



Wildcat Hills

is a rocky escarpment that rises several hundred feet on the south side of the North Platte River in Scotts Bluff, Banner, and Morrill counties. The escarpment is composed primarily of sandstone, siltstone and volcanic ash. The north bluff of the escarpment is steep and deep canyons cut into the bluff. The canyons support stands of mountain mahogany, eastern red cedar and Rocky Mountain juniper. The north-facing slopes of the escarpment support ponderosa pine woodlands. Mixed-grass prairie, rock outcrops, and scattered patches of sandsage prairie occupy the remainder of the Wildcat Hills.



The Wildcat Hills are significant in supporting an intact mosaic of pine woodlands and mixed-grass prairie and the largest stands of mountain mahogany shrubland in the state. The Wildcat Hills also are home to one of three Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep populations in the state. Protected lands within the Wildcat Hills include Scotts Bluff National Monument; Platte River Basin Environment's Bead Mountain, Carter Canyon, and Montz ranches; The Nature Conservancy's Murphy Ranch; and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission's Cedar Canyon and Buffalo Creek Wildlife Management Areas and Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area.

Natural Legacy Demonstration Site

Wildcat Hills

The Wildcat Hills contains several properties that are open to the public: Buffalo Creek Wildlife Management Area (WMA), Cedar Canyon WMA, Wildcat Hills WMA, Platte River Basin Environments, Inc. Bead Mountain and Montz Ranches, Scotts Bluff National Monument, and The Nature Conservancy's Murphy Ranch. The entire wildlands complex encompasses nearly 30,000 acres, including rugged topography with ravines separated by steep, eroded rocky outcrops. A nature center provides education opportunities. Managers have recently found evidence of the invasive mountain pine beetle and are taking steps to slow its spread. This complex contains all the plant communities of the BUL.

Stresses Affecting Species and Habitats

- ❖ Specific livestock grazing and haying practices that may reduce native plant diversity and promote uniform habitat structure
- ❖ Lack of grazing and prescribed fire on many public lands
- ❖ Invasive plant species, including, cheatgrass, smooth brome, Kentucky bluegrass, eastern red cedar, and Canada thistle
- ❖ Increased densities of ponderosa pine and to a lesser extent eastern red cedar because of a lack of fire
- ❖ Housing and ranchette development
- ❖ Potential for catastrophic crown fires resulting from excess fuel accumulation
- ❖ Pine bark beetle infestations
- ❖ Transmission of diseases between domestic sheep, goats, and Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep
- ❖ Poorly-sited utility-scale wind turbines and oil drilling

Conservation Strategies

- ❖ Implement strategic grazing strategies on public and private lands to improve native plant diversity and vigor
- ❖ Work with public and private landowners to implement prescribed, low-intensity surface fires to control exotic plants, reduce ponderosa pine and eastern red cedar densities, and reduce the threat of crown fires. Dense stands of trees may require mechanical thinning prior to burning to reduce fuel loads. A fire return interval of 5-10 years should be appropriate for lands within the Wildcat Hills.
- ❖ Support the development of local industries for pine wood products
- ❖ Treat pine infestations of pine bark beetles
- ❖ Coordinate with landowners interested in using conservation easements and voluntary acquisitions to protect key areas for conservation
- ❖ To avoid disease transmission, work with private landowners to limit domestic sheep and goats in areas used by bighorn sheep
- ❖ Promotion of fencing methods that are less detrimental to wildlife
- ❖ Environmental education programs to increase awareness towards wildlife, and reach out to the growing number of residents and many visitors in the Wildcat Hills
- ❖ Work with energy companies to select turbine and oil drilling sites that minimize fragmentation and impacts to wildlife. See Nebraska Game and Parks Commission guidelines for wind energy development.

Tier I At-risk Species

Plants:

Dog-parsley³

Matted Prickly-phlox²

Animals:

Fringe-tailed Myotis²
Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep²
Swift Fox
Bell's Vireo
Brewer's Sparrow
Burrowing Owl
Long-billed Curlew
Pinyon Jay²
Short-eared Owl
Regal Fritillary
Plains Topminnow
Sagebrush Lizard²

Aquatic Communities:

Headwater, Warm Water Stream

Terrestrial Communities:

Ponderosa Pine Forest*
Dry Ponderosa Pine Open Woodland and Savanna*
Pine-Juniper Scarp Woodland*
Rocky Mountain Juniper Woodland
Buckbrush Shrubland
Chokecherry-Plum Shrub Thicket
Mountain Mahogany Shrubland*
Freshwater Seep*
Western Alkaline Meadow
Western Sedge Wet Meadow
Sandsage Prairie*
Western Sand Prairie*
Threadleaf Sedge Western Mixed-grass Prairie*
Wheatgrass Western Mixed-grass Prairie*
Western Floodplain Terrace Grassland
Western Sandstone Cliff*
Rock Outcrop*
Badlands*
Riverine Gravel Flats

* Priority for conservation in this BUL

¹ This is the only BUL where the species is known to occur

² Known to occur in only one other BUL

³ Known to occur in only two other BULs

⁴ Known to occur in only three other BULs

Visit Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area and Nature Center

http://outdoornebraska.ne.gov/parks/guides/parksearch/showpark.asp?Area_No=193

and

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hzp3k60tA1Y>