

How Man Can Alter Our Native Habitat—For Good or Bad

The native habitat in most of the Hill Country would be classified as one of three types, woodland, grassland or savanna, the latter of which is a mixture of the former two types. Riparian areas are generally in a class by themselves and can be composed of any of the above three types of habitat but with water running through them.

In normal, functioning habitats containing woody vegetation one would find tall mature trees, smaller trees, and young trees as well as shrubs and vines in random distributions so that there would be vegetation from the ground to the crown which can provide a diversity of food and shelter for all sorts of native animals. And in such a habitat, as the older trees die there would always be younger trees there to take their place at the top of the habitat.

The above-described habitat is not what we observe in most Hill Country habitats today. What is missing is the understory, the immature trees, the saplings, the young root sprouts, the shrubs and the vines. Where these components should be, we frequently see either no understory vegetation at all, and an obvious browseline, or only cedar. And the reason for that is simply too many white-tailed deer, exotics and/or goats.

We know from many Hill Country properties where the numbers of those browsers has been closely controlled for some time what the understory should look like.

Back in 2001 when we were finishing construction of our house, we put up a high fence around about one acre around the house, and we have seen first-hand and up close as the understory has returned to the area inside the fence. In order to put some numbers to the new vegetation, I recently went around the yard and counted native plants that have come up, “volunteer” so to speak, inside the fence.

Before the fence was put up, we had black jack oaks, post oaks, and live oaks and a few cedars, but no other woody vegetation. Here is a list of woody vegetation I found that was not here when we put up the fence and that we did not plant, but rather the forces of Mother Nature planted for us.

We now have 85 new black jack trees, 3/4^{ths} of which are 2-feet tall or less, but 11 of which are in the 5- to 9-foot range. We have 43 new post oaks, 3/4^{ths} of those are 2-feet or less, but 5 of which are 5- to 7-feet tall. We have 10 new live oaks, most under 2-feet tall and only 2 of which are 2- to 4-feet tall. I found only 12 small cedars, although I have over the years cut a few new cedar plants but not a huge number. All of the above new trees could well have come from either the acorns or berries produced by our mature trees or from root-sprouts from the mature trees.

We have 37 hackberries, 6 of which are 2-feet tall or less and about half are in the 5- to 12-foot range. We have 27 escarpment black cherries, 5 of which are under 2-feet tall but most of the rest are in the 5- to 18-foot range. And we have 16 flame-leaf sumacs, a few under 2-foot tall but over half are in the 5-feet to 20-feet range. The seeds of all of these obviously were carried by birds or other animals from somewhere else as there

are none on the property outside the fence. The closest escarpment black cherry is over 500 yards away as is the only sumac I know of. I don't know where the nearest hackberry is.

We planted one possumhaw just after the fence was put up. It didn't do very well but we now have 9 more scattered around the yard all between 5- and 9-feet tall.

We also have, by a very rough count, 17 grape vines, 19 greenbrier, 16 Virginia creeper and 6 trumpet creeper vines.

It should be noted that none of the new plants listed above can be found on our property just outside the fence, except for cedar. In addition to all of the above volunteer vegetation, some of the post oaks and blackjacks have grown limbs down to the ground.

Inside the fence is not really a "native" habitat because there are no browsers at all, just as outside the fence is also not "native" because of the overabundance of grazers and browsers--all caused by man's management activities.

But at least the native birds and small animals can have their "native" habitat on our one acre.

Until next time...

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