

How to Best Manage Hill Country Rangeland

In past columns I discussed what an ideal Hill Country habitat should look like and the functions that such a habitat should perform.

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

In order to create or maintain such a habitat, I discussed the BIG THREE management actions that need to be practiced by good land stewards: Prevent overgrazing, overbrowsing and cedar encroachment. Accomplishing these objectives is obviously much easier said than done.

If the land is not being grazed by livestock, or grazed only occasionally, then the first of the big three actions is already being practiced. But the property might very well still be suffering from previous overgrazing so that the native grass cover is sparse with too much bare ground and/or is composed of smaller, less-desirable grass species which frequently result from past overgrazing.

If this is the case, then many folk's first impulse is to plant native grass seed. There are times and conditions where that is indeed the best way to improve the pasture, but native grass seed is expensive and may be unnecessary. Before spending money on seed, I would suggest the landowner consult some knowledgeable experts (AgriLife Extension, NRCS, Master Naturalist).

If a property is currently being overgrazed, then the most obvious action would be to reduce the number of grazers or grazing days, perhaps significantly. For small landowners, replacing a cow-calf operation with stocker calves or leasing your land with restrictions on how many animals can be grazed for how long can be possible options that result in less severe grazing.

Rotational grazing is another important practice that can significantly improve the condition of the grass by allowing it time to recover after grazing. Inexpensive electric cross-fencing may work well for separating pastures.

If you have goats, then you need to consider them not only as grazers but also as browsers, their preferred food. Thus the combined effect of goats, white-tailed deer and exotic ungulates on all vegetation below the browseline needs to be considered. If your property has a distinct browseline with little vegetation below 5 feet, except perhaps

cedar and agarita, then the habitat will not improve significantly until the combined populations of those animals is reduced. Reducing the goat population is easy. Reducing the deer and exotic population is an obvious solution, but one many landowners find to be very difficult. At the very least, don't attract deer to feeders as that just increases the population of them on your property and thus the amount of damage they do.

If you have dense cedar on steep slopes, most people would advise you to leave it there as trying to remove it almost always results in severe erosion before you can get anything else established on the slope. On flatter areas, removal of cedar cover down to some relatively small percentage can certainly improve the habitat for wildlife and increase the grazable acres and productivity of your range.

Current thinking about removing cedar is to do so in small patches a little at a time over several years so as not to expose large areas of bare ground at once. Not having a program to remove cedar will result in a continual increase in cedar cover and subsequent decrease in other more desirable vegetation. Bare ground caused by cedar removal or burn piles can be recovered more quickly if planted in mixtures of native grass seed.

Improving the native grass cover, increasing native vegetation below the browseline, allowing replacement hardwoods to mature, and controlling cedar will all, in time, make for a more ideal native habitat and a more productive rangeland that also captures rainwater and prevents erosion.

Finally, the one thing an ideal habitat does not have is significant amounts of exotic, invasive plants, especially along riparian areas, such as Chinaberry, Chinese tallow, vitex, *Arundo donax* (Giant reed). For more detailed discussions on this topic and the previous columns on habitat, see my book, "Hill Country Landowners Guide".

Until next time...

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