

## A Visit with Rufus Stephens of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) has three divisions that most impact folks in the Hill Country; Parks, Law Enforcement (Game Wardens) and Wildlife. Rufus Stephens is the Wildlife Division's District Leader for the Edwards Plateau. Wildlife biologists of different specialties in this district work in 25 counties.

Stephens holds a BS degree in wildlife ecology and has worked for the Noble Foundation in Oklahoma. He also did deer research in Missouri and was a wildlife biologist in Kansas before becoming an urban wildlife biologist with TPWD in San Antonio in 1994. I first met Rufus when he spoke to our first Hill Country Master Naturalist chapter in 2002 and I have considered him to be one of my go-to experts with questions about deer and native habitat ever since.

Stephens defines his job as being mainly in support of the many biologists in the Edwards Plateau district in their efforts to help manage wildlife species, aid private landowners to better manage their land, manage the state's natural resources and conduct wildlife research. The main constituents and beneficiaries of this work are private landowners, hunters and fishermen.

Rufus describes the best part of his job as being able to get out into the field with landowners and wildlife. He adds that education of landowners and the general public, both one on one and in groups, is a major part of his job.

One of the things that makes his job harder is the fact that many new small landowners are unaware of the information about land, wildlife and native habitat management that TPWD provides, at no cost to them, and therefore they do not avail themselves of this service. The result is that many new landowners may do things on their land that is unnecessary or even detrimental to the native wildlife.

The biggest problem, from a biological or ecological standpoint, in the Hill Country or the Edwards Plateau, is the overabundant deer population. Stephens points out that many people hear that statement and assume that for some reason TPWD doesn't like deer or doesn't want many deer. In fact, it is not the number of deer per se that is the problem, but rather the effect they have on the habitat. The goal of their efforts is to try to maintain a healthy deer population and quality habitat for the benefit of both hunters and landowners.

Too many deer consume too much native vegetation. When the deer population is such that they eat about every green leaf below the browseline (from the ground up to as high as a deer can reach--about 4.5 to 5 feet) they destroy a segment of native habitat used by many other species of animals as food, cover and nesting sites. Furthermore, since just about every hardwood tree in the Hill Country is browsed by deer, we no longer have the replacement hardwoods coming up to replace the older trees when they die. The number of trees in the Hill Country is declining, and it is because of excessive deer numbers. Ironically, the deer are destroying their own habitat.

Here are three additional important things that Stephens has done and continues to do to help the public and landowners in particular.

Rufus was instrumental in getting the Texas Master Naturalist program organized in 1997, and now there are over 9000 Master Naturalists in 44 chapters in the state! Thus his work contributed greatly to all of the education, outreach and service provided by all those Naturalists. He has continued to be a great resource for our Hill Country Chapter as well as other chapters in the area.

Stephens gives presentations to numerous groups on the do's and don'ts of creating native landscapes as well as explaining the abundant deer situation, especially in urban settings.

And finally, Rufus conducts annual training sessions to help landowners who wish to switch from traditional Agricultural Tax Valuation to Wildlife Tax Valuation. This program helps landowners improve their native habitat and avoid overgrazing their property. This year's sessions will be held at Riverside Nature Center on three upcoming Saturdays: Jan, 30, Feb. 6 and Feb. 13. For more information and to make reservations, call Riverside at 830-257-4837.

I would like to point out that the knowledge and advice given by Stephens, and most all government scientists, is unaffected by any personal commercial interest.

Stephens may be contacted at his office on 309 Sidney Baker South at 830-896-2500.

Until next time...

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