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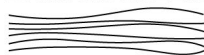
1987-Present

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The next time you see an Ashe juniper, know that it is native, has been here at least since the last ice age, and is the foundation of a forest ecosystem that supports a diverse array of unique, endemic, and endangered species.”

As long as I can remember, I have been an advocate for underdogs. And in 1991, I found the ultimate underdog - the Ashe juniper (aka “cedar”) tree. I have lived in Austin most of my life, and grew up hiking along Barton Creek and photographing our wooded hills. I took them for granted. The first time I remember hearing that these hills were originally covered in grasslands that had been invaded by “cedars,” I was on a biology field trip as a University of Texas undergrad. In 1991, I was hired as an endangered species biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), shortly after the Golden-cheeked Warbler was listed as endangered. I had some colleagues tell me that they had read historic accounts of early explorers riding through the Hill Country, where there was “grass as far as the eye could see” that was “as high as the horse’s belly.” As a USFWS biologist working on Golden-cheeked Warblers, Barton Springs salamanders, and karst invertebrates, and later as a City of Austin biologist managing the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve, I was on a quest to see if I could find historic documents that supported these claims. After reading Del Weniger’s *The Explorers’ Texas*, I embarked on a 20-year search that included prehistoric data (fossilized juniper pollen more than 14,000 years old), first-hand eyewitness accounts (1700-1900), historical maps and photographs, and field survey notes of original land grants. I even found the survey notes for the land that would eventually become Zilker Park. The picture that emerged was extensive Ashe juniper-oak forests along the eastern edge of the Edwards Plateau, which extends westward from Barton Springs. So, the hills along Barton Creek have been forested for a very long time. However, the extensive logging (look around for old cedar stumps, which take decades to decompose), fires, and livestock grazing that followed European settlement have altered the forests considerably. Areas that have been more inaccessible to these activities - like the steep canyons - tend to have older, taller, trees; richer, deeper soils; and more diversity. These refugia are where we find our Golden-cheeked Warblers, Bracted Twistflowers, and springs that feed the creek and provide habitat for aquatic salamanders. More recently, I have been researching the critical role that Ashe junipers play in facilitating oak regeneration and survival, in collaboration with local and international scientists. And what about those accounts of grass “as far as the eye can see”? They were on the Blackland Prairie (east of the Edwards Plateau) and Cross Timbers (north of the Edwards Plateau). So, the next time you see an Ashe juniper, know that it is native, has been here at least since the last ice age, and is the foundation of a forest ecosystem that supports a diverse array of unique, endemic, and endangered species. I plan to write a book on this topic in the next few years.

BARTON CREEK



TIME STREAM