

There is Good Grass Cover This Year

I took a walk out into the pasture in the early days of January. And no, there isn't a lot of greenery to be seen this time of year. All the deciduous trees and shrubs have lost their leaves, which have by now turned brown, and the grass is mostly straw-colored.

But what caught my attention is that there was a lot of grass, both that which was still standing and that which was laying over. I could identify a number of species, such as dropseed, Texas wintergrass, KR bluestem, Hall panicum, silver bluestem, Texas grama, purple threeawn, curly mesquite, and plains lovegrass, as well as occasional bunches of Canada wildrye, and little bluestem.

This collection of grasses is common in this part of the Hill Country on somewhat overgrazed, but not degraded, rangeland and was what I expected from all my previous walks in that area.

But what was different this year, compared to most years, was the total amount, or biomass, of grass. And even that was not much of a surprise, given the amount and timing of rains that we received in 2016, including good rains in August, the fall, and even in December. I recorded just shy of 40 inches of rain last year.

Once I noted the amount of grass I was walking through and over, I began to pay close attention to exactly what I saw and what I didn't. Some of last years' growth was still standing, some had fallen over, and some had already died and was becoming part of the leaf litter in between the grass bunches. What I didn't see was hardly any bare ground, anywhere.

When people assess the condition of a rangeland, among the things they look for are the species composition of the grasses, the health and density of the grass plants, the total amount of grass, the accumulated leaf litter, and the amount of bare ground. Except for the species composition being less than ideal, all of the other characteristics I observed indicate a pretty healthy rangeland: the plants look healthy and the density of the grass bunches appeared to be good, the amount of litter was good and the amount of bare ground was very minimal. In addition, the major cool-season grass, Texas wintergrass, was beginning to green up in significant amounts.

All of the above characteristics are important to the healthy functioning of a grassland. Namely, one likes to see good stands of beneficial grasses and minimal amounts of poor quality grasses, vigorous growth on most of the grasses, a significant amount of leaf litter, both current-years and previous-years growth, and minimal amounts of bare ground.

The above properties determine how a grassland functions. Healthy, vigorous grass plants indicate a healthy fertile soil structure which easily allows water to infiltrate into the soil. Better-quality grass species can support more livestock and other grazers and provide habitat for more wildlife species. Leaf litter protects the soil from having raindrops dislodge soil particles thus starting erosion. The leaf litter also shades the soil

keeping the soil temperature lower and reducing the amount of evaporation from the soil. Leaf litter also slows down water flow thus reducing erosion and increasing more infiltration into the soil. And finally, less bare ground reduces the potential amount of erosion.

So the rains of 2016 certainly left this spot of land in about as good a shape as possible, given the present and past grazing levels. And it is obviously looking very much better than after the drought of 2011. But it is not just the way it looks on the surface that matters. The surface condition is also an indicator of the condition of the soil underneath. Healthy top growth is produced by healthy soil, and vice versa.

The problem, of course, is that some things could happen in the future to significantly degrade the condition of the range. Which really brings us to the basic realities of land management. That is, even the best, healthiest, most productive rangeland can be degraded in a short time if either one of the following situations occur. One is man-made overgrazing, the other is nature-made drought. We are in control of one, but can only prepare to withstand the other, knowing it will come at some time in the future. But then there will also be good times like the present as well.

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.