

Nature's Response to Rains and a Change of Seasons

Often, when I am trying to think of a topic for a new column, I take a walk around our yard and the adjoining pasture. On one such walk recently, after the good rains in early September and the middle of October, I made a number of observations. Here are some of them.

After a long hot dry summer, a good heavy rain is a welcome event. But heavy rains have drawbacks too. Walking around after these rains revealed two new features on the landscape; new bare ground and litter dams, both indications of water running off the land and at least some erosion. So the 4 inch rain we got in mid-October certainly did not all soak into the ground. Much of it floated up dead plant litter (cedar needles and grass leaves) and carried it away, leaving bare ground which is more susceptible to erosion, and depositing the litter in piles around clumps of grass and rocks downhill. Some of our soil went downhill too, even though the land is fairly flat.

On the other hand, a lot of vegetation responded very nicely to the new rains. A bois d'arc tree planted about 8 years ago struggled through the summer in spite of our watering it occasionally, but is now quite healthy looking. Likewise a 10 year-old chinquapin oak lost a lot of its leaves, but after the rains it has produced quite a few new leaves and it has healthy-looking buds for next year. Also a post oak which had largely defoliated by late August has actually re-flowered again—I didn't even know that was possible!

The acorn crop around our place doesn't look very good this year—lots of acorns, but all very small—they needed more rain in the spring and summer to fully mature. It does appear to be a very good year for juniper berries, however. Unfortunately for many allergy sufferers, it looks like we might be seeing very high pollen counts in a few weeks as well.

I found a snake skin while walking around. Given the size (about 5 to 6 feet long) and the kinds of snakes we most often see around the house, my guess is that it was probably a Texas rat snake or an Eastern coachwhip.

Butterflies seem to be most active on warm fall days, especially after a rain, and this year is no exception. Unfortunately, the monarch population is way down this year, so seeing one is an even bigger treat than usual.

As a grass lover, fall is always a good time for me as it is when more species of grasses put up a seed head and show themselves off than any other time. This year, with the early September rain, the fall grass crop is even better than usual.

In just a short walk, in addition to the ubiquitous, invasive KR bluestem, I saw plains lovegrass and meadow dropseed in profusion, with lesser amounts of Hall panicum, cane bluestem, Texas grama, sideoats grama and an occasionally Nealley grama and windmillgrass.

Unfortunately, I also encountered oldfield threeawn, as near to worthless as a grass can be. I always say that any native plant has some benefit to the habitat, holding the soil if nothing else. But this annual grass produces almost no forage and it does make lots of seeds with sharp-pointed barbs which can stick into an animal's mouth and nose and catch in their fur or wool to make for a real nuisance.

I also encountered a colony of mealy blue sage in full bloom. This flower usually blooms in the spring and early summer, but the fall rains really invigorated this patch this year. Along with cowpen daisy, another wildflower which nothing eats, these two really brighten the fall landscape even in a grazed pasture.

And finally, even though I have walked these few acres dozens of times a year for the past dozen plus years, on this particular walk, I discovered a mammillaria cactus I had not noticed before.

One of the things I like best about natural habitats is that they are ever-changing, either because of the changing seasons or recent rains, or because of new plants emerging and old plants dying. Just observing these changes is part of what makes Nature so interesting and never boring.

Until next time...

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