

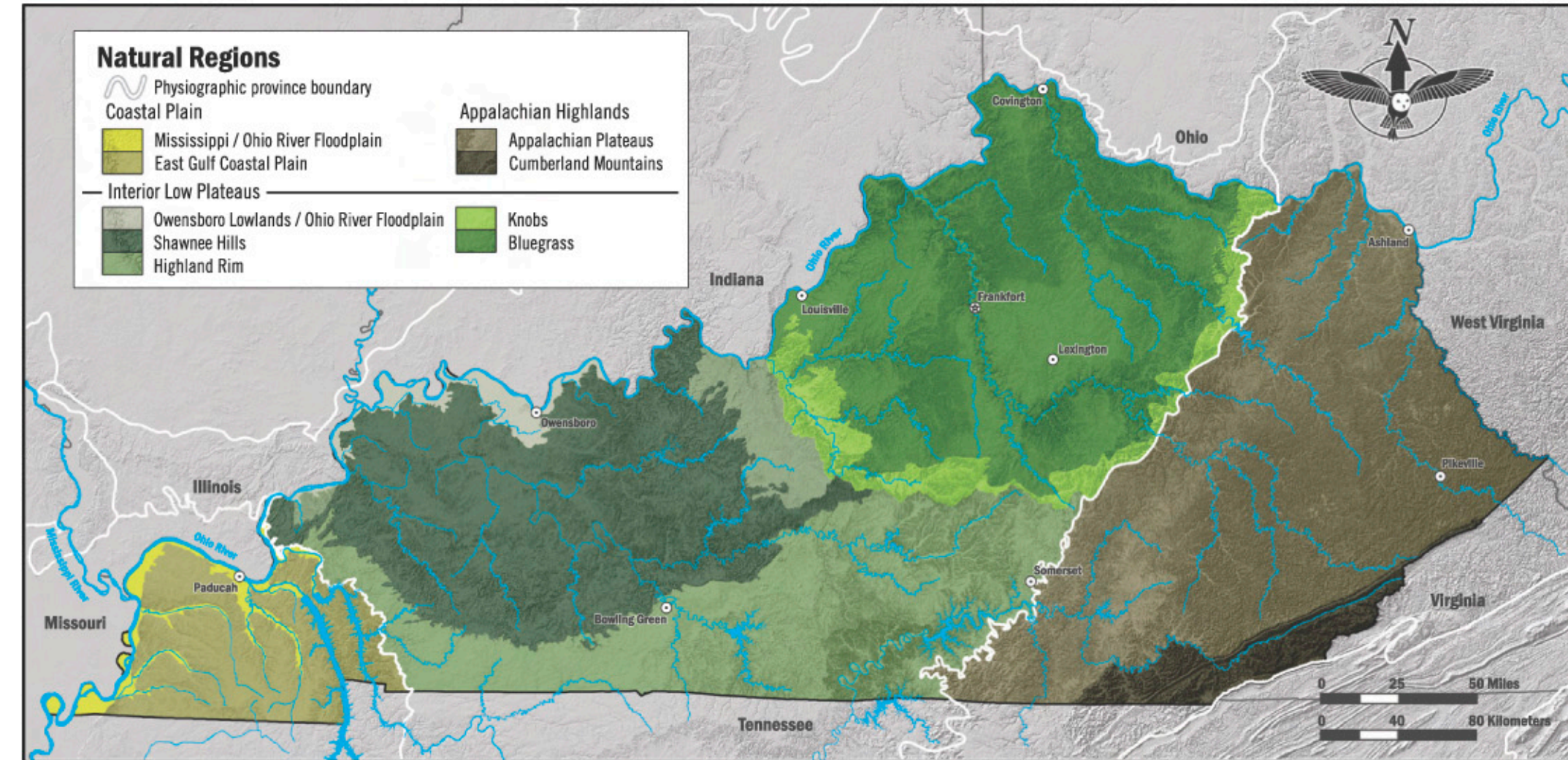
NATURAL REGIONS

Natural regions are areas that share a general similarity in geology, topography, hydrology, soils, climate, and vegetation. The natural regions of Kentucky² are divisions of the three major physiographic provinces that occur in the state: the Coastal Plain, Interior Low Plateaus, and Appalachian Highlands.³ 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 far western Kentucky. Covered by the ocean as recently as the late Cretaceous Period, around 70 million years ago (hereafter abbreviated “mya”), the Coastal Plain is the youngest region in the state in geologic terms.⁴ Kentucky is near the northern interior extent of this province, which stretches from coastal Texas to Massachusetts and inland along the Mississippi River valley to southern Illinois. The Coastal Plain is composed of two natural regions: (1) the Mississippi/Ohio River Floodplain, the broad, alluvial bottomlands 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 silt (loess) deposits. 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 found farther south. Bald cypress swamps and many southern species reach their northern limits near here.

The Interior Low Plateaus physiographic province occupies the midsection 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

Bottomland forests, swamps, and oxbow lakes are characteristic communities of the nearly level, poorly drained lowlands found within the Mississippi/Ohio River floodplain region. © John Brunjes



of a series of plateaus, basins, and domes, often separated by distinct escarpments (steep slopes that separate two areas). Some parts of the province are hilly, while others are flat to rolling. This province contains five natural regions: the Owensboro Lowlands/Ohio River Floodplain, Shawnee Hills, Highland Rim, Bluegrass, and Knobs.

The Owensboro Lowlands/Ohio River Floodplain contains an extension of the southern flood-

plain forests of the Coastal Plain. The Shawnee Hills is a diverse area containing sandstone canyons and bluffs and vast limestone cave systems, including Mammoth Cave. Large wetlands also occur in the interior of this region. Karst (porous limestone) plains characterized by numerous 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