NATURAL REGIONS

Natural regions are areas that share a general similarity in geology, topography, hydrology, soils, climate, and vegetation. The natural regions of Kentucky are divisions of the three major physiographic provinces that occur in the state: Coastal Plain, Interior Low Plateau, and Appalachian Highlands. The diversity within these physiographic provinces is one reason Kentucky supports a rich flora and fauna. The natural regions represent unique localized environmental and physical conditions within the physiographic provinces that affect the distribution of species and natural communities.

The Coastal Plain physiographic province occurs in the western Kentucky. Covered by the ocean as recently as the late Cretaceous Period, around 65 million years ago (thereafter referred to as "today"), the Coastal Plain is the youngest region in the state in geologic terms. Kentucky is near the northern extent of this province, which stretches from coastal Texas to Massachusetts and inland along the Mississippi River valley to southeastern Illinois. The Coastal Plain is composed of two natural regions: (1) the Mississippi-Osage River Floodplain, the broad, alluvial floodplains of two of the largest rivers in the United States; and (2) the East Gulf Coastal Plain, a flat to rolling upland covered by windblown silts and clays. The eastern border of the province is defined by a hilly area composed of gravel and sand deposits that mark the different ancient shorelines of the Gulf of Mexico. The flora and fauna of this province are more typical of regions further south. Hardypress swamps and many southern species reach their northern limits near here.

The Interior Low Plateau physiographic province occupies the middle section of Kentucky. This province extends from northern Alabama through much of Tennessee and north through Kentucky to southern Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. It is composed of a series of plateaus, basins, and domes, often separated by dissected uplands (steep slopes that separate two areas). Some parts of the province are hilly, while others are flat to rolling. This province contains the natural regions of the Overton Lowlands/Osage River Floodplain, Shawnee Hills, Highland Rim, Bluegrass, and Knobs.

The Overton Lowlands/Osage River Floodplain consists of an extensive of the southern floodplain forests of the Coastal Plain. The Shawnee Hills is a diverse area containing woodlands, savannas, and bluffs and vast limestone cave systems, including Mammoth Cave. Large wetlands also occur in the interior of this region. Knobs (eroded limestone) plains characterized by narrowton sinkholes, caves, and underground streams are typical of the Highland Rim, as are hilly areas. The Bluegrass is associated with an ancient, eroded limestone dome in.