

There is Still Very Well-Managed Land in the Hill Country

This past Spring, I have had the privilege of spending time on four really exceptional properties. The four properties, which are located in Blanco, Gillespie and Kerr counties, are not related in any way other than the condition of the native habitat. But what these four properties all illustrate is a hopeful sign about the Hill Country. It is possible to still have well-managed, sustainable, healthy native habitat.

It will never look exactly like it did 200 years ago, but it would be recognizable to folks from the early 1800s. And today's well-managed habitat is functioning as it should to provide food, water, and shelter for the native animals as well as livestock, on a sustainable basis.

What do these properties have in common? All have been ranchland for many years. All but one still have cattle on them, but all are stocked well below the carrying capacity and the cattle are managed to ensure that they are not overgrazing any part of the range. All have managed to keep the deer population low enough that there is no significant browse line on shrubs and vines. All have managed cedar for some time, and some have continuing cedar management programs underway.

But perhaps most importantly, all have owners who are very committed to not just maintaining the property but to improving the habitat as their main goal. This primary objective is even more important than making a profit.

They are not at all identical. On one property, the cattle were removed a few years ago and an intensive cedar management program was adopted which has greatly improved the diversity of the habitat. This program is expected to continue for a number of years before cattle are reintroduced.

On another property, the owners have donated a conservation easement on the property but have maintained their low stocking rate and deer management activities which have maintained a healthy native habitat.

Another property has some old cultivated fields and old Bermudagrass fields which still need some restoration work, but the rest of their property is a very healthy, diverse woodland/savanna thanks to their deer management activities. They expect to remove the cattle for some time and to work to restore the old fields.

The fourth property is the Kerr Wildlife Management Area, which has been under the control of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and where numerous research projects have been conducted over the years to determine the best management techniques for a better native habitat. These techniques include stocking rate management and rotational grazing, deer population control and cedar management, with the result of sustained, ideal native habitat.

These are four very different properties with different histories. But they have in common management philosophies and goals for better healthy, diverse, sustainable

native habitats and management practices of controlling grazing and browsing animal numbers and managing cedar. They are, if you will, living proof, that these management principles are still capable of leading to the kind of Hill Country habitat we all would like to see.

There are a couple of other things these properties have in common that need to be considered. All of these are large properties. The smallest of the three privately held properties is about 750 acres and the largest is about 1500 acres. The Kerr Wildlife Management Area is about 6000 acres. Size matters. The larger an area a manager has under his/her control, the better a job of restoring a native habitat is.

The other thing these properties have in common is the owner's philosophy or ethics of land management, or what Aldo Leopold called an "ecological conscience". Without the owners' attitudes and goals, putting the highest priority on habitat conservation and restoration, not even the best land management practices would be as effective. And of course, being financially able to put habitat ahead of profit also helps.

We are not all so fortunate to have such large properties, but it is obvious that with the right "land ethic" to use another Leopold phrase, and the best practices we can utilize, our properties will also begin to develop the kind of native habitat that makes the Hill Country so special.

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the books "Hill Country Landowner's Guide" and "A Beginner's Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners: How to Live in the Country Without Spiling It". He can be reached at jstmn@kctc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.