

The Lightning Tree Fell Down!

Several years ago my wife and I were sitting on our front porch enjoying a thunderstorm when suddenly a lightning bolt struck a post oak a couple of hundred feet in front of us. (A dedicated naturalist would have recorded the exact date in a journal or notebook—I didn't.)

Lightning generally travels down a tree through the vascular bundles underneath the bark. Sometimes it boils the fluid therein and the steam blows off the bark, which is what happened to parts of this post oak. It was about 15 to 18 inches in diameter and 30-35 feet tall. In the next few weeks it became obvious that at least 80% of the tree was dead—only one limb on what appeared to be the least damaged side of the trunk remained green.

As the months and years went by, first the smaller twigs and later larger limbs decayed and fell off so that what remained was a skeleton of a tree with several dead limbs here and there and one live limb, the latter having grown considerably from its original size when the lightning struck.

I have no doubt that the tree, which could be seen from the street, was a subject of discussion or displeasure to some passersby who undoubtedly thought the tree should have been taken down for aesthetic reasons. I have a different philosophy about these things. First, when considering what to do or not do in terms of managing our property, my first thought is “What would Mother Nature do?”

The trees and all of the other native vegetation in the area evolved to take care of themselves quite well without any “help” from humans. That fact alone is reason enough for me to leave any dead trees that do not threaten the road or our house. I know that dead trees provide insects for woodpeckers and other birds and animals as well as cavities for birds and squirrels to nest in. Finally, the last thing I would ever do is cut down a tree and haul it off or burn it since allowing the tree to decompose by natural forces returns important organic matter and nutrients to the soil.

Unfortunately, we lost several blackjack oaks last year as a result of the drought of 2011 and the hypoxylon fungus that followed the drought stress. Some of those trees are totally dead and some have one or two limbs that have not yet succumbed to the fungus. Those that still have some green limbs may survive long term (we have seen that happen before), some will not. Were it not for the human-caused overpopulation of deer, we would have plenty of replacement hardwoods to take over from the dead mature trees, but the deer prevent any young hardwood saplings from becoming mature trees. In our lifetime, we will have to adjust to a landscape with fewer trees.

Anyway, over the years the lightning tree (we don't generally name our trees, but this one seemed to be an exception) gradually lost more bark and more limbs, but at the same time the one live limb grew bigger and bigger.

Then, a few months ago after a night of rain and wind, I noticed that the tree had fallen down. When we went out to take a look, we first noticed that the trunk was not fully down on the ground, but was supported by a couple of large limbs. Then as we stood looking at the tree, a squirrel poked its head up over a limb and looked back at us. The next thing we saw was a pair of Carolina wrens hopping around the leaves of the live limb. Then upon closer inspection we saw that the deer had already found the tree and had eaten all of the leaves they could reach on the one living limb.

I don't know what the squirrel was doing on the tree. The wrens gave the appearance of having a nest close-by, but we couldn't locate it. Only time will tell if there are enough living roots to support the one live limb in its now-semi-prone state (now, several months later, it is still alive).

We have lots of healthy trees for which we are quite thankful. We certainly enjoyed the lightning tree for as long as we had it, and even in its current state it represents just one more part of a fascinating piece of Hill Country native habitat we are lucky to have.

Until next time...

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