**Lowlands Physical Geography**



Typical terrain of the Driftless Area as viewed from [Wildcat Mountain State Park](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wildcat_Mountain_State_Park) in [Vernon County, Wisconsin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vernon_County,_Wisconsin).

The vast central area of the U.S., into [Canada](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canada), is a landscape of low, flat to rolling terrain in the [Interior Plains](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interior_Plains). Most of its eastern two-thirds form the [Interior Lowlands](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geography_of_the_Interior_United_States). The Lowlands gradually rise westward, from a line passing through eastern Kansas, up to 5,000+ feet in the unit known as the [Great Plains](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Plains)). Much of the Plains are now converted land use-wise to farming.

While these states are for the most part relatively flat, consisting either of plains or of rolling and small hills, there is a measure of geographical variation. In particular, the eastern Midwest near the foothills of the [Appalachian Mountains](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appalachian_Mountains); the [Great Lakes Basin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Lakes_Basin); the [Ozark Mountains](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ozark_Mountains) of southern Missouri; the rugged topography of Southern Indiana and far Southern Illinois; and the [Driftless Area](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Driftless_Area) of northwest Illinois, southwest Wisconsin, southeast Minnesota, and northeast Iowa exhibit a high degree of topographical variety.

Proceeding westward, the [Appalachian Plateau](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appalachian_Plateau) topography gradually gives way to gently rolling hills and then (in central Ohio) to flat lands converted principally to farms and urban areas. This is the beginning of the vast Interior Plains of North America. As a result, [prairies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prairie) cover most of the states west of the [Mississippi River](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mississippi_River) with the exception of [taiga](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taiga)-clad northern Minnesota. Illinois lies within an area called the "prairie peninsula", an eastward extension of prairies that borders [deciduous](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deciduous) forests to the north, east, and south.



Prairie in [Effigy Mounds National Monument](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Effigy_Mounds_National_Monument), [Iowa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iowa).

Geographers subdivide the Interior Plains into the Interior Lowlands and the Great Plains on the basis of elevation. The Lowlands are mostly below 1,500 feet above sea level whereas the Great Plains to the west are higher, rising in [Colorado](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colorado) to around 5,000 feet. The Lowlands, then, are confined to parts of Minnesota, Iowa, Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, [Tennessee](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tennessee), and [Kentucky](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kentucky). Missouri and [Arkansas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arkansas) have regions of Lowlands elevations but in the [Ozarks](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ozarks) (within the Interior Highlands) are higher. Those familiar with the topography of eastern Ohio may be confused by this; that region is hilly but its rocks are horizontal and are an extension of the Appalachian Plateau.

The Interior Plains are largely coincident with the vast Mississippi River Drainage System (other major components are the [Missouri](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Missouri_River) and Ohio Rivers). These rivers have for tens of millions of years been eroding downward into the mostly horizontal sedimentary rocks of [Paleozoic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paleozoic), [Mesozoic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mesozoic), and [Cenozoic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cenozoic) ages. The modern Mississippi River system has developed during the Pleistocene Epoch of the Cenozoic Trout its rocks are horizontal and are an extension of the Appalachian Plateau.