

Terrestrial & Palustrine Plant Communities Of Pennsylvania

By Jean Fike

Big bluestem - Indian grass river grassland

This community type occurs on sand/gravel deposits or rock outcrops along riverbanks and on river islands. These sites are subject to flooding and ice scour. The typical aspect is that of a tall grassland. The most characteristic herbaceous species are *Andropogon gerardii* (big bluestem), *Sorghastrum nutans* (Indian grass), and *Panicum virgatum* (switch grass). Other herbaceous species include *Phalaris arundinacea*^(I) (reed canary-grass), *Spartina pectinata* (freshwater cordgrass), *Sporobolus asper* (dropseed), *Schizachyrium scoparium* (little bluestem), *Lespedeza violacea* (bush-clover), *Apocynum cannabinum* (Indian hemp), and, in western Pennsylvania, *Baptisia australis*^S (blue false-indigo). In some places, woody species may become established for a time. Common species include *Salix* spp. (willows), *Platanus occidentalis* (sycamore), *Fraxinus* spp. (ash), *Acer negundo* (box-elder), and, in the eastern drainages, *Betula nigra* (river birch) and *Prunus pumila* var. *depressa*^S (prostrate sand cherry). Vines may also be present; common species include *Parthenocissus quinquefolia* (Virginia creeper), *Toxicodendron radicans* (poison ivy), *Vitis labrusca* (fox grape), and *V. riparia* (frost grape). This community type is part of the "River bed - bank - floodplain complex."

Related types: This community's landscape setting and hydrology distinguishes it from related upland grassland types. Dominance by herbaceous plants (mainly grasses) distinguishes this type from the "River birch - sycamore floodplain scrub," which is dominated by stunted *Betula nigra* (river birch) and other woody species.

Range: Piedmont, Ridge and Valley, Pittsburgh Plateau, Glaciated NE.

Selected references: Jennings 1927, PNDI field surveys.

[Crosswalk: Smith's "River Gravel Community," TNC's *Andropogon gerardii* - *Sorghastrum nutans* Herbaceous Alliance.]