

The Big Three Problems Facing Land Managers in the Hill Country

In past columns I discussed what the Hill Country looked like before European settlement and the changes that have occurred in the last 200 years. I also discussed the functions an ideal habitat should perform.

These functions can be summarized as: 1. Provide food, water and shelter for reasonable populations of livestock and native wildlife. 2. Be able to replace the vegetation eaten by animals year after year so the amount of vegetation does not decline. 3. Be healthy, meaning be able to survive droughts, floods and disease and to recover over time. 4. Capture rainwater by infiltration into the soil instead of letting it run off, and 5. Prevent erosion, by both wind and water.

A very important point to remember is that the condition of a property is only partially determined by its location (rocky hilltop or creek bottom), but is mostly the result of previous activity, or lack thereof, on that property in the past. In other words, the conditions of one's land is mainly the result of the way it has been managed, currently and earlier, sometimes going back many decades.

Virtually all of Texas has been overgrazed in the past, and many properties are still being overgrazed. Ranching is a constant compromise between raising as many animals as possible to make money this year or reducing their numbers to allow the grass cover to increase and better quality grass species to return to improve future productivity. The result of this compromise is that most properties with livestock are stocked with too many animals to allow significant improvement in the condition of the range in most years.

This compromise is complicated, especially for small landowners, by the need to raise more animals than their land can accommodate in order to maintain their Agricultural Tax Valuation.

But to provide food, water and shelter for wildlife as well as livestock, a property needs more than just good grass cover, but also reasonable amounts of browse (tree and shrub leaves) which also provide cover for many species of wildlife. Excess deer, goat and exotic populations have produced browselines on most woody plants in the Hill Country, which not only have eliminated important vegetation below about 5 feet, but also greatly reduced the number of replacement hardwoods of many species.

The overbrowsed condition of many properties greatly limits the population of many birds and small animals as well as providing too little vegetation for healthy deer populations. Unfortunately, especially for small landowners, managing the numbers of deer and exotics can be very difficult as these animals move freely from one property to another. High fences can keep out the neighbor's deer and exotics, but that presents

another very significant problem. Once you high fence your property, you are totally responsible for managing the deer/exotic population inside the fence--forever. High fences also present other problems for native wildlife.

Given the absence of fire, which formerly helped keep juniper numbers in check, cedar would eventually take over areas currently free of cedar and begin to crowd out other vegetation and reduce the number of grazable acres if not controlled by the landowner. There are no natural forces other than fire that will prevent cedar encroachment, and extensive cedar brakes are very poor habitat for any wildlife or livestock. (Small patches of dense cedar do provide shelter for deer and other wildlife in the winter).

Without an ongoing program of juniper removal, the percent of the land covered by junipers will gradually, continuously increase.

While cedar cover on steep slopes is probably where most cedar was before settlement, and where it should probably be left alone to prevent erosion, on flatter areas the ideal habitat would probably have only small amounts of cedar cover.

I have just described the BIG THREE problems of managing native habitat on most Hill Country properties: Overgrazing, Overbrowsing, and Cedar encroachment. The habitat of most properties in the Hill Country can be improved by growing more native grass, managing browser numbers, and controlling the encroachment of cedar.

Having a thicker, healthier, diverse grass cover not only provides forage for more livestock, but it also reduces the amount of erosion and increases the amount of rainfall that infiltrates into ground to nourish vegetation and also seeps deeper into the ground to replenish local water tables and aquifers.

Controlling deer populations will lead to greater vegetative diversity, better bird and small animal habitat and a greater diversity of wildlife. Controlling cedar protects this diversity.

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.