

Watching Deer and Grass on the Nature Trail

I went out on my previously-described, nature trail, on Oct. 10th. It was the first time I had been out on the trail since the very welcome rains (about 5 inches) in September, and I was interested to see what changes I could find.

As I sat down on my milk crate at my first stop, the first thing I noticed was green Texas wintergrass under my feet. This is a cool-season grass that usually doesn't start growing until later in the year, but all the rain last month plus the fact that it was in the shade of a tree meant it was taking advantage of the ideal conditions to get started on next year's foliage. This is an important grass to have on a range as it provides grazers with nutrition in the spring when there isn't much else to eat.

Next to the Texas wintergrass was plains lovegrass with a full seedhead, a warm-season grass that provides good forage. At other stops I found Hall panicum, a fair forage grass, as well as Texas grama, hairy grama, red grama and old-field threeawn—all poor forage grasses.

I didn't have to go out on the trail to notice the KR bluestem that suddenly sprang up everywhere with prominent multiple seed heads. From a car driving by, one might conclude that we suddenly have lots of tall grass, as the seed heads are 18 to 24 inches high and from a distance it looks like the range is covered with lots of "amber waves of grain". Unfortunately, it is just the stems and the seed heads that are sticking up like that, and they provide very little nutrition for grazers. Later in the year, the seed heads will drop off and the stems will turn yellow.

Just to see how much edible foliage was present, I pulled up a small KR bluestem plant that had 6 stems and seed heads. It turns out that it was really two plants, but the total amount of foliage down low on the plant was fairly minimal—this introduced, invasive, ubiquitous grass is not the best forage grass.

Sitting on my crate at one stop I noticed a white-tailed doe doing what I can best describe as a hesitation/stomping gait that I have observed numerous times when a deer is uneasy about something it sees and wants to investigate instead of simply bounding away. The doe would pick up one of her fore feet (and sometimes her opposite hind foot as well), hold it motionless in the air for maybe a second, then stomp it down with some force.

I don't know if the stomping was aimed at me, trying to scare me away, or at other deer, trying to warn them of something to be concerned about. Stomping is something other animals do to try to drive away something they consider a possible threat.

At any rate, the doe continued this behavior for several minutes, moving through somewhat brushy cover that was dense enough to partially hide her from me and vice versa, but not dense enough for me to lose sight of her. Then when she walked out of the brush and into a clearing, she continued this hesitation/stomping as she turned toward me and came to within about 50 feet of me, with both of us being in the open. Then we had a staring contest for a couple of minutes when neither of us moved. Eventually, although I never moved or turned my head, I turned my eyes to one side for a moment and she bounded off, showing her white tail flag briefly.

Deer in our area are so numerous and live among so many people and their cars that they scarcely ever look up when you drive by, even within 10 feet of them, but I suspect they usually see humans, even out of their cars, being in motion. So maybe my complete lack of motion made her more curious than scared, at least for a while.

Sadly, I found another blackjack oak which showed signs of hypoxylon and the two main limbs had broken off from the hollow trunk about six feet off the ground. This was yet another casualty of the drought that started in 2011. The rains we got in September came much too late to save this one.

Until next time...

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