

Some Books Recommended for Those Interested in Nature and Texas Natural History

If you are at all interested in the natural world around you, in what Texas used to look like, the changes that have occurred, and the importance of every plant, every animal, and the interactions among them, here are some books you might want to read.

If someone were to ask me what single book I would recommend to help them understand the basics of how a naturalist or a conservationist views the world, I would first protest that no one book can do that. But if pressed for just one, it would have to be Aldo Leopold's "A Sand County Almanac", published in 1949, a year after his death. Leopold has to be considered at least on a par with Thoreau and John Muir and is usually credited as being the father of modern land and wildlife management thinking. Leopold begins the foreword to this book by saying, "There are those who can live without wild things, and some who cannot. These essays are the delights and dilemmas of one who cannot".

A very similar kind of book, "Adventures with a Texas Naturalist" by Roy Bedichek is more directly focused on Texas. Although Bedichek's book was published two years before Leopold's, Bedichek never achieved quite the status of Leopold, probably partly because of his more regional scope and partly because he didn't have the academic and government agency credentials of Leopold. But his observations are just as keen and his prose decidedly more "Texan", possibly due in part to the influence of his friend, J. Frank Dobie.

I rarely ever read fiction—there is too much of the real world I am interested in—but this novel is an exception. Elmer Kelton's "The Time It Never Rained" is a truly exceptional historic novel. Based on the author's experience as a youth during the drought of the 50's in west Texas, there is a lot we can learn from it, and you may find it hard to put down.

"Roemer's Texas", translated by Oswald Mueller, is the account of a German scientist who traveled throughout the Hill Country and adjacent areas in the mid-1800s. He describes the landscape, the people, travel, prairie fires and trouble with Indians, all in detail.

Walter Prescott Webb, also a friend of Bedichek and Dobie, in "The Great Plains" draws on anthropology, geography, demographics and climate to describe why life on the plains was/is very different from life in the eastern US, and how the inventions of the six-shooter revolver, barbed wire and the windmill shaped life on the plains.

“Yesterday in the Texas Hill Country”, by Gilbert Jordon is a description of life in the early to mid-20th century in a German settlement in Mason Co.

John Graves, acclaimed author of “Goodbye to a River”, also wrote “Hardscrabble. Observations on a Patch of Land” in which he describes his life and the land in the early 20th century in Central Texas.

C. Allen Jones, in “Texas Roots. Agriculture and Rural Life before the Civil War” starts way back in the 1500s to describe life in the first Spanish missions and proceeds to describe in great detail life and agriculture up to the Civil War.

David Schmidly, a past president of Texas Tech and certainly one of the foremost mammalogists in the state, wrote “Texas Natural History. A Century of Change”. The first half of the book is a reprint of Vernon Bailey’s account of his Biological Survey of Texas from 1880 to 1904, and the second half is Schmidly’s discussion of the various mammals and changes that have occurred in Texas fauna in the 20th century.

I might also add one other book for Hill Country Landowners, my book, “Hill Country Landowners Guide”, which is a discussion of what the Hill Country used to be like, changes caused by human settlement, problems caused by past and present occupants, and ways to solve these problems.

What stands out to me after reading these folks from the mid-20th century and earlier? They were a lot smarter than we give them credit for and we haven’t listened to them very well.

For anyone interested in a longer list of books, especially those interested in identification of trees, grasses, wildflowers, animals, birds, insects, and other topics, there is a list on my website, www.hillcountrynaturalist.org. Go to the HC Ecology page to find the book list.

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the book “Hill Country Landowner’s Guide”. He can be reached at jstmn@ktc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.