

Animals and Their Food Choices

When we want something to eat, our available choices are many. We can pick one of a long list of restaurants and other prepared-food places, or we can go to the grocery store and choose from an unimaginable assortment of things to eat. Furthermore, most of these choices are available to us 365 days a year. And most of us have lived with these conditions for so long that we don't even think about how truly incredible that is.

Our ancestors, and the Native Americans before them, certainly didn't have it this easy. And neither do all of the native animals that live around us today.

We are so accustomed to having such a large choice of things to eat, that we really only eat those things that we really like—our favorite foods. Animals, on the other hand, live in a totally different world. I was reminded of this a while back when I looked at a display at a Hill Country Land-Use Expo prepared by the local Texas Parks and Wildlife biologists. They laid out cuttings of probably 60 or more native plants on three different tables. One table was for plants that deer really like to eat, another for plants they will eat, but are not favorites, and a third for plants that they only eat when very hungry.

I was already well aware of this deer food-preference ranking, but seeing samples laid out like that revealed something very striking. On most properties in the Hill Country, certainly most that have a distinct browseline, one would be hard pressed to find any of the favorite food category plants below the browseline, and maybe not many of the intermediate category of foods either. Deer, in overpopulated areas, almost never get to have any of their favorite foods.

And it gets worse. Most of the favorite deer foods are deciduous plant leaves, so from late November until at least March, none of these foods are available anywhere. And in times of drought, the amount of these foods is greatly reduced even in the spring and summer. So even in areas where the animal population is not really excessive, they still have to go without their favorite foods much of the time.

When humans think of favorite deer foods, we may think a little about the nutritional aspects, but most of us think about taste. It turns out that most of the deer favorite foods are in fact actually nutritionally good for them, and many of their least favorite foods are not really very helpful in terms of nutrition.

Most of the above could also be said about all herbivores, and to some extent, omnivores as well. The bottom line is that most of the animal world lives not on a short list of favorite foods, but on what is available, whether they like it or whether it is nutritious or not. And the same can pretty much be said about predators as well.

Raccoons and skunks will eat whatever they happen to find, whether it is the dog food you left on the porch, or a beetle they happen to find, or a crawfish in the creek, or a dead squirrel. The mockingbird will exist and feed its young on a collection of whatever insects happen to be available at the moment, and when insects are scarce in the winter, berries will have to do. The praying mantis can't be too picky, sitting around waiting for something tasty to eat, he has to grab anything that happens to come along.

If animals can't find enough food for good health, they may be out in the daylight taking risks in areas with high human populations just trying to survive, or just to be able to feed their young.

Herbivore populations will rise and fall depending on the available vegetative forage which of course is determined by both rainfall and the competition from livestock. Predator populations rise and fall with the herbivore populations, although with a short time lag.

So when you see or hear the term "deer-resistant" or "deer-proof", be very skeptical. Deer eat what is available, and if the only available forage is what someone calls "deer resistant", then that is what they will eat. A recent study found that cedar, at the bottom of the deer food preference list, was a major component of the stomachs of harvested deer.

The more we understand what the lives of our wild neighbors are like, the more we have to admire them.

Until next time...

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