wet prairies and fens

Characteristics

A wet prairie has moist to saturated soils with standing water present for only brief to moderate periods during the growing season, more than 70 percent herbaceous vegetation, and a near neutral pH. A fen is a type of wetland formed where water moves through limestone (bedrock or gravel) and reaches the earth's surface as a spring or seep. The soil in a fen is muck that develops from decomposing plants. It is saturated and may have standing water. Calcium and magnesium are common in the soil of a fen resulting in a near neutral pH. A variety of unique plants adapted to surviving these unusual conditions occur in fens.

Recreation

Hiking, wildlife observation and/or photography

What Lives Here?

A wet prairie contains a wide variety of herbaceous species including grasses, forbs, sedges, and rushes. Woody vegetation, if present, covers less than one-third of the area. Straw-colored nutsedge, winged loosestrife, swamp milkweed, blue flag iris, cardinal flower, common cattail, horsetail, purple ammannia, small white lady slipper, water horehound, water parsnip, water pepper, water smartweed, ferns, cordgrass, and water hemlock are all plants that may be found in a wet prairie. Historically these areas contained many birds including ducks, geese, swans, rails, prairie chickens, and cranes. Turtles and frogs also were common.

Fens are comprised mainly of herbaceous plants, although shrubs or trees may be present. Fen vegetation includes broad leaf arrowhead, boneset, bulrush, fringed gentian, great blue lobelia, grass of Parnassus, tall cotton-grass, and spotted touch-me-not. Animal species are similar to those living in a wet prairie.

Organisms found in this CD:
American bittern, American toad, anabaena, aquatic sowbug, badger, blue flag iris**,** boneset, broadleaf arrowhead, bulrush, chara, cardinal flower, chlorella, common cattail, copepod, crane fly, crawfish frog, cricket frog, damselfly, deer fly, diatoms, dragonfly, earthworm, euglena, false nettle, fisher spider, fog fruit, Franklin's ground squirrel, fringed gentian, grass of Parnassus, great blue lobelia, great plains toad, horse fly, horsetail, Kalm's lobelia, least shrew, least weasel, leech, left-handed snails, long-tailed weasel, mallard, masked shrew, massasauga, meadow beauty, meadow jumping mouse, microcystis, midge, mink, mosquito, northern harrier, northern leopard frog, Norway rat, operculate snails, plains garter snake, plains leopard frog, prairie crayfish, prairie cord grass, protozoa, purple ammannia, purple loosestrife, red-sided and eastern garter snakes, red-winged blackbird, right-handed snails, sandhill crane, sedge wren, smallmouth salamander, small white lady slipper, smooth green snake, snow/blue goose, southern bog lemming, spirogyra, spotted touch-me-not, straw-colored nutsedge, swamp milkweed, swamp sparrow, tall cotton-grass, tiger salamander, volvox, water hemlock, water horehound, water mites, water parsnip, water pepper, water smartweed, western chorus frog, western harvest mouse, winged loosestrife, Woodhouse's toad, woodland vole, yellow monkey-flower

Locations in Iowa

Wet prairies once were common in north-central and northeast Iowa in association with prairie marshes throughout the Des Moines Lobe and scattered throughout Iowa in river floodplains, drainage and shallow depressions on the landscape. Almost all have been drained for agricultural purposes.

Fens are associated with moraines along the northwestern and eastern edges of the Des Moines Lobe (land surface covering north-central and part of northwest Iowa) and scattered throughout the Iowan Surface in the northeastern part of the state.

Bibliography

Iowa Department of Natural Resources. 2001. *Biodiversity of Iowa: Aquatic Habitats* CD-ROM.