

## Harbingers of Spring: Greenery in January

It was the last day of January and I made a short walk around the yard noting all of the new green leaves around. Many Hill Country wildflowers start the year as a small cluster of green leaves near the ground, sometimes called a rosette. And while I am certainly not an expert at identifying all of these rosettes, I found a number I could identify.

The only annuals I found in my walk were bluebonnets. They are hard to miss as the characteristic palmately compound leaves (5 leaflets attached to the end of a stem) make them hard to miss. I also found the biennial standing cypress rosettes.

All the rest of the things I found are perennials, so the winter growth on them mostly did not come from germinated seed but from the living roots. What I found were the Engelmann daisy (AKA cutleaf daisy), tall goldenrod, vetch, Mexican hat, yarrow, prairie verbena and golden groundsel. As I said, I am not an expert at identifying forbs from the first seed leaves, and I certainly found a number of things I couldn't identify.

If you are interested in learning to identify seedlings of forbs, the best place I know is to get a copy of the Native American Seed catalog where you will find photos of seedlings for a number of wildflowers. By the way, that catalog ([www.seedsource.com](http://www.seedsource.com)) is way more than a catalog—it is a how-to book to grow grasses and forbs and contains many excellent photos to help you identify them.

The other things I found on my walk were Texas wintergrass, the most common and abundant native cool season perennial grass, and some bromes (possibly a mixture of rescuegrass and Japanese brome, both annuals). Texas wintergrass has somewhat upright blades that feel slightly rough to the touch. The bromes have soft, bright green blades. Texas wintergrass, in a couple of months, will make for a major forage grass for cattle. The young bromes are easily digested which means in the winter deer will graze on them.

I also walked by two interesting shrubs on this last day of January. One was an elbowbush which was about half in full bloom and thus was covered with bees and a few butterflies, including a red admiral, a painted lady, and a clouded sulfur. The other interesting shrub or small tree was a rusty blackhaw viburnum which was already beginning to put out some new leaves and a few buds as well.

Of course we always have all the native evergreen trees and shrubs, including live oak, cedar, Texas mountain laurel, cenizo, evergreen sumac, Mexican silktassel and yaupon that are green all winter.

People often think that “nature” has kind of “gone to sleep” in the winter and there is nothing outside worth looking at. But in addition to all of the greenery I just mentioned, there are all of the native birds, many of which we only see in the winter. And because there are fewer leaves in the winter it is easier to see the birds than in other parts of the

year. I just watched a wren hopping all over our elbow bush, presumably finding small insects drawn to the newly opened blooms.

From a naturalist's standpoint, we are only a few weeks away from the most exciting time of the year, when changes in the habitat take place more dramatically and faster than any other time of the year. It is also true that our state parks are not nearly as crowded as in other times of the year, even on week-ends, so by all means visit a park and enjoy nature on one of our typical warm winter days.

Nature is always interesting and worth visiting.

Until next time...

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