

Stop, look and Listen: One Year of Visits to the Nature Trail

About a year ago I started taking a series of nature walks on a trail that I set out on the pasture around our house. The idea for such a study came from a book I read, "The Forest Unseen: A Year's Watch in Nature" by David George Haskell. The author is a biologist, and he embarked on a year-long project to observe a small patch of forest in southeastern Tennessee every week or so for a year and record whatever he saw that interested him.

I found the whole idea fascinating and wanted to do something similar. But Haskell had two advantages that I don't have and he was obviously willing to work harder at the project than I could see myself doing. He lives in an area near mature eastern forests that inherently have a much greater biodiversity of plants and animals than our part of the Hill Country, and he is a well-trained professor of biology, much more knowledgeable about both plants and animals than I am: he could identify just about everything he saw. He also had access to an area that has been very little affected by man, whereas the area most easily accessible to me has been significantly overgrazed and overbrowsed for a long time.

Rather than concentrate on a small area and everything I could see, hear, smell or feel from that one location, I established a nature walk path that begins and ends at our driveway and attempted to take that walk every ten to fourteen days, making note of everything I could see of interest and any changes noted.

I have reported my observations in several columns beginning on 2/28 last year and continuing on 5/2, 6/13, 8/1, 10/3, 11/7, 12/12 and finally 2/6 of this year. You can find these columns on the columns page of my website, www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.

In my study area there are wooded areas, open grasslands, dead trees, rocky areas, and patches of cedar. The entire area is active rangeland with cattle grazing several months every year, several blackbuck grazing constantly, and too many white-tailed deer as permanent residents. Native trees include live oaks, post oaks, blackjack oaks, Spanish oaks, shin oaks and cedar.

Since I like nothing more than spending time in a native habitat, I found each visit to be both fun and informative. Even though it was an area I was thoroughly familiar with, there were some surprises (some good, some bad), and it was never dull.

It has been a year since I started making these periodic visits along my so-called nature trail, and I have learned something very important. I have been interested in nature all my life, and over the years I have had the pleasure to hike along the trails of some of the most spectacular places in the country, from Arcadia National Park to the Everglades, to Big Bend to the Grand Canyon, to Mount Rainier, to Denali in Alaska and

to the Hawaiian Islands. But I obviously missed a lot of really interesting nature observations by just hiking.

About half way through the year on the nature trail, I began taking a milk crate with me and instead of just walking the trail I would periodically stop, and sit on the crate for a while and just look around—more like Haskell did his visits. What I learned was, if you really want to begin to understand nature and observe it as it is, not as it reacts to a human walking through it, you need to go alone, sit quietly and just look and watch and listen. Sometimes it causes you to focus on little things up close, but sometimes you focus on the bigger picture in front of you.

But sitting in one place causes you to study and to learn about what you are seeing. Billy Kniffen, a former AgriLife Extension agent and expert on range science and land management likes to say that his father used to tell him, “Boy, you need to learn to see what you are looking at”. Sitting on a box in the pasture has taught me the essential truth of that statement.

So the next time you are out in a natural area, don't focus on how far you can hike or how fast you can get to the end of the trail, take your time and concentrate on what you see in front of you.

Until next time...

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