

Our Oak Population is Declining

I took a short walk on May 18, a few days after the first good rain most of us have had in about 6 months. For those of us that received only about an inch and a half, we certainly wished for more (and got it the next week), and now at least the grass and trees and flowers got a little much-needed moisture to hold them through the first weeks of summer. For those of you who got four or five inches, much of it probably ran off and is now in either Canyon Lake or the Gulf.

One of the first things I noticed on my walk was a large dead limb that had broken off of a blackjack oak. On closer inspection, I discovered some other dead limbs on the tree along with about half of the limbs looking fine. But the dead limbs showed signs of hypoxylon, a fungal disease that is commonly found on stressed trees and the past three years have certainly stressed the trees.

On reflection, we have lost an inordinate number of blackjacks since buying the property in the 1990s. Most of these oaks were probably at least 50 years old and many were probably significantly older than that. This represents a large percentage of these great oaks dying in the last 15 years. In the same time frame, we have lost an even greater percentage of a much smaller number of Spanish oaks, (some to hypoxylon and some to wind), a few post oaks, but no live oaks.

Death is part of nature, so it is not surprising that trees die, but in the normal order of things, young sprouts and saplings will grow up to replace the older trees and the habitat remains unchanged. The problem is that there are no young sprouts or saplings of any of these trees. None anywhere except in areas protected from the deer. Deer love most all tree leaves, but especially blackjacks and Spanish oaks. And the increasing deer population in many areas in the past few decades has meant that no future oak trees are allowed to grow to maturity.

The above, coupled with the loss of live oaks from oak wilt, means two things. First, we are moving into a time when the hardwood tree population of the Hill Country is declining, meaning we will have fewer trees per acre in areas of high deer populations. Secondly, the scenic views in the Hill Country will reveal more dead trees and dead limbs than in the past.

Basically, what is happening is that as man has eliminated most all predators of white-tailed deer, the excessive deer numbers are altering the native habitat in a way that reduces new hardwood tree growth. But because juniper (cedar) is not something that deer like to eat very much, the deer are not preventing new juniper trees from becoming established, so that although the hardwood trees will be declining, the junipers will not.

There is no doubt that drought is part of the cause of the death of many trees, but it is also true that many of these trees survived the drought of the 1950s and everything since then.

This is the fourth anniversary of this column. I hope some of you have enjoyed these columns half as much as I have enjoyed writing them. I have also learned a lot doing the research for many of these columns, which is also fun. I want to thank you readers for your interest and encouragement.

I want to take this opportunity to let you know that I have recently published my second book, "A Beginner's Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners: How to Live in the Country Without Spoiling It"

The book is based on the premise, that many people who buy property and move to the country are inexperienced with living on rural property and how it is different from living the suburbs. And furthermore, how these rural landowners manage the land is important to the future conservation of nature and native habitat, and thus important to all of us, city and country dwellers alike. My hope is that this book will help rural landowners make good decisions in managing their property and thus conserve our native Texas.

The book is available in paperback and in the Kindle edition at Amazon.com and in paperback at barnsandnoble.com.

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the books "Hill Country Landowner's Guide" and "A Beginner's Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners: How to Live in the Country Without Spoiling It". He can be reached at jstmn@kvc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.