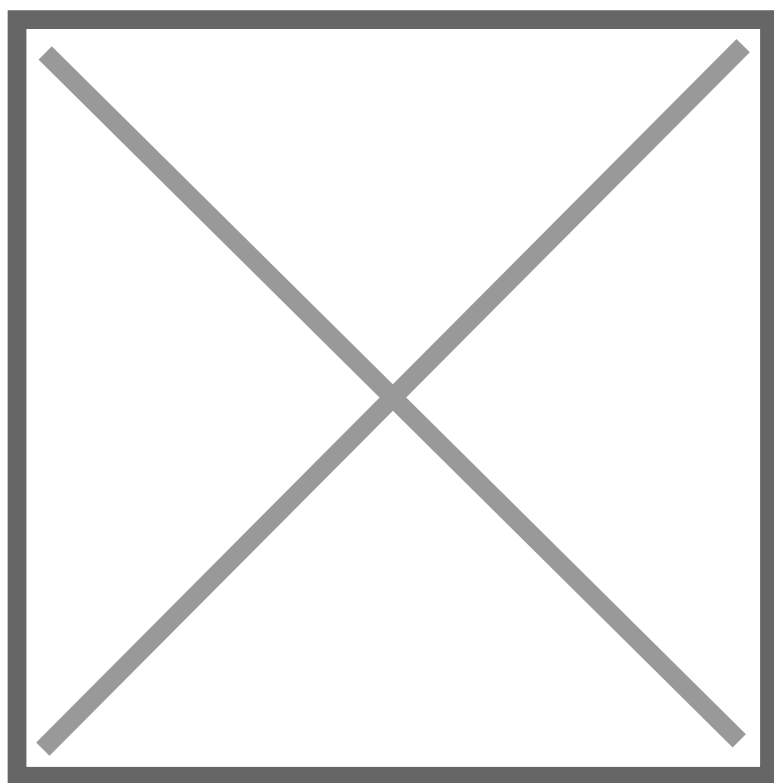


Figure 7. Figure 5. Hydrologic cycling in Calcareous Till Exposed Backslope Prairie ecological site.

Soil features

Soils of Calcareous Till Exposed Backslope Prairies are in the Mollisols and Entisols orders, further classified as Entic Hapludolls, Oxyaquic Vertic Argiudolls, Typic Hapludolls, Udorthentic Haplustolls, and Typic Udorthents with slow to moderate infiltration and high to very high runoff potential. The soil series associated with this site includes Cornell, Moneta, Steinauer, Steinauer variant, and Soils that are moderately deep to carbonates (Figure 6). The parent material is calcareous glacial till and the soils are well-drained and deep. Soil pH classes are slightly to moderately alkaline. No rooting restrictions are noted for the soils of this ecological site (Table 5).

Figure 8. Figure 6. Profile sketches of soil series associated with Calcareous Till Exposed Backslope Prairie.

Table 4. Representative soil features

Parent material	(1) Till
Family particle size	(1) Fine-loamy
Drainage class	Well drained
Permeability class	Slow
Soil depth	200 cm

Ecological dynamics

The information in this Ecological Site Description, including the state-and-transition model (STM), was developed based on historical data, current field data, professional experience, and a review of the scientific literature. As a result, all possible scenarios or plant species may not be included. Key indicator plant species, disturbances, and ecological processes are described to inform land management decisions.

MLRA 107A is defined by a relatively low relief landscape that experiences lower rainfall amounts and available moisture compared to other MLRAs occurring to the south and east. As a result, prairie vegetation communities dominate the uplands, while forested communities are restricted to medium and large streams (Prior 1991; Eilers and Roosa 1994; MDNR 2017a, b). Calcareous Till Exposed Backslope Prairies form an aspect of this vegetative continuum. This ecological site occurs on south and west-facing upland backslopes on well drained soils. Species characteristic of this ecological site consist of drought-tolerant, midgrass herbaceous vegetation (Figure 7).

Fire is the dominant ecosystem driver for maintaining the vegetation of Calcareous Till Exposed Backslope Prairies. Fire intensity typically consisted of periodic, high severity surface fires occurring every 1 to 5 years (LANDFIRE 2009). Ignition sources included summertime lightning strikes from convective storms and bimodal, human ignitions during the spring and fall seasons. Native Americans regularly set fires to improve sight lines for hunting, driving large game, improving grazing and browsing habitat, agricultural clearing, and enhancing vital ethnobotanical plants (Barrett 1980).

Drought and herbivory have also played a role in shaping this ecological site. The periodic episodes of reduced soil moisture in conjunction with the well-drained soils have favored the proliferation of plant species tolerant of such conditions. Drought can also slow the growth of plants and result in dieback of certain species. The steep slopes of this ecological site likely deterred extensive grazing, however some grazing could be expected from bison (*Bos bison*) and possibly prairie elk (*Cervus elaphus*), the main herbivores in northern tallgrass prairies (LANDFIRE 2009). When coupled with fire, periods of drought and herbivory can greatly delay the establishment of woody vegetation (Pyne et al. 1996).

Today, Calcareous Till Exposed Backslope Prairies are limited in their extent, having been reduced as a result of eastern redcedar (*Juniperus virginiana* L.) encroachment from long-term fire suppression or having been converted to pasture. Remnants that do exist show evidence of indirect anthropogenic influence as some non-native species are present in the species composition. A return to the historic plant community is highly challenging, but long-term reconstruction efforts can help to restore some the natural diversity and ecological function. The state-and-transition model that follows provides a detailed description of each state, community phase, pathway, and transition. This model is based on available experimental research, field observations, literature reviews, professional consensus, and interpretations.

State and transition model

Additional community tables

Table 5. Community 1.1 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 6. Community 1.2 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 7. Community 2.1 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 8. Community 2.2 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 9. Community 3.1 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 10. Community 3.2 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 11. Community 3.3 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 12. Community 4.1 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Table 13. Community 4.2 plant community composition

Group	Common Name	Symbol	Scientific Name	Annual Production ()	Foliar Cover (%)
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Inventory data references

Tier 3 Sampling Plot used to develop the reference state, community phase 1.1: State County Ownership Legal Description Easting Northing Iowa O'Brien Waterman Prairie Wildlife Area – Iowa Department of Natural Resources T94N R39W S23 302976 4758029

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Approval

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Rangeland health reference sheet

Interpreting Indicators of Rangeland Health is a qualitative assessment protocol used to determine ecosystem condition based on benchmark characteristics described in the Reference Sheet. A suite of 17 (or more) indicators are typically considered in an assessment. The ecological site(s) representative of an assessment location must be known prior to applying the protocol and must be verified based on soils and climate. Current plant community cannot be used to identify the ecological site.

Author(s)/participant(s)	
Contact for lead author	
Date	10/01/2026
Approved by	
Approval date	
Composition (Indicators 10 and 12) based on	Annual Production

Indicators

1. Number and extent of rills:

2. Presence of water flow patterns:

3. Number and height of erosional pedestals or terracettes:

4. Bare ground from Ecological Site Description or other studies (rock, litter, lichen, moss, plant canopy are not bare ground):

5. Number of gullies and erosion associated with gullies:

6. Extent of wind scoured, blowouts and/or depositional areas:

7. Amount of litter movement (describe size and distance expected to travel):

8. Soil surface (top few mm) resistance to erosion (stability values are averages - most sites will show a range of values):

9. Soil surface structure and SOM content (include type of structure and A-horizon color and thickness):

10. Effect of community phase composition (relative proportion of different functional groups) and spatial distribution on infiltration and runoff:

11. Presence and thickness of compaction layer (usually none; describe soil profile features which may be mistaken for compaction on this site):

12. Functional/Structural Groups (list in order of descending dominance by above-ground annual-production or live foliar cover using symbols: >>, >, = to indicate much greater than, greater than, and equal to):

Dominant:

Sub-dominant:

Other:

Additional:

13. Amount of plant mortality and decadence (include which functional groups are expected to show mortality or decadence):

14. Average percent litter cover (%) and depth (in):

15. Expected annual annual-production (this is TOTAL above-ground annual-production, not just forage annual-production):

16. Potential invasive (including noxious) species (native and non-native). List species which BOTH characterize degraded states and have the potential to become a dominant or co-dominant species on the ecological site if their future

establishment and growth is not actively controlled by management interventions. Species that become dominant for only one to several years (e.g., short-term response to drought or wildfire) are not invasive plants. Note that unlike other indicators, we are describing what is NOT expected in the reference state for the ecological site:

17. Perennial plant reproductive capability:
