

Terrestrial & Palustrine Plant Communities Of Pennsylvania

By Jean Fike

Low heath - mountain ash shrubland

This community type occurs at high elevations, usually on a thin soil layer over bedrock. Scattered trees may occur in pockets of deeper soil. Characteristic tree species include *Pinus strobus* (eastern white pine), *Betula populifolia* (gray birch), *Acer rubrum* (red maple), *Quercus montana* (chestnut oak), and rarely *Picea rubens* (red spruce). The most characteristic shrub species are *Vaccinium pallidum* (lowbush blueberry) and *Sorbus americana* (mountain ash), although *V. angustifolium* (low sweet blueberry), *Kalmia angustifolia* (sheep laurel), *Gaylussacia baccata* (huckleberry), *Aronia melanocarpa* (black chokeberry) also commonly occur. Herbaceous species include *Potentilla tridentata*^S (three-toothed cinquefoil), *Schizachyrium scoparium* (little bluestem), *Deschampsia flexuosa* (hairgrass), *Minuartia glabra*^S (Appalachian sandwort), *Campanula rotundifolia* (harebell), and *Lilium philadelphicum* (wood lily). Moss and lichen cover on rocks may be considerable; more information is needed on non-vascular species. This community type may occur as part of the "Ridgetop acidic barrens complex."

Related types: The "Low heath shrubland" is more common than this type and typically occurs at lower elevations than this does. A species mix reflecting a more northern affinity, and specifically the presence of *Sorbus americana* (mountain ash), may be used to distinguish this type. The "Red spruce rocky summit" community type occurs in similar situations, but is much less common in Pennsylvania, with only one known example at the time of writing. Dominance or codominance by *Picea rubens* (red spruce) distinguishes the rarer type from that described here.

Range: Glaciated NE, Pocono Plateau, Ridge and Valley, Unglaciated Allegheny Plateau.

Selected references: PNDI field surveys, Sneddon, Anderson and Metzler 1996.

[Crosswalk: Smith's "Northern Appalachian High Elevation Acidic Rocky Summit," TNC's *Vaccinium (myrtilloides, pallidum, angustifolium)* Dwarf-Shrubland Alliance, *Vaccinium angustifolium - Sorbus americana* Community.]