



A CONSERVATION NOTEBOOK by Homer Stevens

History tells us that back in the early 1800's the Texas Hill country and much of the rest of the state was covered with tall grasses-- Little Bluestem, Big Bluestem, Yellow Indian grass, Eastern gama , Switch grass to name a few. Subsequent articles of this publication may deal with each of these species individually, in fact Eastern gama has already had its position of individual attention. Most of the early Bandera history books mention men on horseback riding through grasses stirrup high, and these are the species that are capable of fullfilling that description. However, as might be expected this group of grasses has deep penetrating root systems which allow them to have abundant tall leaf areas. This constitution requires years to establish, and all forms of herbivore animal life whether it be deer, buffalo, or domestic cattle, sheep and goats have strong preferences for these broad leafed species.

The species mentioned were prevalent in the pre wire era of Texas where huge herds of buffalo were the dominant range species that would graze the grasses to the ground but would move on and allow months even years before coming back to the same grounds. This would give the primary species of grass time to recover.

Another important controlling factor in maintaining the tall grass ecology was fire. Such events as lightning storms, or possibly human action accidental or intentional occasionally touched off wildfires that consumed vast areas of the tall grass prairie. These sequences of events, short grazing and prairie wildfires, prevented the establishment of invasive species such as prickly pear, mesquite, or Texas mountain cedar.

In the late 1800's and early 1900's with the advent of wire fences grazing animals were confined to specific areas, and most of the land was grazed almost to ground level. Nature, however, is persistent in seeking to maintain plant life, and the tall grasses were replaced

by a second level of species most of which had some type of thorn, grass burrs, three awns, mesquite, prickly pear, or Texas Mountain Cedar that has its own adaptive techniques. Fortunately some of our government entities recognized the value of encouraging land owners to restore the tall grass culture.



educational materials and makes research results available. The Soil Conservation Service evaluates and gives engineering advice on specific situations. The Agricultural Stabilization Service actually distributes government funds for such practices as clearing cedar.

Clearing brush species mechanically is a step forward, but unless followed by controlled grazing, and some other form of land care, its value can be negated rapidly. Research at the Kerr Wildlife Management Area has shown that land cleared free of cedar even though the tall grasses may reestablish themselves temporarily, the brush species will take over in due time if no other follow-throughs are initiated.

Here on the Farm! A twenty + acre field that was formerly used as cropland has lain fallow for several years only subject to occasional grazing by cattle. For the most part tall grass conditions did reestablish. However, a smattering of cedar trees and prickly pear patches have appeared.

Four years ago the field was shredded using a 40 Hp John Deer tractor and a PTO shredder in the hope that this kind of practice would suffice without the danger of fire. At first appearances the practice seemed to have been successful. However, recent examinations have shown that the

cedar that was not cut completely to the ground has grown bigger trunk bases and spread closer to the ground. The prickly pear is an even bigger problem.

The shredder scattered pieces of the plant over a wide area and many of them formed new plants increasing the size of the pear patch significantly. Not only did the shredding process increase the amount of pear it apparently PO'd the plants so that the new growth has bigger and longer thorns than its predecessors. The recommended practice that is planned for this spring is a controlled burn. Any cedar that has all of its green removed by the fire will not resprout, the prickly pear will react in the same manner, and the burned pear will be eaten by deer and antelope.

Obviously the practice of controlling grassland ecology by burning requires careful attention, but is a time honored proven practice.



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