

Our Landscapes “Should be Allowed to go Scruffy”

That quote is from Dr Sarah Darwin, the great great granddaughter of Charles Darwin!

A friend of mine sent me a copy of an article recently published in the British Telegraph about a study Dr. Darwin was conducting into the disappearance of nightingales in the UK.

A nightingale is a roughly robin-sized bird breeding in Europe and wintering in sub-Saharan Africa. It is widely known because it has a powerful, varied song which it sings at night. It is an insectivorous bird that nests on or near the ground in dense foliage.

What Dr Darwin observed is that while the nightingales were no longer seen, or heard, in London Parks, in similar habitats in parks in Berlin, they were numerous. She also observed a difference in park maintenance. While the London parks are manicured right up to the edge of the park where the pavement begins, in Berlin, a perimeter area of about 15 feet is left which she called “scrubby” or “scruffy,” and this is the area where the nightingales spend most of their time.

The conclusion to be drawn from her observations is that habitat is essential for a significant wildlife population. (Of course, there could be other causes for the disappearance of the bird in England, but this much is pretty obvious.)

Extrapolate that conclusion to the Texas Hill Country and look at a common Hill Country landscape which has numerous mature trees, but little if any other vegetation below the browseline, at least in areas of high deer populations. And I know many landowners like their property just that way, where they can see long distances under all of the trees, but it is not good habitat for many native species.

I have written before that our ideas of what our American “lawns” should look like originated with the British “Barons” on their “Manors,” where they kept a few sheep to keep the grass and other vegetation down, apparently because they liked the way it looked. Most of us grew up with lawns that needed to be mowed and bushes that needed to be trimmed, all of which was accepted without question. All this many years later, we are still mismanaging our land for no good reason.

Another quote from Dr. Darwin, “We are a nation of naturalists and are getting more conscious about gardening for nature.”

I think I can say that we also are “getting more conscious” about land management, but we are not there yet, and we certainly were not there in Leopold’s time. Here is a Leopold quote from 1931.

“Here is one of the most astonishing incidents observed during the game survey: I was introduced to a highly educated dirt-farmer... I asked him how the game fared on his farm. He replied that he had hardly any, in spite of the fact that he allowed no shooting. I

asked him about cover, and learned he had recently cleared off the only remaining cover on his place—a strip of brushy timber along a creek bank. It was apparently a revelation to him that this had anything to do with his game crop”.

Without an understory, the diversity of shrubs, vines and tree saplings are missing, and without that diversity not only is the habitat necessary for black capped vireos to nest missing, but hiding places for quail and rabbits and other critters are also missing, and a diversity of forage necessary to feed a wide variety of insects which in turn provide food for all of our songbirds. And without any tree saplings, we will not have any replacements for our current hardwoods.

I was so intrigued to learn that Charles Darwin’s great great granddaughter was continuing his legacy of biological research, I did a little checking. She was born in 1964 in London and obtained her PhD in botany from University College London. Some of her research was done in the Galapagos Islands, the site of her great great grandfather’s major contributions to the world’s understanding of evolution.

Her married name is Sarah Darwin Vogel. Her husband is also a botanist and they live in Berlin where he is the director of a museum. They have two teen-aged boys.

We know so much more about the natural world, about science in general and life on earth than Charles Darwin could have ever imagined, and yet when it comes to managing to live on this planet without spoiling it for the other inhabitants, we fail miserably.

Food for thought.

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@krc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.