

Nature is Always Changing, Which Makes It Interesting

One of the things that I find so interesting about nature is that it is never constant, but constantly changing. Just because we saw something yesterday, or last week or last year doesn't mean we will see the same thing tomorrow or next year. Some of these changes we can expect in the abstract but we can still be surprised when they occur, like changes caused by births or growth or death.

And of course, changes in seasons or even in weather can bring about major changes in vegetation and animal behavior. And in fact, rainfall and weather may be responsible for most of the changes in vegetation from year to year. Here are some examples of different vegetative responses to different rainfall amounts and patterns.

I planted yellow indiagrass about 13 or 14 years ago as an ornamental in our buffalo grass lawn because I think it is really beautiful, especially when it is blooming. And every year since, with the exception of 2011, it has continued to bloom and in fact to spread into a much larger plant. But this year it has not put up a single seed head. However, another indiagrass plant, close to a tree that was watered occasionally, is blooming now.

Little bluestem is later this year to put up seed heads around our place than I have ever seen it, and I was just out in west Kerr Co. and the little bluestem is only slightly ahead of ours there. It looks like our Lindheimer muhly will not put up a seed head this year either.

This appears to have been a good year for snow-on-the-mountain. I have never seen such dense blooms everywhere this year. Butterflies use these plants for nectar.

Our Maximilian sunflower also did not bloom this year, although I did observe a nice bunch on the entrance ramp to I-10 west off Route 16.

The rainfall amounts we have received this year so far are much greater than we saw in 2011, and the drought Index this year is not nearly as severe as in 2011. But obviously the timing of the rains was still unfavorable for some of the above species and favorable for others.

Some changes I have observed that do not appear to be related to rainfall include:

Several years ago, I noticed a large number of rather large and light-colored round galls on my blackjack oaks—all the result of a gall wasp or fly that stung the acorn cup and caused the tree to respond by growing these galls. I had never seen these particular galls before and have not seen them since, and they were only on the blackjacks, no other trees had them. These galls do not materially injure the tree.

When we first began feeding thistle seeds to the finches, we would occasionally see, not only the resident least goldfinches, but also the American goldfinches. We have not seen a single American goldfinch around our place in several years now. Interestingly, I have gone through more thistle seeds in the past two or three months, than I have

usually used all year in past years—much larger flocks of lesser goldfinches have been around all summer.

Several years ago we planted some cow pen daisy in the pasture just outside our fence. It derives its name because it is not normally eaten by grazers or browsers. I have confirmed that property when I observed a large drift of cow pen daisy untouched in a heavily stocked goat pasture. The daisies seemed to thrive and expand for a few years with no signs of any grazing or browsing, but then last year the cattle began eating them and they are now gone.

Another kind of change in nature that I have observed for a long time has to do with the movements and also populations of our small animals, at least as we observe them around the house. It is not uncommon to see certain species regularly for a few weeks or months and then to not see them any more for some time, and also to see something we haven't seen at all for years suddenly be seen regularly for a while. I am referring to all of our small mammals as well as snakes and lizards.

I think the unpredictability of nature is part of what makes it so interesting and so much fun to watch.

Until next time...

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