

Habitat Changes in the Hill Country Since Modern Humans Moved In

We know enough about what the Hill Country looked like before European settlers arrived to be able to describe it fairly well, at least in general terms, and we certainly know what changes have taken place in the 200 years since that time. It is interesting to compare the past to the present. My description of the pre-1800 Hill Country is of necessity an average which applies to much of the Hill Country, but no one can know what your particular piece of property was like, so the following description should be taken with that in mind.

Prior to European settlement, we know that much of the Hill Country had relatively more open grassland areas, especially on the flatter, higher portions, and somewhat fewer trees, both hardwoods and junipers (cedars). We know that on the slopes and in the creek bottoms there were plenty of junipers as well as all of the hardwood species we still have.

We know that buffalo, elk and pronghorn grazed the grasslands heavily, but were somewhat nomadic or migratory so that once they had passed by an area and grazed it down, they would not come back until the grass had recovered. We know that the deer were numerous in the woodlands and hardwood savanna areas, and we know that there were large predators (wolves, mountain lions, bears) that preyed on all of these larger herbivores.

And we know that there were relatively frequent grass fires that burned most upland areas every 3 to 10 years, which was responsible for keeping the grasslands open and savannas from becoming denser woodlands. These fires were caused by Native Americans (intentionally or accidentally) and lightning, and they burned such large areas because the denser, taller grass provided ample fuel to carry the intense fires.

European settlement changed the environment of the Hill Country in several ways. First, they grazed the land continuously with their livestock so the grass never had a chance to fully recover. This changed not only the amount of grass but the species of grasses as well. Europeans killed the buffalo, elk and pronghorn, drove off the Native Americans and fought every grass fire they could. And they killed off most of the large predators in order to protect their livestock.

Much of the land was cleared and plowed in order to grow crops, both for themselves and for their livestock. Once barbed wire was available in the 1880s, most properties were fenced. Especially in hard economic times, most of the remaining rangeland was severely overgrazed, allowing erosion to deplete the soil and the productivity of the land decreased significantly.

Without fire there was, and still is, nothing to prevent junipers from encroaching on most all areas, because natural plant succession in the absence of fire would make this area a woodland or at least a heavily-wooded savanna. Junipers are better at spreading than most hardwoods because they make more seedlings and grow faster, and in recent years hardwood regeneration has been reduced by our high deer population.

While a cedar brake (dense cedar thicket) may be a “natural” result of modern man’s overgrazing, suppression of fire, and the overabundant deer population caused by man’s eliminating most predators, that doesn’t mean that the resulting cedar habitat would be considered good, or healthy, or beneficial or diverse. In other words, we are faced with a situation in which “letting Nature take its course” is no longer a desirable land management option since man has so altered the native habitat that it cannot “go back to the way it was”.

The result has been the establishment of a wide variety of different rangeland habitats on different properties around the Hill Country. On one extreme are continuously, severely overgrazed habitats with virtually nothing growing below the 5 foot browseline. Another common habitat results from land being left unmanaged and is best described as dense cedar brakes with little vegetative or wildlife diversity. A third type of Hill Country habitat results from landowners limiting the numbers of grazers and browsers to a healthy level as well as controlling the amount of cedar cover.

This latter habitat is clearly the most desirable from the standpoint of diverse vegetation providing habitat for diverse wildlife species, good grass cover preventing erosion, and good rainwater capture. This type of habitat may or may not very closely resemble what a particular property was like before settlement. But it does represent the best we can do given the current human population and what has taken place on the land since settlement began. In other words, our goal should be for all properties to be like the third type of habitat.

Until next time...

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