

Watching Nature Adapt to Changing Conditions

When I was working for a major corporation, it was not unusual to hear someone say, "The only thing constant around here is change." I was reminded of that recently while taking a walk around our property as I observed the exceptional amount of grass cover. It is obvious that the abundant amount of rain we had this spring was responsible, but I wondered just how exceptional this year has been.

I went back over my records and looked at the total amount of rainfall we recorded around our house in the past 6 springs. Looking at the total amount of rainfall for March, April, May and June for the years from 2010 through 2015, I found approximately the following: for 2010, 12 inches, for 2011, 2 inches, for 2012, 12 inches, for 2013, 9 inches, for 2014, 6 inches and for this year, 17 inches!

The 17 inches this year represents 15 inches more than we received in 2011 and 9 inches more than the average for the previous five years. So yes, this year was truly exceptional. The amount of vegetation growing this spring, because of the exceptional rainfall, has also been exceptional and here I am not just referring to the grasses, but to the trees, shrubs and wildflowers as well.

The spring is the season when the greatest total amount of new growth is produced, although summer and fall are usually good for grass production as well. In fact, most native grasses are classified as warm-season grasses because that is when most of their growth occurs. The most notable exception to that is Texas wintergrass, which, as the name implies, is a cool-season grass. And in fact, as I was taking my walk, the vast majority of the grass that I was walking over was Texas wintergrass. And there was more of it, both in terms of number of grass plants and also because of the size of the grass plants. In the 15 years we have lived here, we have never seen so much biomass of grass.

Five years ago when the range looked bare and dead, it would have been hard to imagine what it looks like today, or to even hope for it to look half this good. And while today we don't like to think about it ever looking like it did in 2011, we know that sometime in the future, it will. The good news is that what we see today teaches us that Mother Nature is, if anything, resilient. Conditions change, nature adapts. 2011 was not the first bad dry year our native plants have experienced, and this year won't be the last really wet year either. The problem is, of course, that we humans are impatient and we want the best all the time and to fix any problems instantly, but Mother Nature has a different timetable than we do.

Another observation from my walk was that most of the Texas wintergrass had begun to go dormant, as it usually does in mid-summer, especially that growing in full sun. And so the grass leaves as well as the stems, now devoid of seeds, are laying over instead

of being upright as before. In this state, the thick cover of wintergrass gives the pasture the appearance of waves on the ocean. It is almost alarming how quickly the grass turned from green to straw-colored. The warm-season grasses are now trying to struggle through the wintergrass to find the sun, and, since it has been almost 6 weeks since the last rain, the conditions for them are nothing like the conditions the wintergrass grew in.

Who knows, maybe next year we will have a dry spring and a wet summer, and then maybe little bluestem and sideoats grama will carpet the pasture. To me, one of the most interesting things about nature is that it is never constant. Conditions change, vegetation changes, wildlife numbers change, so we get to see new things every year and every season—sometimes every month. Humans, of course, want to have everything ideal, all the time, so we are frequently fighting Mother Nature. She is not going to change her ways, so we should learn to adapt to Her ways.

Indeed, the only thing constant (in nature) is change.

Until next time...

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