

Well-Timed Rains Have Made for a Bumper Crop of Native Vegetation

This year most of us have been blessed with two periods of very well-timed and beneficial rains—April and May, and August and September. The effect this has had on our native vegetation has been quite remarkable.

This year I have seen yellow indiangrass in greater profusion and in more places than I have ever seen it before. It is certainly one of the most desirable of our native grasses, and one of the big-four grasses of the tall grass prairie. And many other of the more-desirable native grasses are in greater abundance and healthier than usual as well.

And it is not just grasses that have responded to this year's rains. Many of our native forbs have appeared in greater numbers and have bloomed more prolifically than usual. In fact, many of our native wildflowers which usually bloom in the spring have even bloomed a second time this fall in response to the rains in August and September.

We almost certainly have had a greater biomass (total weight of green vegetation) per acre than usual this year, and probably have a greater diversity of species as well.

Our woody plants have clearly benefited from the greater amount of soil moisture throughout most of this year and are in good shape going into the winter.

This increased amount of woody vegetation below the browseline has obviously been a benefit for our native white-tailed deer population. But all of this extra vegetation (grasses, forbs and browse) and blooms are not just good for our larger grazers and browsers, but are also a boon to many smaller species.

The increased number of blooms and longer bloom period this year has also given rise to an increase in the number of butterflies and other pollinators, which in turn helps the birds and lizards and frogs that eat the insects. The greater grass cover also provides better nesting cover for ground-nesting birds and small mammals. Also more grass makes for more grass seeds that are essential to a number of bird and small animal species.

And, of course, the greater populations of birds, insects and small animals helps the larger predators and omnivores, such as coons, skunks, possums, foxes, owls and hawks.

All of the above are just examples that illustrate the commonly-quoted principle of biology, that, "In nature, everything is connected to everything else." Which plants grow in a certain area is determined by the soil, the climate and the past history of the area, and what other plants are growing there. Different types of plants and different species respond to current weather conditions differently, so the vegetation is never exactly the same from year to year or even from month to month.

But what plants are growing in a particular area also depends on what animals there are that eat them and/or pollinate them. And in turn, which herbivorous animals live in an area depend on which plants there are eat and in what seasons. Similarly, what carnivorous animals there are depends on which potential prey live there. And the populations of all of these plants and animals depend not only on the weather, but also on the populations of everything else.

One interesting thought is that while we enjoy all of the abundant vegetation we see this year, and the insects, etc. that we see because of the vegetation, we should remember that all of these native plant and animal species are here this year because, in spite of the severity of the drought-of-record in 2011, they all survived.

So while nature is complex and everything is interconnected, it is also resilient. So we should savor the conditions this year and hope for other good years to come, but when the next drought comes, we can take some solace in the fact that we know that our native plants and animals have been through this before and they will survive again.

We just need to try to not do anything that would disrupt or upset any of these natural processes.

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