



What are oak savannas?

- Oak savannas are native plant communities with scattered open-grown oaks.
- Oak savannas are transitional habitats between prairies and forests. The understory receives a mix of light levels, allowing a wide variety of grasses and wildflowers to grow.
- Early settlers described the “park-like” setting of oak savannas.
- Oak savanna is an umbrella term used to describe a number of subtypes: ‘oak openings,’ occur on rich, moist soils and are characterized by bur and white oaks; ‘oak barrens’ occur on dry, sandy soils and are characterized by black and northern pin oak. Shagbark hickory and black cherry can also be found at a low density in oak openings.

Where are oak savannas located?

- Oak savannas are found on rich to sandy upland soils in areas historically subjected to frequent fires. Fires prevented most woody plants from encroaching and starting a forest. The oaks were usually protected from the fire by their thick bark.
- Prior to European settlement, oak savannas covered ~75% of southern Wisconsin.

Why is the conservation and restoration of oak savannas important?

- Oak savanna is considered to be one of the most threatened plant communities not only in the Midwest, but also on Earth. Only an estimated 500 acres (less than 0.01%) of original oak savannas remain today in Wisconsin.
- Many plant species are unique to oak savannas and are not found in the surrounding prairie or forest.
- Acorns, produced by the oak trees, are a major food source for many wildlife species, including wild turkey, deer, and woodpeckers, such as the uncommon red-headed woodpecker.
- Fire was effectively removed from the ecosystem after settlers began the practice of extinguishing prairie wildfires. Oak savannas were quickly invaded by dense brush and tree growth without fire to slow their encroachment.
- Development and the practice of fire suppression continue to threaten oak savannas. Additionally, oak wilt, overgrazing, and invasive species can affect ecosystem health and regeneration.

How can we protect oak savannas?

- Fire can be reintroduced to the landscape through the practice of prescribed burns. Private lands biologists at the US Fish and Wildlife Service can assist with developing management plans, including fire prescriptions.
- Trees and brush can be removed from the oak savanna through logging operations or the use of chainsaws. Not only does this reduce the density of trees to allow for a more open canopy, but trees not normally found on savannas can also be removed.
- Conservation easements can protect savanna remnants from development.

The Military Ridge Prairie Heritage Area is a cooperative project of 9 partner groups representing the private, state and federal sectors. Goals of the partnership include: 1) Provide and maintain viable prairie, savanna, grassland, and aquatic habitat, for the many plants and animals that depend on these habitats for their survival; 2) Maintain an economically viable rural and agricultural landscape; 3) Provide and encourage traditional recreational opportunities which are compatible with the conservation goals; and 4) Integrate best applied science through the use of continued monitoring and adaptive management. For more information, contact Katie Abbott, Project Coordinator, at (608)935-2791 ext. 134, or at katie.abbott@rcdnet.net.