

Can We Get Our Land Back Like It Was in the Early 1800s?

Before we can answer that question we have to review, briefly, what the Hill Country looked like in the early 1800s before many Europeans arrived and what has happened to bring us to where we are now.

Just like today, the Hill Country was a mosaic of grasslands, savannas, woodlands and riparian areas. In general, on average, there was somewhat more open grasslands, more of the taller grass species, less bare ground, fewer trees, less cedar, and more springs and seeps than we see today.

There would have likely been a greater diversity of vegetation at all levels, from ground to crown, with little or no browse line. And there would have been occasional buffalo herds, periodic fires set by lightning and by the Native Americans, and many more predators.

So what happened to the land since settlement began? First, the settlers brought cattle, sheep, goats, pigs and chickens and they grazed the grass around the settler's homes continuously, year around. Our native grasses evolved to be grazed, but by migratory herbivores such as bison, elk and pronghorn, and both the grass and the animals survived very well for thousands of years

But the continuous grazing never gave the grass time to recover from being grazed, the result being less grass and smaller grass species with more bare ground between grass plants. Since settlers only moved into an area after the Native Americans had been chased out, the less-frequent fires caused by lightning allowed woody plants (both hardwoods and cedar) to begin to encroach on more open grasslands.

The early Texans also needed to protect their valuable livestock so they shot every large predator they saw, which also meant that the deer not only had more woody-plant browse but also fewer predators. Once the screwworm flu was eliminated in the 1960s, there were no more natural predators of the white-tailed deer.

To summarize all of the above, settlers did not move into an area until the Native Americans had been chased out, thus fewer fires, thus more woody plants. They brought in livestock which they grazed continuously, thus less grass in many areas and smaller grass species, thus less intense and widespread fires, thus more woody plants.

They killed all the large predators protecting their livestock, thus fewer predators for white-tailed deer. After the screwworm was eliminated, the deer population has increased dramatically, thus less understory and fewer replacement trees. However, Ash juniper, being at the bottom of the deer-preference list, and with fewer fires, has continued to increase with no natural controls.

Aldo Leopold said, "... game can be restored by the *creative use* of the same tools which have heretofore destroyed it—axe, plow, cow, fire and gun..." And the same can be said of the land itself.

To oversimplify and summarize the problems of managing rural land in the Hill Country, they are largely: overgrazing, overbrowsing and cedar encroachment. But knowing how we got to this condition also allows us to know how to get back to the original land condition.

Knowing that overgrazing is detrimental both short term as well as long term, and that in the early 1800s the grass got to rest and recover from being grazed, we now know that by proper rotational grazing, lower stocking rates, and occasional prescribe fire grasslands can be significantly improved.

We know that cedar management by bobcat or chain saw can certainly control overabundant cedar and that prescribed fire also helps to prevent new cedar from surviving to become larger.

And we know that on properties that have managed to control deer and exotics numbers to within the carrying capacity, we see replacement hardwoods again coming up and the native understory habitat again returning.

And we know that there are properties in the Hill Country today that: (1) manage cattle as well as good stands of the better tall grasses, (2) keep cedar to reasonable levels, and (3) manage deer populations such that good stands of understory shrubs and vines can be seen as well as replacement hardwood trees.

I didn't say this was easy, or quick, or that it didn't require some sacrifice in income. It takes a longer time for Mother Nature to respond to improved management practices than we humans may have the patience for, but we can now see places where the landscape looks as much like the early 1800s as we can imagine.

We cannot, of course bring back everything from 1800—that would require us to remove all fences, bring back the bison to replace cattle, allow fires to burn naturally, as well as bringing back the wolves, bear and mountain lions. But we can have really beautiful, healthy, sustainable, productive, land without doing that.

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the books "Hill Country Ecology," "Hill Country Landowner's Guide" and "A Beginner's Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners." He can be reached at jstmn@ktc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org

Caption for photo BJ1, "A typical overgrazed, overbrowsed pasture with a severe browseline due to too many cattle and deer."

Caption for IF2, "An area on the same property where the livestock and deer have been excluded for several years, showing tall grass, obvious shrubs and tree limbs down near the ground."