

Books Recommended for Winter Reading and Holiday Gifts

Shorter days, longer nights and cooler temperatures make me think about catching up on my reading. I thought it might be helpful to make a few suggestions of books that are my favorites.

My website has a list of over a hundred books with brief descriptions, but that is a bit many to handle in this column. So here is a somewhat shorter list.

I can't ever recommend a list of books without starting with Aldo Leopold's "A Sand County Almanac." Leopold was arguably the most influential naturalist and nature writer of the first half of the twentieth century and the first person to suggest that mankind has an ethical responsibility to take care of the land. It is an easy, great, inspiring read.

"Texas Master Naturalist," edited by Michelle Haggerty and May Pearl Meuth is the state curriculum for the Texas Master Naturalist program. It is a big, heavy (8.5 x 11 hardbound, 500 pages with color photos) comprehensive book covering 24 topics having to do with nature and native habitat, and man's interaction with them for the whole state. Think of it as an encyclopedia of the natural world of Texas.

Most of us like to think of the Hill Country as a special place and fortunately there are a number of books that focus on our area. The next three books are ones I recommend to every new Hill Country landowner so they can understand the vegetation growing on their property.

"Wildflowers of the Texas Hill Country," by Marshall Enquist is considered the "bible" for wildflowers for many of us and certainly the first source to go to to help identify wildflowers and learn about them. I estimate there are between 500 and 700 wildflowers listed, all with good-quality photos and good descriptions of their characteristics to help identify them as well as their growth habits.

"Trees of the Texas Hill Country," by Jan Wrede is certainly the first book a landowner should own if you are interested in the woody plants on your property. I estimate there are about 125 species of trees, shrubs and vines covered in good detail with good quality photos. The book also contains a discussion of the different habitats in the Hill Country and some discussion of land management and the problems with exotic species.

"Grasses of the Texas Hill Country," by Brian and Shirley Loflin is another "must" for landowners. This book contains descriptions and photos of about 75 of the most common grasses found in the Hill Country. Grasses are identified by most of us laymen by the seed head structure, and the Loflins have not only provided excellent photos of the different grass seed heads, but they also arranged the book by types of seed head structures which makes finding a certain grass much easier.

A very recently published book, "Attracting Birds in the Texas Hill Country: A Guide to Land Stewardship," by Rufus Stephens and Jan Wrede, is a really great addition to

books on the Hill Country. It is a large book of about 500 pages with many great photographs, lots of bird pictures and very well-written descriptions of the Hill Country habitat and how to make your property more attractive for birds.

My first book, "Hill Country Landowners Guide," is an attempt to educate Hill Country landowners about how to become good land stewards, how to best manage their land and create and maintain a healthy native habitat. This book was awarded the Carroll Abbott Memorial Award by the Native Plant Society of Texas.

My most recent book, "Hill Country Ecology: Essays on Plants, Animals, Water and Land Management," was published this past summer. It is a collection of over 200 of my columns in the Kerrville Daily Times over the past 7 years, collected into 8 major sections and 25 subsections by topic, and edited as necessary. This 8 x 10 book contains 288 pages and over 70 photos. It seeks to teach readers ABOUT the Hill Country, including the native habitat, the land, the water, the plants, the animals, the people, and the myriad interactions among them.

All of the above books are available on www.Amazon.com. Most are available at Riverside Nature Center as well as from Native American Seed (www.seedsource.com). My most recent book, "Hill Country Ecology," can also be obtained at a 25% discount from: www.hugohousepublishers.com, using the coupon code TMN25.

Happy Reading!

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the books "Hill Country Ecology," "Hill Country Landowner's Guide" and "A Beginner's Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners." He can be reached at jstmn@kctc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.