



Issue: Common Landowner Myths and Misperceptions

Photo By: Katherine Romans



HCA is a passionate community caring for the unique features, spring-fed streams, heritage ranch lands, spectacular beauty and vibrant culture of the Texas Hill Country for the benefit of future generations.

Brush Management

MYTH: Mesquite is not native to Texas; it invaded from Mexico. Mesquite is a native tree and has been here for thousands of years. The density of mesquite has increased on many areas for a variety of reasons.

MYTH: Cedar (juniper) is not native to Texas; it is an invader. Ashe juniper (cedar) is native to the region and was present in very large amounts in the eastern and southern Edwards Plateau prior to European settlement. Large and vast cedar forests and woodlands were always present on the steeper hills and in canyons. Heavy grazing and the lack of fires have allowed cedar to increase in abundance and spread beyond its former natural habitat. Red-berry juniper is another native species of cedar that grows in the western Hill Country and further north.

MYTH: Cedar, mesquite and pricklypear are undesirable noxious brush species detrimental to conservation and should be controlled. Cedar, mesquite and pricklypear are all natural components of the native vegetation of Central Texas. They are desirable for wildlife in various amounts. If they become too thick, they can become a problem. Selective and careful management of these species is sometimes needed and desirable.

MYTH: Brush control is needed to help restore water supplies in creeks, lakes and aquifers. Scientists say that brush control is not the answer to our water problems. In most cases, brush control will not substantially increase the offsite supply of water. Large scale brush clearing without adequate precautions can substantially increase runoff to rivers and creeks. This could have dangerous consequences in the Hill Country where soils are thin and slopes are steep. In some cases, the control of juniper on fractured limestone areas may improve spring flow and aquifer recharge, although any improvement is often temporary. In other cases, there is no effect. The proper management of water catchments through good land stewardship and conservative grazing management is the best way to restore healthy hydrologic conditions.

With more new landowners moving to the Texas Hill Country each year, it is important to dispel the common and long-held misperceptions relating to the management of our natural resources. Perhaps the best way to correct these myths is to seek out the input of land management experts. There are a number of free consultation services to help both long-time and new landowners. The items in bold are common misperceptions followed by a brief explanation of clarification.

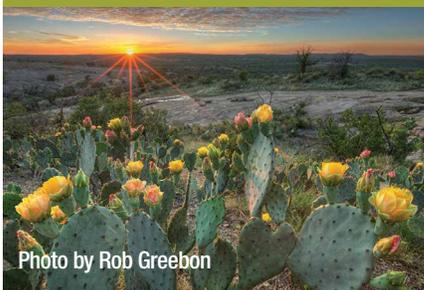


Photo by Rob Greebon



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Grazing Management

MYTH: Land should not be grazed, since livestock cause overgrazing. Cattle, sheep or goats don't cause overgrazing; people cause overgrazing. Grazing done the right way – incorporating rotations and seasonal rest – can be very compatible with good stewardship of the land. Grazing can also be done in a manner to maintain or improve wildlife habitat. Grazing is inherently neither good nor bad. It is a land management tool that can be used positively or negatively to alter the habitat. How it is used is entirely the decision of the landowner.

MYTH: The recommended stocking rate for Central Texas ranches is about 20 to 25 acres per cow. Long term grazing at such fixed rates has caused great deterioration to the vegetation of the region. Some very good condition, well-managed rangeland will safely support a cow per 20 acres or even more, but this is the exception. Proper stocking rates should be determined by a careful assessment of the existing vegetation by a trained individual. Conservative, flexible and light stocking rates are needed in most cases to help restore the health of the land. Overgrazing occurs when livestock is left on a range for too long without allowing for periods of pasture rest and recovery. On most central Texas ranches, 20 to 25 acres per cow will result in substantial overgrazing. It is important to remember that livestock are not the only grazers- deer and exotics must be considered in grazing management plans.

MYTH: Grazing is ecologically necessary in order to maintain healthy land. For land that has been heavily grazed in the past and is in poor condition, the removal of livestock for 2 to 5 years is often recommended to hasten recovery. At that time, a decision can be made whether or not some controlled rotational grazing may be appropriate or beneficial. In most cases, land does not necessarily have to be grazed in order to maintain good healthy vegetation.

MYTH: Goats can be effectively used to control cedar. If goats are stocked in high numbers, they will often get hungry enough to browse large amounts of cedar, especially in winter. Goats may browse young cedar plants severely enough to kill them. The problem with this practice is that cedar is very low on the list of preferred plants, and goats will generally over-browse the other desirable shrubs before they begin to control cedar. The damage that this causes to rangeland and wildlife habitat can be significant.

It is important to remember that the true carrying capacity of a ranch is highly variable and dependent on topography, water availability, type, volume and diversity of vegetation, soils, weather and climate patterns as well as landowner preference.

“Myths are not totally untrue. There is often a thread of truth woven into myths. This is what makes them believable and what helps perpetuate them. In fact, there is enough truth contained in some myths that they could simply be called misperceptions.”

— Steve Nelle

“The Great Grassland Myth,”
Texas Wildlife Monthly, July 2012

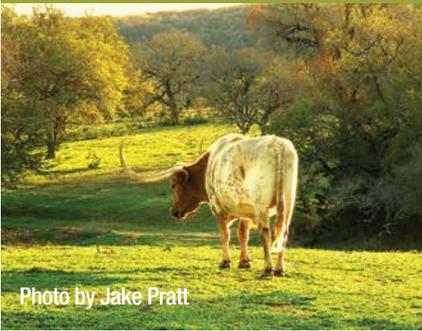


Photo by Jake Pratt



Photo by Ginger Andrews

Wildlife Management

MYTH: Quail cannot be over-hunted since there is an 80% turnover in the population each year. This old misperception was disseminated by wildlife biologists. It has been discovered that heavy hunting can, in fact, hurt next year's quail population. A good carryover of birds from the fall and winter until the spring nesting season is important to stable quail populations. In general, hunters should not remove more than about 1/4 to 1/3 of the birds in each covey in good years. In poor years, no hunting at all may be advisable.

MYTH: Large numbers of raccoons, skunks, and hogs are the reason why we don't have quail. These predators do destroy quail nests, but they are not the primary reason for low quail numbers. Good habitat, especially adequate nest cover will buffer the damage that nest predators cause. Large clumps of grass, the size of a basketball, spaced about every 10 feet are needed for good protective nest cover. Drought and habitat management are the main problems for quail across most of Texas.

MYTH: Coyotes cause great harm to wildlife populations and should be controlled. Coyotes kill and eat fawns and some adult deer. They also destroy quail and turkey nests and eat many other kinds of wild animals. However, predation is a natural and necessary part of the natural balance. Some of the best wildlife populations in the state exist where there are high coyote numbers. Coyotes may actually do more good than harm when it comes to wildlife by reducing the number of raccoons, skunks, fox and other predators. For those who raise livestock, especially sheep or goats, coyotes can be a serious problem and control is often warranted. Where deer numbers are low and where fawn crops are consistently low, coyote control can help boost the deer population.

MYTH: Live oak is a preferred deer food. Deer eat large amounts of live oak leaves; however it is not a high quality or a preferred food. When deer numbers exceed the food supply, they are forced to eat large amounts of low quality browse such as live oak and persimmon. Live oak acorns on the other hand are highly preferred, but acorn production is unreliable and only available for a few months of the year. Remember- when managing for grazing you must consider the impacts of livestock, deer and exotics.

MYTH: Planting food plots is an effective way to improve deer habitat. Food plots can be used to increase the food supply; however they are risky and costly. A large acreage devoted to food plots would be needed to provide a substantial increase in nutrition (1 acre for every 3 deer). If food plots are done properly, they can be very beneficial—depending on rainfall. When not done properly, they are of little or no value. Smaller fields can be planted to attract deer, but their contribution to the overall food supply is

minimal. Native perennial forbs such as Engelmann daisy, bush sunflower, Maximilian sunflower and bundleflower can be planted to provide permanent habitat improvement.

MYTH: Supplemental feeding of high protein is recommended to improve deer nutrition. Deer will readily eat large amounts of protein pellets and it will increase antler development, body size and fawn crops. A high consumption of feed can be an indicator of poor habitat and/or an overpopulation of deer. Supplemental feeding is a very costly practice and can actually lead to habitat degradation since it will quickly allow the population to increase beyond the carrying capacity of the habitat. Feeder placement should always be done with care, as deer and other wildlife will likely be drawn to that location. Feeders should not be placed in environmentally sensitive locations, including riparian areas. An extremely aggressive annual deer harvest becomes essential if feeding is practiced.

MYTH: Spike bucks are genetically inferior and should be culled from the deer herd. Several factors will affect whether a yearling buck will have spike or multiple points for their first set of antlers. The second and subsequent sets of antlers will each be progressively larger until about the age of 6 or 7. Some spikes will remain under developed the remainder of their life while others will develop large antlers. Most bucks that start out as spikes will develop 8 or more points later in life. With good nutrition as a result of good habitat management, most yearling bucks will have 4 or more points, except in drought years. A large number of yearling spikes is normally indicative of habitat and nutritional problems, not a “genetic problem.” In years of drought, it is common to have many spikes, even where there is good habitat. Most biologists and deer managers agree that emphasis should be placed on habitat improvement rather than the culling of spikes. However, there is no consensus among biologists and deer managers on this issue and opinions vary greatly.

MYTH: Improved grasses are recommended for planting in Central Texas. For many years, some ranchers have planted exotic (non-native) grasses to provide increased forage for livestock. Some people mistakenly refer to these as “improved grasses”. For central Texas, the list includes Coastal bermuda grass, Kleingrass, Wilman lovesgrass, K. R. bluestem, Old world bluestem, and other exotic bluestems. These grasses establish quickly and provide high production. These grasses are inferior in many ways to diverse native grassland. A monoculture of any of these exotic grasses reduces habitat quality and provides less favorable yearlong grazing compared to native grasslands.



Photo by W. Price

“Unfortunately, engineering or mechanical solutions usually trump ecological solutions because the former do not require people to change their behavior.”

— Dr. John Walker
Range Ecologist and
President, Texas Section
of the Society for Range
Management



Photo by Jim Stanley

This Hill Country ranch has been seriously overgrazed, and is an unfortunately common scene in our region.

A Photo is Worth 1,000 Words...



The Grand Prize winner of the 2014 HCA Photo Contest was Mark Holly with “No Bluebonnets This Year,” taken on the Willow City Loop near Fredericksburg in early spring, 2014. We felt especially compelled to use this image on the calendar cover because of the story it tells — of stress and hope and resiliency. To continue the story, we asked the photographer to return to his photo point and take another shot during the early mild summer of 2014 after several rains. Bill Neiman helps us understand the scene.

“Most landowners, especially those who just purchased a piece of heavenly Hill Country, are totally in love with their land. But what many don’t realize is how to love this land with our human hands connecting what we learn and observe with essential stewardship best practices.

Many times, well-intentioned people draw from their experience in managing a lawn back in town, but imposing landscaping tactics on a grander scale can lead to disappointment, wasted expense, and unintended consequences. Often people jump to conclusions when

ground becomes barren during dormant times of drought. Unknowingly, some think of plowing or tilling bare areas and introducing cheaper and widely available exotic grass seeds. This scenario can set off soil erosion and introduction of invasive species and decline in wildlife habitat and water resources.

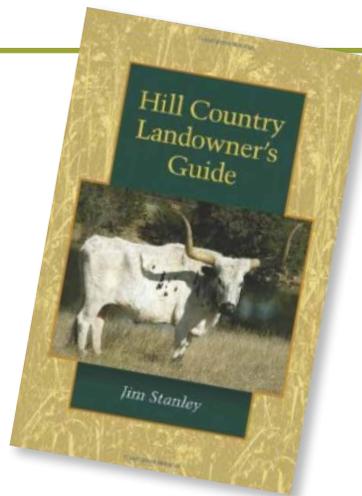
Our Hill Country land is usually quite resilient; it shows us signs that can be read like a book. As pictured in the photo that followed rains, abundant native Texas winter grasses were laying in wait... only to thrive when favorable climate conditions returned, and requiring nothing of the landowner but to wait and see.



Sometimes the best advice is to be patient and do nothing. Take time to observe the natural functions around us. Learn to read the land. Let four seasons play out before jumping to conclusions. You will assuredly and more quietly be on your way to better stewardship.”

– Bill Neiman, Native American Seed

Interested in learning more about common landowner misperceptions? Check out the Hill Country Landowner’s Guide, by Jim Stanley.



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What is HCA?

The Hill Country Alliance is a nonprofit organization whose purpose is to raise public awareness and build community support around the need to preserve the natural resources and heritage of the Central Texas Hill Country. We create resources, conversations and forums for landowners, neighbors, elected officials and all concerned citizens.



Interested in staying connected to this and other land, water and scenic beauty issues in the Hill Country? Please visit www.hillcountryalliance.org and click “subscribe” to receive our weekly newsletter with news, events and updates.

“This is resilient country that can rebound from pure desolation to lush abundance in an instant with rain. Native plants, animals and also the early people of the Texas Hill Country adapted; they learned to consume less, conserve limited resources, and live within the carrying capacity of the land. If we are to live here in big numbers, we need to listen, observe, learn and tread lightly.”

– Sky Lewey,
Nueces River Authority



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