



Scrub Complex

The preserve areas included in this complex have been selected because the most significant characteristic of each is an area of extremely rare scrub habitat. The Florida Natural Areas Inventory ranks scrub as “Imperiled” both in the State of Florida and globally, because of its rarity. Scrub habitat was apparently never very common to begin with, since it only occurs on sand ridges along former shorelines. Whether originating from wind or wave action, the scrub soils are composed of well-washed, deep sands, that are usually a very bright white at the ground surface. Low nutrient levels and rapid drainage create very dry, sterile growing conditions, so that many of the plant and animal species found in scrub have evolved unique survival strategies.

The two most common forms of scrub in our region are sand pine scrub, characterized by a forest canopy of sand pines, and oak scrub, a dense, low growing forest composed of several species of scrub oaks. In either case, the ground cover is usually sparse, with open patches of barren sand. Since Florida scrubs are characterized by rarity, isolation and relatively harsh conditions, many of the species that occur in them are endemic, meaning that they found no where else in the world.

While most of the largest and oldest examples of scrub habitat in Florida are found on the Lake Wales Ridge in the center of the State, the scrub habitat in the Tampa Bay region shares the same characteristics and supports many of the unique scrub species. One plant species in particular, the Florida golden aster (*Chrysopsis floridana*), occurs only in scrub habitat in west central Florida, and it occurs in greater numbers in Hillsborough County than anywhere else. For this reason, the species is mentioned prominently throughout this booklet whenever it occurs on a site.

The scrub ecosystem, and its many endemic species, are rapidly being lost to development. And even when protected from development by preservation programs, scrub habitat can be damaged by human activities such as off road vehicles, or even foot traffic, that destroys delicate ground cover. Some ground lichens may require 50 years or more to recover. Special precautions must be taken by land managers when considering recreational access. Another concern for “protected” scrub areas is the loss of diversity over time in the absence of fire. Sparse ground cover reduces the frequency of fire, but when it does occur, perhaps once every 20 to 80 years, the result is a high intensity crown fire, followed by natural regeneration of the plant community. Without proper long term protection and management, scrub areas will suffer degradation.