

The View From the Back Porch on a Beautiful October Morning

I took my coffee cup out on the back porch this morning to think of a topic for a new column. Then I quickly realized that everything in front of me was indeed what I wanted to write about. The scene from my back porch was truly spectacular. Nature, resplendent with color and critters.

It was a bright sunny morning in mid-October after having an uncharacteristically high amount of rain over the past six weeks.

The things that dominated the scene before me were all of the blooming wildflowers. The huge drift of tall goldenrod in the east bed covered the area with bright yellow eight inch tall flower heads. The tall Maximilian sunflowers under the post oak plus the scattered common sunflowers were eye-catching. The purple gay-feather sprinkled around the goldenrod added to the color.

In the south bed the Turks cap and the fall obedient plants were responding to the recent rains with profuse blooms, and the passion flower was adding its intricate blooms as well.

But the blue Gregg's mistflowers growing in four colonies around the yard were what garnered the most attention, not just because of the beautiful powder blue filamentous blooms, but also because of the incredible collection of active butterflies flitting from one bloom to another. The queen butterflies had been here all summer nectaring on the mistflower, but because of the scarce rain, the blooms were not nearly as many or as large as they are now.

What really caught my attention this morning were the many monarchs also nectaring on the mistflowers. As everyone who follows these things knows, the monarchs have been severely declining in recent years, due mainly to loss of habitat and milkweeds on which to lay their eggs throughout much of their migration range. In fact, last year at this time, which is the peak time for monarchs to be migrating through our area on the way to their wintering grounds in Mexico, I saw very few monarchs at all. So it is very heartening to see them arriving in mass this year and it makes me glad we planted and have nurtured these mistflowers all these years so these beautiful threatened creatures could tank up before the long flight to Mexico.

Thinking about migrations, the hummingbird population at our feeders seems to be very much weather related. Their numbers are down now from earlier in the summer and early fall, but right after a norther blows through, we get a surge in the population as lots of the little critters take advantage of the tail winds to get them here from more northern areas.

Off in the distance outside our fence I could see squirrels, turkeys and deer all hurrying to find as many acorns as possible before they are all gone.

The September rains were also very helpful for the grasses. Fall is the normal time for many warm-season grasses to put up their last growth of foliage and to put up seed heads to ensure that there will be grasses in the future. This year the rains encouraged our yellow indiagrass to put up numerous seed heads with their showy yellow blooms. The switchgrass plants extended the number and size of their seed heads on 5 to 6 foot stalks. The little bluestem plants grew even more leaves and increased the number of red and green stems which will make for beautiful reddish-brown collections of stems through the winter. Even our one sickly big bluestem managed to put up one tiny seed head—something we haven't seen in several years. Droughts can be hard even for native plants.

And of course our usual collection of songbirds could be seen doing their normal things all around the yard this morning. Included are the cardinals, titmice, chickadees, wrens, finches and woodpeckers, all of which entertain not only by their actions but by their songs as well.

So sitting on the porch with a hot cup of coffee and relaxing in the warmth of a morning sun, I can't imagine any place I would rather be or any place that would be as alive with native critters going about their business. It really is a privilege to be able to be an observer on this little patch of nature.

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@kctc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.