Brush — It’s a Matter of Perspective

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If you ever attended a talk by Steve Nelle, you undoubtedly were impressed by how well this man understands the natural habit of this part of Texas and its relationship to our human-influenced ecosystem. Mr. Nelle is with USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service in San Angelo, but he often comes to Boerne to share his wisdom at various programs and workshops given by Cibolo Nature Center.

Steve Nelle usually works with landowners who want to be better stewards of their rangeland, but his experience in good management of those rural large tracts of land can be applicable to the smaller tracts and suburban lots which most of us try to manage in one way or another.

Steve recently wrote an insightful paper about rangeland brush. Brush … you know … that worthless mix of small trees, shrubs, and vines that needs to be cleaned off the land. Or is that really a sensible definition of “brush”?

Steve Nelle thinks a more acceptable definition is “shrubs and trees which are considered undesirable to the planned use of the area”. This defines brush relative to the objectives for a given piece of land. Where land is managed for prairies or grazing land without wildlife habitat, most shrubs and trees are indeed brush, incompatible with the objectives. For any land wholly or partly managed for wildlife, however, trees and shrubs are desirable, even essential, and are not brush.

“What may be a worthless brushy jungle to the cattleman may be an exceptional browse pasture to the goat raiser,” Steve writes. It’s a matter of perspective. “What may be a hideous brush-infested pasture to one person may be a tract of excellent wildlife habitat to another.”

Wildlife uses trees and shrubs for two main purposes: to eat and to live in. Steve points out that “browse” (leaves and tender stems) may be an important food source for a few mammals such as deer, but is of no direct food benefit to most mammals, birds, and reptiles. By contrast, the berries, nuts, and seeds of woody plants are vital for the existence of many species of wildlife.

The most preferred Hill Country shrubs, trees, and vines with demonstrated wildlife value as fruit, seed, or flower include: bush honeysuckle, hawthorn, rusty blackhaw, Carolina buckthorn, Spanish oak, possumhaw, Texas mulberry, mistletoe, hackberry, blackjack oak, bumelia, Roemer acacia, redbud, grapevine, wild plum, Carolina snailseed, elbowbush, Virginia creeper, poison ivy, greenbriar, black cherry, and elms.

Nearly all types of wildlife in Texas depend on woody plants for cover, shelter, and protection from predators and harsh weather. Steve points out that, “When considering cover for wildlife, more is not necessarily better. For just about any wildlife species, there can be too much or too little cover.” For example, a sparse canopy of low shrubby cover is used by deer, quail, and many grassland birds, but a dense canopy of smaller trees with open understory is required by many woodland birds, and a sparse canopy of taller trees is used by savanna birds.

Another benefit of shrubs and trees is that they enrich the soil with leaf litter. Some, such as mesquite and other woody legumes, also fix nitrogen into the soil. In addition, spiny shrubs serve as nursery areas to protect desirable plants from browsing animals.

From Steve Nelle’s perspective, land managed for wildlife is lucky to have native shrubs and trees and especially lucky if there is a wide diversity of shrubs and trees. From my perspective, Steve's ideas work even on a suburban lot. I am convinced that our yard attracts such a variety of birds because of the large diversity of native shrubs and trees we cultivate. Our “brush” is not brush!