

What is a Naturalist Anyway?

You know the bumper sticker that reads, “I wasn’t born in Texas but I got here as soon as I could”? Well, I wasn’t always a naturalist, but I have been working as hard as I can for the past 10 years to become one. I have spent literally hundreds of hours attending presentations, seminars, workshops and field days on every subject having to do with the ecology of the Hill Country, land management and all of the related “ologies”, not to mention reading numerous books, articles and research papers in all of these fields.

What I discovered early on is that there are a lot of very knowledgeable, educated and experienced people working for such government agencies as Texas AgriLife Extension, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Texas Forest Service and USDA/Natural Resources Conservation Service who are more than willing to teach you all the things they know. It is from these individuals, plus numerous university professors, that I have learned most everything I know about the natural world of the Hill Country.

And it is largely through the Texas Master Naturalist program, and the local Hill Country Chapter, that I have had the opportunity to learn from these experts. All of these studies finally culminated last year with the publication, by Texas A & M Press, of my book, “Hill Country Landowner’s Guide”.

While I think the Texas Master Naturalist organization is a really great program, I have always been bothered by the term “Master”. It implies a level of complete mastery of a subject that most people can really never attain, and I certainly don’t consider myself a master of anything. So forget master, let’s talk about naturalists. What is a naturalist anyway?

There are lots of definitions, but the one I like best is that it is someone who is interested in and observes all the rocks, the soil, the water, the plants, the insects, the higher animals and all of the many interactions and relationships among them. In other words, everything in the natural world.

So who are some naturalists? The most famous naturalists, of course, are Henry David Thoreau, and John Muir, and many of us would place Aldo Leopold on the same level as these two men. Naturalists who have contributed to our knowledge of Texas would include many of the early explorers such as Roemer, Lindheimer, and Engelmann in the early 1800s, Vernon Bailey near the turn of the last century, and Roy Bedichek in the mid-1900s.

I would add to these earlier naturalists many current Hill Country experts working for the government agencies mentioned above as well as a number of university professors. While, if asked, most of these folks will describe themselves as biologists, botanists,

range scientists, etc., because that is what their degree is in or what their current function is. But their knowledge is far broader than their titles indicate. I would also add many enlightened ranchers who have learned about the natural world around them, perhaps from a lifetime of experience and keen observation; one of the more famous in the Hill Country being J. David Bamberger.

So what does a naturalist do? A naturalist spends a lot of time outdoors, in the fields, on the hill tops, along the creeks, in a continual process of learning about everything they see. They learn the names of the plants and where and how they grow, what eats them and what pollinates them. They learn about the animals, wild and domestic, large and small. They learn to observe changes in the plant or the animal communities in response to various natural forces. They learn the interconnectedness of everything in nature, and how a change in one species affects all the others.

Naturalists study the effects man has on the whole ecosystem as well as on all of its parts, the ecological problems caused by increasing human populations, and possible solutions to these problems. And finally, naturalists study ways to conserve our native habitat, to restore damaged ecosystems, and to manage land in a way that preserves the native habitat.

The mission statement of the Texas Master Naturalists is: "To develop a corps of well-informed volunteers to provide education, outreach, and service dedicated to the beneficial management of natural resources and natural areas within their communities."

Which brings us to the last characteristic of a true naturalist: they share their knowledge with others. And that will be the primary purpose of this column. I hope in future columns to be able to discuss some interesting facts and stories and maybe explore a few myths as well, but mainly to share some things I know about our wonderful Hill Country. Until next time....

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