

Beauty, and Nature. In the Eye of the Beholder?

Recently, I had the opportunity to visit a Hill Country property that had been managed in a very different way than most places I have been on. The owner, new to the Hill Country, and with no prior experience owning any rural property, completely changed the appearance of his property to fit his vision of what a beautiful landscape should look like. Unfortunately, his vision matches a golf course or city park instead of a healthy native habitat.

The property, situated on top of and on the sides of a small hill, had a number of mature native hardwoods, mostly oaks, all of which had been pruned of any limbs below about 6 feet. There were no shrubs or young trees below the 6-foot level and no cedar at all.

In contrast, on one side of the hill, the grasses and forbs along the slope were mostly healthy native species with a nice diversity of species and he was intentionally leaving this area alone and enjoying the beauty of the relatively native prairie.

On the other side of the hill, he felt that some of the native forbs were getting out of hand and he was mowing them regularly to try to reduce the forbs and get more grass to grow, and to just keep the vegetation short, as that was what he liked to look at.

As a naturalist and lover of native habitat, the vegetation on this property, other than the prairie on the first hill described above, was about as far from ideal as one could get. Most naturalists and wildlife biologists will think of the ideal native habitat as being one with the greatest diversity of vegetation from the ground to the crown, which therefore includes the understory of young trees, shrubs and vines.

The more different species of different vegetation types, the greater number of species of animals (insects, birds, reptiles, mammals, etc.). But understory was exactly what the landowner most wanted to get rid of, and he did a very thorough job if it.

The problem was, however, the landowners very much wanted to attract birds and other wildlife to their property, but they didn't realize that by eliminating much of the vegetation on the property to make the landscape appeal to their sense of aesthetics, they made the property appear very inhospitable to most wildlife.

Native understory (trees, shrubs, and vines) not only provides much of the food for native wildlife, but it also provides essential cover for birds and small animals to move about in without exposing themselves to predators.

Of course, many Hill Country properties are also lacking in the kind of understory that would be considered ideal native habitat—not because of land management activities but because of overabundant deer. But even on properties with high deer populations, there can usually be found some understory here and there, even if it is mainly from small cedars.

It is not uncommon for new small landowners to rush to “do something” on their property, to make them feel they have “improved” the property, when in fact they have

acted without the best knowledge or experience and have either done something unnecessary or even detrimental. I believe many more land management mistakes are made doing things that were ill-advised than by not doing something that really needed to be done. The condition of most properties did not get that way overnight, and “fixing” the problem is not urgent.

Of course, in the case of the landowners described above, their sense of aesthetics is pretty strong and I think they very much like their land as it is now and they spent a lot of time and money making it that way. And they have every right to have it the way they like it, and I would never suggest they change doing what they think is best. But I do think it would have been nice if they had found someone to talk to who could have explained the consequences of their clearing so much understory so they would have been better informed before they acted.

A lot of us landowners have similarly acted without full knowledge of the consequences. Aldo Leopold wrote, “It is inconceivable to me that we can adjust ourselves to the complexities of the land mechanism without an intense curiosity to understand its workings and a habitual personal study of those workings. The urge to comprehend must precede the urge to reform.”

Until next time...

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