

Winter Along the Nature Trail

I had not been on the Nature Trail in a while and it was the middle of January, approaching the middle of winter. It is not a time when one expects to see a lot of activity, and in terms of wildlife, and other than a flock of turkeys and a couple of squirrels, I didn't see too much.

I did watch a buck slowly searching for acorns and forbs among the grass, and as he stepped over a log it reminded me of something I have often wondered about four-legged critters—how do they know where their back feet are? The buck smoothly stepped over the log with his front legs and then just as smoothly with his back legs as well.

Can he see where his back feet are? I doubt it, but he certainly didn't turn his head to look. And I know that predators (think cats and dogs) can't see their hind feet when they are walking straight ahead, but their brains clearly "know" how to step over things with their back feet. What really amazes me is to see a deer running through the pasture with downed tree limbs and rocks strewn everywhere and they seem to almost never stumble even in area where I would have to be careful not to stumble while only walking.

I discovered a lot of feral hog activity this visit in areas where I had not seen any activity before. Most of the activity seemed to be under trees, which I guess is where the soil is the most moist and loose. But since the activity was also under cedars, not just oaks, they must have been after something other than acorns—probably grubs and roots. Feral hogs have the potential to cause a lot of habitat destruction as well as predation on ground-nesting wildlife. They are working on solutions at the Kerr Wildlife Management Area—let's hope they find one.

At one stop where I set my box down, I examined the grasses around me. The Texas wintergrass stood out because it is green and growing, and I could see that grazers had already found the grass around me. The yellow stems of the KR bluestem are beginning to fall over and decay. I could also identify small tufts of Hall panicum and curly mesquite. I found a single triangular seed of Texas grama.

I noticed several newly broken limbs of some of the blackjack oaks that died as a result of the drought in 2011 and 2012. These trees seem to be falling apart faster than I expected, and I found it puzzling because a little further along the trail I came to a live oak that has been dead for over 10 years and even though it had lost a lot of its bark, it still had most of its big limbs.

Some may consider all of these dead limbs to be unsightly, but Mother Nature doesn't think of it that way. The dead and decaying trees and limbs make for habitat for insects

and the birds and critters that feed on them, as well as “nurse areas” to protect grass and forbs from being eaten. This allows the grass and forbs to set seed and for the seed to be distributed around the area, thus improving the seed bank, the vegetative cover and the native habitat.

Ten or fifteen years ago I noticed a small live oak about a foot or so tall in an area too far from the nearest live oak to have been a root sprout, so it obviously came from an acorn. The reason I noticed it was that it is very unusual to find small shoots of any hardwood trees in this overgrazed, overbrowsed pasture. So I put a wire cage around it to protect it, and it has been growing slowly inside that cage ever since—it is now over three feet tall.

A few months ago I noticed the cage was gone. I assumed that a buck caught his antlers in the wire and ran off with it, but the live oak seemed to be OK. I kept intending to replace the cage, but didn't. Well, on this last visit I noticed it had been browsed and a buck had been rubbing on it as well. So, better late than never, I hope, it now has a new cage.

Until next time...

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