

A Spring Walk Around the House

This year marks the 16th year we have lived in the Hill Country and enjoyed all the new spring vegetation. In terms of the variety of species and the total biomass that has grown up in the past 2-3 months, this year has to be one of the best we have seen.

Of course rain has a lot to do with it. At our house we have received over 9 inches in the first four months of the year, and if we go back to the last two months of 2015 we can add another 7 inches. This is certainly not a record, but the rains have been timely.

The cool-season grasses have been particularly abundant and healthy this year and include Texas wintergrass, little barley, rescuegrass, cheatgrass, Scribner's dichanthelium, and switchgrass. Silver bluestem and eastern gammagrass were seen to be in flower already on May 5.

I took a notebook with me on a casual walk around the house to record the things that were blooming. It is a pretty long list. Here in the order in which I first found things that were blooming, are: Texas vervain, pink evening primrose, Engelmann daisy, rock rose, anacacho orchid, Indian blanket, bluebonnet, blue-eyed grass, Texas star, Autumn sage (several varieties), winecup, blackfoot daisy, penstemon cobaea, (plus two other penstemons), fall aster, mealy blue sage, Texas prickly pear, Texas dandelion, coral honeysuckle, Texas lantana, Gregg's mist flower, passionflower, scarlet leatherflower, columbine, Mexican hat, goldenball leadtree, yarrow, prairie phlox, and Texas greeneyes.

And that list is only things I saw while casually walking around—I wasn't searching for every bloom I could find.

Of course there were other species that bloomed earlier and did not show any color on my early May walk, including several woody species like the elbow bush, redbuds, plums, rusty blackhaw viburnum, damianita, and rosemary.

Again, without specifically looking for butterflies, I saw several sulphurs, a red admiral, a few queens and one pipevine swallowtail. At the same time, I also either saw or heard the following birds: wrens, titmice, chickadees, cardinals, pine siskins, lesser goldfinches, hummingbirds, barn swallows, a pair of scarlet tanagers, and a ladder-back woodpecker. We also have a pair of barn swallows building a nest on the back porch. Just to complete the wildlife list, I also saw several squirrels and a skink and I heard a leopard frog in the "creek".

Everything on the above lists were in an approximate 1-acre area that is high fenced to keep out the deer and livestock. Very few of the species on the above lists could be seen outside the fence. It is also true that if we had just fenced a 1-acre area and had not done anything else in that area, (if we had not planted anything or provided bird feeders and water) the lists would have been somewhat shorter. In addition to our planting a large number of the native plants listed above, we also provide wildlife with food and water, and have installed a number of nest boxes.

A significant number of plant species that have come up inside the fence are volunteer plants started from seeds that birds or other animals brought into the yard. Things we did not plant.

The point I want to make is that even with our thin soil and overgrazed, overbrowsed condition of the land before we built the fence, it is still possible to have a very diverse habitat if grazer and browser numbers are controlled.

The land fragmentation that results when a large ranch is sold to developers and broken up into many smaller parcels of land is generally detrimental to the quality of the habitat. But our experience with this little acre shows that highly degraded land can be brought back to a healthy condition with time and patience.

If every new small landowner were to work to protect and restore the native habitat that their property used to be many years ago, the effects of land fragmentation could be partially mitigated and the native fauna would continue to have healthy habitat in which to live.

Until next time...

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