

What The Hill Country Was Like Before We Got Here

People often ask, “What did the Hill Country look like in the past?” The answer of course depends a lot on how far back in the past you want to go. During the last ice age, there were mastodons, saber-tooth tigers and spruce/pine forests, but that is probably not what most people have in mind when they ask the question.

The time many people have in mind is before many European settlers had arrived in Texas. And this is a very good time period to refer to, because not only was it the time just before great changes were beginning to take place in Texas, but also the first time that we have the detailed descriptions of the Hill Country by numerous educated explorers. They arrived in Texas at a time before the settlers of European ancestry had been here for a sufficient time or in sufficient numbers to have had major effects on the countryside—the early to middle 1800s.

Various explorers made forays into different parts of the Hill Country at different times. No single account can be taken as best describing the Hill Country, but each description is a snap-shot in time and place. It is only after putting together all of their accounts that an accurate picture emerges of the early 19th century Hill Country.

In general, the Hill Country of the early 1800s had considerably fewer trees, including cedar (Ashe juniper), than we have now and more open grasslands and savannas. The most densely wooded areas were along creeks and streams and the steep valleys thereof, where mixtures of various hardwoods and cedars were common. Most of the flatter uplands contained considerably fewer trees of any kind, although occasional live oak mottes and scattered cedar brakes did exist.

In many areas, especially in areas with the deeper soil, the grassland would have looked different because of a greater proportion of taller grasses, especially what we call the Big Four of the tall grass prairie, big bluestem, yellow indiagrass, switchgrass, and little bluestem. These grasses put up seed heads that, in wet years, could be taller than a man’s head.

Bison ranged widely in great herds which migrated long distances. This part of the Hill Country may not have seen the really large herds seen further north in the Great Plains, but the bison did range beyond San Antonio. Elk and pronghorns also grazed these lands.

When a large herd of bison passed through an area, they left virtually nothing uneaten. Fortunately the herds seldom passed through the same area more than once during the growing season or maybe not again for several years, so the heavily grazed grasses could recover and, with the fertilizer left behind by the animals, grow back vigorously. Some of the early explorers reported that on attempted trips of some distance, they

sometimes had to turn back because coming along just after the bison had been through the area, there was nothing for their horses to eat.

The other major occurrence in the early 1800s was fire. The early explorers described encountering numerous prairie fires that burned huge areas, sometimes burning for weeks at a time. Some of these fires were certainly caused by lightning, but many were set by the Native Americans, either accidentally or on purpose. (They knew that soon after a fire, the new green grass shoots would attract game animals.) These fires in the grasslands are the main thing that kept more trees from growing, because before a sapling could get big enough to withstand a fire, it would be burned up.

Because there was much less grass for fuel in the wooded areas on the slopes, these areas seldom burned. The white-tailed deer probably spent most of their time in the wooded areas, because there was little for them to eat on the grasslands.

With all of the large prey animals around, it is not surprising that there were many large predators as well. The last wolf and black bear in Kerr County were killed in the early years of the 20th century.

Until next time....

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