

## Sitting Around the Nature Trail in Mid-July

I took my milk crate and my notebook and went out to sit in various places along my nature trail to see what I could see. It was mid-July and things were beginning to show the lack of rain.

I did notice, however, on my first stop that the grass still had enough green in it, especially the grass under the live oaks, to give the area a nice green hue when viewed from a distance. At this same stop, I noticed what looked like dead leaves on a post oak. When I walked over I was able to confirm that this lower limb was indeed dead, having died this year as the dead leaves were clearly this year's growth.

I then noticed that the bark had fallen off of this limb in the characteristic fashion of hypoxylon. Hypoxylon is a fungal disease that can infect just about any tree, but seems to be most common in blackjack, post and Spanish oaks. Unlike oak wilt, this disease does not travel from one tree to another via the roots. It sometimes takes several years for hypoxylon to move from one limb to another and to kill the whole tree. But then again, sometimes the whole tree dies in a matter of months; other times it may survive for a long time.

At the next stop I noticed a good example of the "nursery effect" of a dead limb on the ground. A sizeable limb had fallen sometime ago, and the grass growing up in amongst the dead branches was much taller with many more seed heads than the grass growing everywhere else. Downed branches and limbs protect newly sprouted woody plants as well as grass and forbs from being grazed or browsed. This protection allows for the production of more seeds and the establishment of forbs and woody plants, thus improving the condition of the range and the diversity of the habitat.

I also noted something I already knew, but hadn't thought about for some time. Because of the browseline (caused by deer) most vegetation from about 5 feet down was missing so one can see much farther under the trees when sitting down.

When sitting at my next stop, I suddenly noticed a very large, black feral cat moving with some purpose somewhat towards me. It appeared to be careful where it put each paw as it was walking through the grass. When it got to within about 25 feet, it suddenly turned its head and looked at me for maybe one second before it bolted off. In less than a minute, I saw it again about 250 yards away, still moving with a purpose.

Feral cats are a real problem for our native fauna, killing very many birds and small animals. The problem, other than they are not native, is that their population is very much higher than would naturally be the case for any apex predator, and therefore their effect on the ecosystem is proportionately greater. Their population is so high because

humans keep adding to the population by releasing unwanted animals and also by providing them with food and even shelter in some cases.

Moving on to my next stop I came upon a relatively fresh “cow pie”. And low and behold, it was being worked on by several dung beetles. For some years, I never saw a single dung beetle around here, apparently because the cattle were being given anti-worm medication that killed the dung beetles. Dung beetles provide a service of not only helping to disperse the manure, but by burying the balls of manure with their eggs inside, they help to aerate and fertilize the soil.

Wildlife seen this trip: cardinal, white-wing dove, sparrow, white-tailed deer, swallow, golden-fronted woodpecker, pipevine swallowtail butterfly and a queen butterfly.

A friend of mine used to talk about his visits to the woods behind his house to sit on a log and smoke a cigar and how relaxing it was. It took me a while to realize that it really wasn't the cigar he was going to the woods for, it was the woods themselves, and the relaxation that he experienced. I thought of my friend when I was out in the pasture. Try it, you will find it relaxing too.

Until next time...

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