

Good Books About Nature and Texas for Winter Reading

Short cold days and long winter nights seem like a good time to read some good books. Here are a few from my collection that I recommend you consider this winter.

If you haven't read Aldo Leopold's, "A Sand County Almanac" that would be the first book I would recommend—everyone interested in nature should have it. Other books about Leopold include, "The Essential Aldo Leopold: Quotations and Commentaries", by Meine and Knight; "The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays by Aldo Leopold" by Flader and Callicott; and "Round River. From the Journals of Aldo Leopold" by Luna Leopold (Aldo's son).

Roy Bedichek's "Adventures with a Texas Naturalist" was written while the author was taking a sabbatical in a shack in the northeastern part of the Hill Country in 1947. Bedichek's book can be considered the Texas version of "A Sand County Almanac". Bedichek was a friend of Texas authors J. Frank Dobie and Walter Prescott Webb.

In a similar vein, the much-acclaimed writer John Graves' "Hard Scrabble: Observations on a Patch of Land" is a series of essays, again based, like Leopold's work, on observations on his place in Somervell Co. SW of Ft. Worth. Actually, any book by John Graves is recommended, but especially, from my point of view, "Goodbye to a River" and "From a Limestone Ledge".

For folks interested in the history of the Great Plains, the Dust Bowl, and the Drought of the 50's, I would recommend "The Great Plains" by Walter Prescott Webb, "The Worst Hard Time" by Timothy Egan, and "The Time it Never Rained" by Elmer Kelton. The latter is actually a novel. I virtually never read fiction as there is too much non-fiction I am interested in, but this book about the drought of the '50s, set not far from where I grew up, is certainly an exception.

For a fascinating description of travels around the Hill Country, especially in the areas of New Braunfels, San Antonio, and Fredericksburg from 1845 to 1847, read "Roemer's Texas" (alternate title, "Texas with particular Reference to German Immigration and the Appearance of the Country") by Ferdinand Roemer, translated from the German by Oswald Mueller.

For more recent accounts of rural Texas life in the early 20th century, there is a book edited by Thad Sitton, "Harder than Hardscrabble: Oral Recollections of Farming Life from the Edge of the Texas Hill Country". This is based on descriptions of life in the early 20th century by people who were displaced from their homes in order to build Fort Hood in 1942.

The book which was my inspiration for setting out a nature trail to visit every few weeks and write about what I saw is “The Forest Unseen. A Year’s Watch in Nature”, by David Haskell. A recent book about the problems with non-native plants and the importance of conserving native habitats is “Bringing Nature Home: How You Can Sustain Wildlife with Native Plants”, by Douglas Tallamy.

My friend David Langford, a nature photographer and sixth generation Hill Country landowner, tells the story of his family’s land management outside of Comfort with both words and gorgeous photographs in his book “Hillingdon Ranch”.

“Enchanted Rock: A Natural and Human History” by Lance Allred is a book filled with over a thousand pictures of wildflowers, animals, birds and insects Allred photographed in Enchanted Rock State Park, as well as geological descriptions and human history discussions.

Published just a few months ago is a great book by Ricky Linex, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, entitled “Range Plants of North Central Texas. A Land User’s Guide to their Identification, Value and Management”. This large spiral-bound book contains descriptions for the layman of over 300 forbs, grasses and trees as well as multiple color photographs of each plant. Don’t be put off by the title, as probably 90 percent of the species discussed are also found in the Hill Country. (All of the other books listed here can generally be found online, but for this one contact Linex at Ricky.Linex@tx.usda.gov.)

Finally, but I hope not the last on your list, are my books, “Hill Country Landowners Guide”, and “A Beginner’s Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners: How to Live in the Country Without Spoiling It”. Also, on the Ecology page of my website, www.hillcountrynaturalist.org, is a list of 80 books covering different categories with descriptions.

Merry Christmas and Happy Reading.

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