

March and April Walks Along the Nature Trail

Continuing my observations while walking along my nature trail between March 20 and April 12, here are some of the things I recorded.

On March 20th I noted that the Lacey oak we planted several years ago, and which is caged from browsers, has large swollen buds. This is a great tree that is endemic to our area of the Hill Country and was first identified as a separate species by rancher Howard Lacey on his place near Lower Turtle Creek in the late 1800s. The tree is most often seen growing on the upper reaches of hills even on very rocky soils, so it is pretty tough.

I noticed a number of insects on this day, from a tiger swallowtail butterfly, to several sulfur butterflies to a number of grasshoppers. There were a lot of tiny bees swarming on the flowers of the agarita bush. This is an important shrub in the Hill Country. It is evergreen, and it is generally not browsed by anything, so it is one of the few shrubs that one can find on almost any property. Because the leaves are so stiff and sharp-pointed, these shrubs can also serve as very effective “nurse” plants that allow other species to grow up within their protection and escape browsing. It is not at all uncommon to find hackberry or escarpment black cherry saplings growing up inside an agarita bush.

On this walk, I also observed a big turkey gobbler displaying for a group of six or so hens.

On March 30, one of the first things I noticed was that some of the ball moss on various live oak trees was blooming. Most of the time ball moss is just kind of ignored, but the blooms make it slightly more noticeable. It also reminds us how remarkable this epiphyte is, obtaining all of its nutrients from the air and rainfall and not taking anything from the live oaks except for a place to live.

Along one part of the walk, the trail passes a large live oak that we once thought would be outside our bedroom window of our yet-to-be-built house. But only now, after over a decade of walking around under this wonderful tree did I notice that up on a big limb about 15 feet up, there was a Texas prickly pear growing! It is not really rare to find prickly pear growing up in trees or even in rain gutters sometimes, as all sorts of wildlife like prickly pear tunas and deposit the seeds everywhere, but I couldn't believe I had missed it all these years.

I noticed more wildflowers on this walk than before, including low verbena, low bladderpod, and prairie verbena.

I also noticed three turkey toms displaying—this time for each other as best I could tell!

On the April 12th walk, I decided to check on the bluebird house just off the trail. The last time I checked it was totally empty. This time I discovered a nest with at least one bird in it. I very quickly closed the box and walked away, so I didn't yet know if it was a baby or a momma sitting on eggs, or what kind of bird it was. But later I went out with my binoculars and hid in the trees to watch for any activity at the bird house. Sure enough, after less than 10 minutes I was able to confirm that a pair of titmice were obviously feeding a brood.

Just a little further along my trail, I noticed that one of the large blackjack trees that died of drought and/or hypoxylon in 2012, and is still standing, had lost a very large (about 1 foot in diameter) branch in a recent windstorm. That is generally the fate of trees that die—they usually lose several limbs to wind damage as the weakened wood can no longer support the weight, but it is always a little sad to see it happen.

We have a small of grove of maybe a dozen shin oaks that have a slightly different-appearing bark than the rest of the shin oaks, and previously I had noticed they were also later in greening up than the other shin oaks. But on this walk they were indeed leafing out nicely.

There is always something new and interesting to see, even on a familiar 30 minute walk.

Until next time...

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