

## The Texas Hill Country. How We Got Here

How did the Hill Country get to look like it does?

Most of Central Texas was under shallow seas during the Cretaceous geologic period (100 +/-35 million years ago) during which time limestone from the shells of various organisms was deposited on the ocean floor as the sea level advanced and retreated. As sea levels finally receded for good and the land began to be uplifted, the limestone became the bedrock of most of the Hill Country.

Slowly, as rivers and streams began to flow over the relatively flat landscape and erode the soft limestone, valleys were formed and as the valleys became deeper and wider the appearance of the Hill Country began to look more like a collection of hills rather than valleys.

Moving forward to much more modern times, say the last 200 or so years, the Hill Country would have looked somewhat similar to what it does today. To greatly oversimplify and generalize what the early European explorers and settlers wrote about the Hill Country, it would be that, compared to what we see now, there would have been somewhat fewer trees, more open grasslands and savannas, particularly on the flatter, higher elevations. There would have been, generally, more of the taller grass species than we see today and less cedar. There would also have been more numerous springs, seeps and small creeks than we see today.

As the Hill Country began to be populated by European settlers, their footprint on the land began to be apparent. The settlers brought with them cattle, sheep, goats, pigs and chickens, all of which were vital to their survival, and they kept these animals close to their houses to protect them from predators, the latter of which they shot at every opportunity to protect their livestock. This resulted in the land being grazed by livestock continuously year round instead of only occasionally by migrating herds.

Thus virtually all of the Hill Country, along with most of the rest of the state has been overgrazed in the past.

Now, most Hill Country properties probably have more mature hardwoods growing on them than was true 150 or so years ago. However, now, because of the increased number of deer, many Hill Country properties are pretty much devoid of young hardwood saplings to replace the mature trees—they are eaten before they can become mature. So the number of hardwood trees in the Hill Country has probably begun to decline.

Less grass cover caused by continual overgrazing, fewer wildfires and no natural limits on its growth has allowed cedar to become invasive on many properties.

So to summarize the main changes to the Hill Country landscape since the beginning of European settlement, one would say that most properties today have somewhat more trees, fewer open grasslands, less grass, less soil, possibly fewer springs and seeps, and maybe more cedar than would have been there 200 years ago.

In spite of the above changes, the Hill Country is probably less-altered by modern man than any other part of the state. Because of the steep terrain and rocky soil, the vast majority of the Hill Country landscape is unsuitable for plowing and farming. So for most properties, the only sustained use of the land has been for ranching on native grass ranges—the native habitat may have been altered by too many grazers and browsers, but it is still native habitat.

So the Hill Country is, without question, closer to its “native state” than most parts of the state. From a naturalist standpoint, the Hill Country is an ideal place. Sitting in the middle of the state and having most of the area largely unaltered, the Hill Country has vegetation from all the adjoining ecosystems. This gives us more different species, both plant and animal, than most of the other areas. We also sit in the middle of major bird migration routes as well as the monarch butterfly migration route. So it is a great place for those of us who love nature.

But the Hill Country faces several serious challenges. Here is a partial list: water supply, distribution and use, loss of rangeland to “development”, land fragmentation as larger ranches are broken up into smaller “ranchettes”, and increasing numbers of residents. As more and more residents demand more and more services, it degrades the “small town/rural” lifestyle which attracted many of us to the Hill Country in the first place. These are challenging problems that need to be addressed, but probably can’t be eliminated.

The Texas Hill Country. Let’s hope we don’t love it to death!

Until next time...

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