Habitat…..It's Where We All Live

My Webster's dictionary defines habitat as: "1: the place or environment where a plant or animal naturally or normally lives and grows, or 2. the place where something is commonly found". I think that is fine, but I think a more practical definition is a place that provides all of the elements needed for a given species to live and reproduce. For animals, we tend to think of a habitat as something that provides both food and water obviously, but also possibly, nesting areas, cover from predators, shelter from the weather, and space to move about.

Most ranchers may never use the term habitat, but they know very well all of the needs of their livestock and work to provide them with a good habitat. Knowledgeable landowners who seek to raise deer, either for hunting or just for enjoyment, soon learn that the most important thing they can do is to provide a good habitat. Likewise, folks who like to have birds around their house are most successful if they concentrate on providing a good habitat for the birds.

Of course different species require different kinds of habitat. The ideal habitat for a deer (1/2 to 1 square mile, lots of woody plant leaves and weeds and wildflowers within a short distance from cover) is very different than habitat for a jackrabbit (large areas of short to medium tall grasses without too much brush so he has space to outrun his predators) or a little 3" skink (leaf litter), or a black-capped vireo (brush 3 to 6' tall without too many tall trees).

So if every species wants something different, what would be considered the ideal habitat in the Hill Country? The answer is simple, diversity.

The most important characteristic for a healthy, functional ecosystem is diversity. Diversity in plant species, diversity in animal species, diversity in type of plants (trees, shrubs, vines, forbs (weeds and wildflowers) and grasses), diversity in age of woody plants…you get the picture. The more diverse the habitat, the greater the number of plant species, the greater the number of insect species, the greater the number of animal species.

When people think about diversity they usually think of places like the Amazon rain forest, where the greatest number of species are found. But most people are surprised to learn just how diverse some areas of the Hill Country can be, areas where the grazing and browsing pressure from livestock and white-tailed deer are well controlled can have literally hundreds of species of plants on a single acre, especially if the acre also covers a riparian area near water. The key to diversity in the Hill Country is control of the numbers of the large grazers and browsers; where those animal numbers are low, diversity is high.

One interesting characteristic of diverse habitats is that they are less likely to be devastated by a dry spell or a cold snap and are thus better able to sustain the animals that depend on them.

So what would be the ideal Hill Country habitat? Different folks will come up with different descriptions, and they may all be right.

Here is mine: An ideal Hill Country habitat would have a mixture of native trees, grasses and forbs containing some tall mature hardwoods such as oaks, cherries, cedar elms, and hackberries plus some young saplings as well. In addition it would have a collection of shrubs including cedar and many hardwood berry-producing species. These woodland areas would be interspersed with native grasses in open areas, and forbs would be dispersed throughout both the woodland and the grassland areas. The result would be native vegetation of all types from the shortest to the tallest, dense vegetation and open spaces as well.

Why do I consider this the ideal habitat? Because it contains the most diverse vegetation I can think of. It also happens to be a good description of what we think the Hill Country looked like 150-200 years ago, and it is a pretty good description of many areas, both large and small, that we can find in the Hill Country today which have been well managed for some time. Until next time……

Correction: In last week's column, a sentence appeared indicating a 1" rain should be considered an insignificant shower. This was an error. The statement should have been, "…don't let a little ONE TENTH (0.1) of an inch rain fool you into thinking that light shower did anything for the plants."

Jim Stanley is a member of Riverside Nature Center and the Native Plant Society of Texas, a Texas Master Naturalist and author of "Hill Country Landowner's Guide". He can be reached at jstmn@ktc.com