California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System
California Department of Fish and Game
California Interagency Wildlife Task Group

Mixed Chaparral

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Vegetation

Structure-- Mixed Chaparral (MCH) is a structurally homogeneous brushland type dominated by shrubs with thick, stiff, heavily cutinized evergreen leaves. Shrub height and crown cover vary considerably with age since last burn, precipitation regime (cismontane vs. transmontane), aspect, and soil type (Hanes 1977). At maturity, cismontane Mixed Chaparral typically is a dense, nearly impenetrable thicket with greater than 80 percent absolute shrub cover. Canopy height ranges from 1 to 4 m (3.3 to 13.1 fl), occasionally to 6 m (19.6 fl) (Horton 1960, Cheatham and Haller 1975, Hanes 1977). On poor sites, serpentine soils or transmontane slopes, shrub cover may be only 30 to 60 percent and shrubs may be shorter, 0.5 to 3.0 m (1.6 to 9.8 fl) (Cheatham and Haller 1975, Hanes 1976, 1977). Considerable leaf litter and standing dead material may accumulate in stands that have not burned for several decades.

Composition-- Mixed Chaparral is a floristically rich type that supports approximately 240 species of woody plants (Oruduff 1974). Composition changes between northern and southern California and with precipitation regime, aspect, and soil type. Dominant species in cismontane Mixed Chaparral include scrub oak, chaparral oak, and several species of ceanothus and manzanita. Individual sites may support pure stands of these shrubs or diverse mixtures of several species. Commonly associated shrubs include chamise, birchleaf mountain mahogany, silk-tassel, toyon, yerba-santa, California buckeye, poison-oak, sumac, California buckthorn, hollyleaf cherry, Montana chaparral-pea, and California fremontia. Some of these species may be locally dominant. Leather oak and interior silktassel are widely distributed on cismontane serpentine soils, and chamise and toyon may be abundant on these soils. Shrubs such as Jepson, coyote, and dwarf ceanothus and serpentine manzanita are local serpentine endemics (Cheatham and Haller 1975, Thorne 1976, Hanes 1977). Incense-cedar, knobcone pine, Coulter pine, and foothill pine frequently are found in Mixed Chaparral on serpentine soils (Thorne 1976).

Shrub live oak, desert ceanothus, and desert bitterbrush are examples of shrubs found in Mixed Chaparral only on transmontane slopes (Cheatham and Haller 1975, Thorne 1976, Hanes 1977, and Zabriskie 1979). However, many species found in cismontane stands are also common on desert-facing slopes. Examples include bigberry manzanita, chamise, birchleaf mountain mahogany, California fremontia, and several species of ceanothus.

Other Classifications-- Most authors divide Mixed Chaparral into several types based on the dominant floristic component, soil type or location. Cheatham and Haller (1975) recognize Californian mixed, south coastal, semi-desert, and serpentine chaparrals. Thorne (1976) identifies mixed chaparral but separates serpentine and desert transition chaparral as distinct types. Paysen et al. (1980) subdivide this type into 7 series (ceanothus, mountain mahogany, scrub oak, prunus, sumac, manzanita, and toyon) based on the dominant or codominant shrub components. Hanes (1977) gives a good review and description of 6 Mixed Chaparral types (ceanothus, scrub oak, manzanita, serpentine, desert, and woodland) .

Habitat Stages

Vegetation Changes-- 1;24.S-D. Post-fire recovery of Mixed Chaparral begins with a cover of subshrubs, annuals, and perennial herbs. However, shrubs that will be dominant in mature chaparral are present as seedlings and root-crown sprouts. As shrub cover and height increase with age, herbaceous cover declines. Long-lived seeds remaining in the soil produce the herbaceous cover following the next fire (Sweeney 1956). Shrub species composition also may change as the stand ages. Yerba-santa, common deerweed, and many ceanothus are examples of relatively short-lived (< 40 years) shrubs and subshrubs that disappear from stands that have not been burned for decades (Horton and Kraebel 1955, Hanes 1971, 1977). Long-lived shrubs in very old stands become senescent, accumulating standing dead material, and some individual may die.

Some authors (e.g., Thorne 1976) have suggested that Mixed Chaparral might succeed to an oak woodland if protected from fire for extremely long periods. Others (e.g., Minnich 1976) have failed to find evidence to support this notion. Hanes (1977) suggests that confusion may result from inadequate distinction among vegetation types with different species compositions, soil qualities, slopes, aspects, and precipitation regimes.

Duration of Stages-- Menke and Villaseñor (1977) and Zedler (1977) give good descriptions of the chaparral post-fire recovery schedule. For the first 1 to 3 years, cover is dominated by short-lived herbs and subshrubs; shrubs are present as seedlings and root-crown sprouts. From 3 to 15 years, herbaceous species disappear as shrubs and subshrubs enlarge, but shrub canopies generally do not touch. From approximately 10 to 30+ years after a burn, shrub cover increases, canopies begin to overlap, relatively short-lived shrubs begin to die, and dead material accumulates. Stands more than 25 to 35 years old eventually can become senescent. The post-fire recovery schedule varies with species composition, slope, aspect, elevation, and soil type. Shrub regeneration is quicker on more mesic sites. In southern California, stands dominated by manzanita, ceanothus, and scrub oak reach 50 to 60 percent cover in 10 years and 80+ percent cover in 25 to 30 years (Horton 1960, Vogl 1976, Pase 1982b). Recovery time usually is shorter in northern California. Stands of Chamise-Redshank Chaparral (CRC) can become extremely senescent in 60 to 90 years; some Mixed Chaparral types may take 2 to 3 times longer (Hanes 1982).

Biological Setting

Habitat-- Mixed and Chamise-Redshank Chaparral (CRC) occur as a mosaic on low to middle elevation slopes below several woodland and forest types. Compared to Chamise-Redshank Chaparral, Mixed Chaparral generally occupies more mesic sites at higher elevations or on north-facing slopes. In southern California, Coastal Scrub (CSC) may form the lower chaparral boundary (Hanes 1977). In northern California, Mixed Chaparral merges with Annual Grassland (AGS) and Blue Oak-Foothill Pine (BOP) at lower elevations. Chaparral shrubs form the understory of many Blue Oak-Foothill Pine stands. At upper elevations, Mixed Chaparral grades into Coastal Oak Woodland (COW), Ponderosa Pine (PPN) or mixed conifer types and frequently forms the understory of these habitats. On desert exposures, Desert Scrub (DSC), Desert Succulent Scrub (DSS) or Joshua Tree (JST) may be found below Mixed Chaparral. Jeffrey Pine (JPN), Pinyon-Juniper (PJN) or Juniper (JUN) habitats occur above Mixed Chaparral.

Wildlife Considerations-- No wildlife species are restricted to Mixed Chaparral. Most species are found in other shrub-dominated types including Chamise-Redshank Chaparral (CRC), Montane Chaparral (MCP), Coastal Scrub (CSC), and Sagebrush (SGB), or the shrubs beneath several woodland and forest types. Wildlife management considerations usually focus on selecting alternative fire management treatments. Potential impacts of management actions in Mixed Chaparral generally are similar to Chamise-Redshank Chaparral.

Physical Setting

Mixed Chaparral occurs on all aspects, but at lower elevations, it generally is found on north-facing slopes. This pattern is especially true in southern California. Generally, it occurs on steep slopes and ridges with relatively thin, well-drained soils (Oruduff 1974, Cheatham and Haller 1975). Soils can be rocky, sandy, gravelly or heavy (Cheatham and Haller 1975, Thorne 1976). Mixed Chaparral occurs on sites with deeper and more mesic soils than Chamise-Redshank Chaparral (Cheatham and Haller 1975). Serpentine soils are high in several potentially toxic substances, such as iron and magnesium, and low in required nutrients, including calcium (Whittaker 1975). The mediterranean climate is characterized by cool, wet winters and hot, dry summers. Total rainfall is 38 to 63 cm (15 to 25 in) with less than 20 percent falling during the summer (Oruduff 1974).

Distribution

Mixed Chaparral generally occurs below 1520 m (5000 ft) on mountain ranges throughout California except in the deserts (Cheatham and Haller 1975, Parker and Matyas 1981). Upper and lower elevational limits vary considerably with precipitation regime, aspect, and soil type. Mixed Chaparral occurs throughout the transverse, peninsular, and central coast ranges and the Tehachapi Mountains. In the Sierra Nevada, this type is a broken band along middle and lower elevations of the western slope. It also

occupies large areas in the north coast ranges, especially on interior slopes, and is found as large discontinuous patches in the Siskiyou Mountains and Cascade and Klamath Ranges (Cheatham and Haller 1975, Hanes 1977).

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