

Reading the Driftless Landscape

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Introduction

The goal of this handbook is to empower you, a landowner in the Driftless Area, to make wise ecological stewardship decisions appropriate for the land around you. We will first introduce you to the human and natural history of the Driftless Area. The history of a site directly influences the health and well-being of the flora and fauna that inhabit a space of ground today. Then, we will discuss the various aspects of the natural world that you see around you, both within the region you call home, and what you may find on your property. Lastly, we provide a series of worksheets to encourage you to put pen to paper and begin developing your own “read” of your landscape.



Rosinweed, photo Julie Rausch

We will provide the tools and references to help you interpret or read the landscape around you. The last section of this handbook is designed for you to discover and record the complex natural and human histories of your land, its physical characteristics and its ecological potential. Ultimately, you will merge this information with your own personal goals into a simple, ecologically-based stewardship plan for your property.



Reading the Landscape

Look to the land. Which plants grow and can potentially grow in a location is directly related to where you are in the landscape, the land features, and its history. The factors that influence which plants, shrubs, and trees thrive at a site (which in turn has direct implications on which animals can thrive there) are actually underfoot and above us. These factors broadly include soil, underlying rock formation or geology, slope and aspect, and the flow of water or where you are in a watershed.

What you discover when you read the land has real-life implications that can save you money, frustration, and time. Try as we might, a hickory forest will not easily grow in a valley bottom that floods and has saturated soils. Prairie plants and trees adapted to wet conditions will do better. An old road bed and honeysuckle thickets don't become instant savannas. Spotted knapweed takes years to control and alters the soil chemistry. These are all lessons you will learn from reading your landscape for its clues.

Look to the history. Each property has a natural and cultural history that has influenced what you see today, and what it might become tomorrow. Your property offers signs of the past, an image of the present, and directions for the future that you can influence by making wise stewardship decisions based on your needs and values. From this information, you will be able to create a better fit with your interests and what the land can offer, with considerations for neighbors, the community, the environment, and future generations of landowners.

Your Ecological Address

The Driftless Area: A Landscape of Valleys and Hills

The term Driftless Area refers to a region that includes parts of southwest Wisconsin, southeast Minnesota, northeast Iowa and a small portion of northwest Illinois. In contrast to the rest of the state, the Driftless Area of Wisconsin was by-passed by the ice sheets of the last glacial period that ended 10,000 to 12,000 years ago. The lack of glaciation resulted in the rolling hills, steep terrain, rocky outcrops, and sparkling streams of southwest Wisconsin.

Unlike glacial soils that were made of transported materials (drift), the soils in the Driftless Area are residual soils, made from the slow weathering of limestone, sandstone, and crystalline rocks. The land is underlain with soluble bedrock of limestone and dolomite layered with sandstone. Limestone and dolomite are carbonate rocks that erode as groundwater seeps or flows through conduits. Over time, this action forms landscape features familiar to this region, including cliffs, cracks, crevices, tunnels, caves and sinkholes.



Michigan Lily, Photo Julie Roasch

Wherever you live in the Driftless Area, there is one common characteristic - change in elevation. And it happens quickly unless you stay in a valley bottom. Traversing the landscape means going up and down, encountering a variety of land forms. It is an old eroded landscape.

An Ecological Landscape Address

Reading the landscape patterns is not easy right off the bat. It takes a special mind-set to think with a "bird's eye view". Using the concept of an ecological landscape address is one way to get a better handle on the broad-scale patterns that influence your property's potential.

Scientists have defined sixteen different ecological landscapes within Wisconsin. For this handbook, we are primarily concerned with two: the Western Coulee and Ridges, and the Southwest Savanna. The very distinct Military Ridge (now the approximate route of U.S Highway 18) divides the two regions of the Driftless Area. Though they share the characteristic of being untouched

