

BUNCHGRASS BIOGEOCLIMATIC ZONE

BIOGEOCLIMATIC ZONE: BUNCHGRASS

Bunchgrass, often referred to as grasslands, is one of the 16 biogeoclimatic zones within British Columbia, covering less than one percent of the total area of British Columbia. Bunchgrass, like the Coastal Douglas-fir biogeoclimatic zone, has minimal representation in the province's parks and protected areas system. Currently 10% is under protected area status.



Location of the Bunchgrass biogeoclimatic zone in British Columbia
Courtesy: BC Ministry of Environment

Importance

The Bunchgrass biogeoclimatic zone, despite its small area, incorporates open grasslands, rocky slopes and outcrops, riparian areas, wetlands, ponds, lakes, gullies and parklands. These habitats support a wide variety of plants and animals including many rare and endangered

species. In fact, this zone is home to more than 30% of the province's species at risk – among them the badger, burrowing owl, pallid bat, Great Basin gopher snake and western rattlesnake.

Threats

With its abundance of productive agricultural land, the Bunchgrass biogeoclimatic zone is one of the most populated and developed areas in the interior of British Columbia. In addition to development, poor land management practices such as overgrazing and the spread of introduced invasive plants are major threats to the preservation of grassland ecosystems. When sites become disturbed by overgrazing or other activities, this allows non-native weedy species such as knapweed and cheatgrass to invade and dominate. Furthermore, cattle grazing can damage or destroy the cryptogamic crust – one of the most unique features of the Bunchgrass zone. This thin, fragile layer of low-growing mosses, lichens, algae and bacteria not only helps to bind the soil and protect it from erosion, but also restricts the invasion of weedy species and provides nutrients such as nitrogen to plants.



Cow grazing in provincial park
Courtesy: Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society

Presently, most protected grasslands are isolated from each other and there is little connectivity between them. Additionally, even if established as a provincial park, pre-existing grazing rights may allow for grazing to continue within the park. For effective protection, these areas must be within close proximity to other protected areas, the quality of the environment around the protected area must be upheld and both internal and external stressors on the protected area must be kept in check.

For more information on Grasslands in British Columbia, visit the Grasslands Conservation Council of British Columbia website: <http://www.bcgrasslands.org/default.htm>

* This information is provided for the convenience of the reader but is not part of our audit report.