

MACALESTER COLLEGE

SAINT PAUL, MINNESOTA 55105

■ DEPARTMENT OF BIOLOGY

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Subject: CHERSONESE at ORDWAY.

The eastern shore of River Lake stretches into a peninsula which separates it from the mighty Mississippi. It is inundated each year by the spring floods which cause a completely different environment from that of the western (mainland) shore. It is about a kilometer in length and an average of 30 meters in width although at its narrowest constriction it is scarcely 10 meters wide. Properly called a "flood plain habitat" it rises no more than 2 meters above the summer level of the River and displays its own special types of vegetation. This is understandable when one considers that each spring the chersonese region is stifled by a layer of floodwater while the higher areas are awakening to new life in the warming sun. The result has been a considerably shorter growing season and a natural selectivity as to the plants which grow there.

The perennial plants of the peninsula are those which are hardy to a water environment. Willows and cottonwoods abound, as do two species of elm - the American (Ulmus americana) and the Slippery Elm (U. rubra). There are also numerous clumps ("clones") of the Prickly-Ash (Zanthoxylum americanum), a tree which forms dense, formidable thickets. The Cottonwoods tower to mighty heights of 90-100 feet, flourishing in this water habitat with sandy soil replenished by the seasonal whims of Ol' Man River. On the river side the Willows - a half-dozen species of them - grow in profusion; subject to the moods of the River, which each year tears into the banks or deposits silt and sand which initially choke the growth and at the same time provide a substrate for further growth. This is a very good place to view the succession of plants onto newly-formed soil. Growing here also - and no place else on the property - is the "burning bush", also called Wahoo (Euonymus atropurpureus), a close relative of the Bittersweet.

The understory growth is made up largely of rushes, both species of the Horsetail being prominent (Equisetum arvense) and (E. laevigatum). Otherwise most of the small plants are those which grow quickly - some of the bluegrasses, a few Wild Blue Asters in the fall and several acres of Stinging Nettle (Urtica dioica).

This near-jungle is not easily accessible, which is quite a boon to those wild creatures who use it. Deer seem to prefer the relatively-undisturbed area in spite of better browsing in more convenient places. In the summer evenings the Great White Egrets (Casmerodius albus) come from their rookery upstream at Pig's Eye Lake to forage, returning to feed their young with the regurgitated contents of their gullets. River Lake is especially important in the life chain of these and other wading birds and they forage wherever they can but the farshore locale is very good for them and they show a definite preference for it. It is like a place apart - visible but ever-so-slightly mysterious.



R J CHRISTMAN,
Naturalist,
Katharine Ordway Natural
History Study Area

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