

A Native Habitat in Our Backyard

I just finished spending about 15 minutes standing at the window looking out at small birds pecking around in the grass. At one time there was a wren, a sparrow and a junco all within a few feet of one another. I was really focused mainly on the wren and its jerky movements as it searched through the grass and under leaves for something to eat—it is really incredibly agile and quick.

Seeing three birds of three different species in our backyard is not only not unusual, but is something we can almost always count on throughout the day. But if I were to go to a similar-sized area 100 yards in any direction from our backyard the bird population would be vastly reduced. Why the difference? One word—habitat.

Outside the fence is native rangeland that is somewhat overgrazed and significantly overbrowsed live-oak/cedar savanna with little understory vegetation. The total number of woody species in any one-acre space would probably be less than 6 or 8 species. There would probably be less than a half dozen species of grasses in that same area and even fewer forb species.

Inside our one-acre fence we probably have at least 40 species of woody plants, 15 to 20 species of grasses and a similar number of forbs. The vegetative diversity is obviously much greater inside the fence. The difference is the result of both having fenced the grazers and browsers out as well as a number of native plant species we have planted inside the fence over the years.

To be fair, the vastly increased vegetative diversity alone would not sustain the numbers of birds or the numbers of species we routinely see inside the fence. But the fact that we also have two sunflower seed feeders, a thistle feeder, a suet feeder as well as a small recirculating “creek” certainly adds to the avian diversity around the house. Many birds are not interested in seeds but instead are attracted to habitats with numerous insects and or berries or fruit of some kind.

However, just providing food or even also providing water will not be as successful at attracting birds if it is provided on manicured St Augustine lawns with ligustrum hedges—the birds won’t recognize it as native habitat.

Some of the other things we have done or not done also contributes to our success in attracting birds. First, virtually all of the plant species we have planted are native to the Hill Country, so native Hill Country birds are familiar with them. And we have fought, not completely successfully, the non-native species that have invited themselves in.

We have allowed most native volunteer woody plants, that have come up in the yard, through no efforts of ourselves, to grow and establish themselves. We never use any insecticides outside the house so the native insect population is “normal” which is essential for a healthy bird population. And we don’t have any outside cats to prey on our birds or lizards.

We don't maintain a non-native, water-guzzling, lawn, and, except for various paths and areas near the house, we allow the grasses to grow un-mowed until the winter. We also allow various forbs that put up seed heads with seeds for the birds to remain until all of the seeds are gone.

Our place is not what most people would call "neat". It certainly would not be featured in any of the Scotts or Toro or Good Housekeeping ads either. But we very much like it that way.

There is a new book by a couple of friends of mine, "Attracting Birds in the Texas Hill Country: A Guide to Land Stewardship", by W. Rufus Stephens and Jan Wrede. For anyone interested in Hill Country birds or native Hill Country habitat, I highly recommend it. It is exceptionally well-written and by far the most thorough discussion of how to best manage native Hill Country habitats. It also contains full page descriptions and discussions of a long list of Hill Country birds.

Finally, I should point out that our feathered friends are not the only animals that like to visit our diverse native habitat. Skinks, lizards, frogs, toads, squirrels, and a host of furry night creatures like to visit as well.

Until next time...

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