The Trees We Love to Hate

"If you wrote a book that told everybody how to eradicate all the cedars, then you could run for mayor of Austin and win."

Jim Messer, an Austin acquaintance

The Ubiquitous Cedar

Perceived to be as wily as the coyote, and just as common, the adaptable Mountain Cedar tree covers million of acres in central Texas like a verdant blanket of fleece. Of this region, it is most abundant in the Texas Hill Country.

This evergreen tree, most commonly thought of as a bush, was called Mountain Cedar by the first European settlers. Later, it was botanically labeled as the *Juniperus ashei*, or just Ashe Juniper. Other names, such as Blueberry Juniper, Post Cedar, Mexican Juniper, Rock Cedar, Ozark White Cedar, or just damn cedar, were later tacked on.

Like most junipers, Mountain Cedars thrive in limestone soils of the Hill Country. One subregion, the Llano Uplift, has granite based soils. Mountain Cedars can also grow in those soils but never prolifically.

Beyond the Hill Country, the range of Mountain Cedars extends with less abundance southward into the Sierra del Carmen Mountains of Mexico and northward to the mountains of the Ozarks in Arkansas and Missouri, and the Arbunkles in Oklahoma. (see Chapter 4 for a range map)

The wily coyote. photo courtesy of ©Sean Crane/Minden Pictures

In its northern most range, the trees are not abundant. In the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas, older Mountain Cedars are found in such isolated pockets that they are viewed as precious and worthy of protection.

But in the Hill Country, this tree has

Over time, bushy-cedars can develop into multi trunk trees. photo by Elizabeth McGreevy

become viewed as the bane of ranchers, developers, water managers, and those that suffer from a seasonal allergic reaction to the tree's pollen, called cedar fever. These trees seem to grow everywhere and anywhere, and are hated by most.

Throughout my years of cedar research it always amazes me to hear the snarls emitting from otherwise docile people as they denounce the Mountain Cedar. To most people, the mere mention of the word cedar is enough to rile the tempers of many Central Texans.

Emotions run high whenever I dispute the beliefs of those who are firmly seated upon the bandwagon of the anti-cedar people. I have had lunch bags hurled in my direction, people hang up on me and been

Typical bushy-cedars, both small and large. photo by Elizabeth McGreevy

Typical cedar thicket of pioneering Mountain Cedars. photo by Elizabeth McGreevy

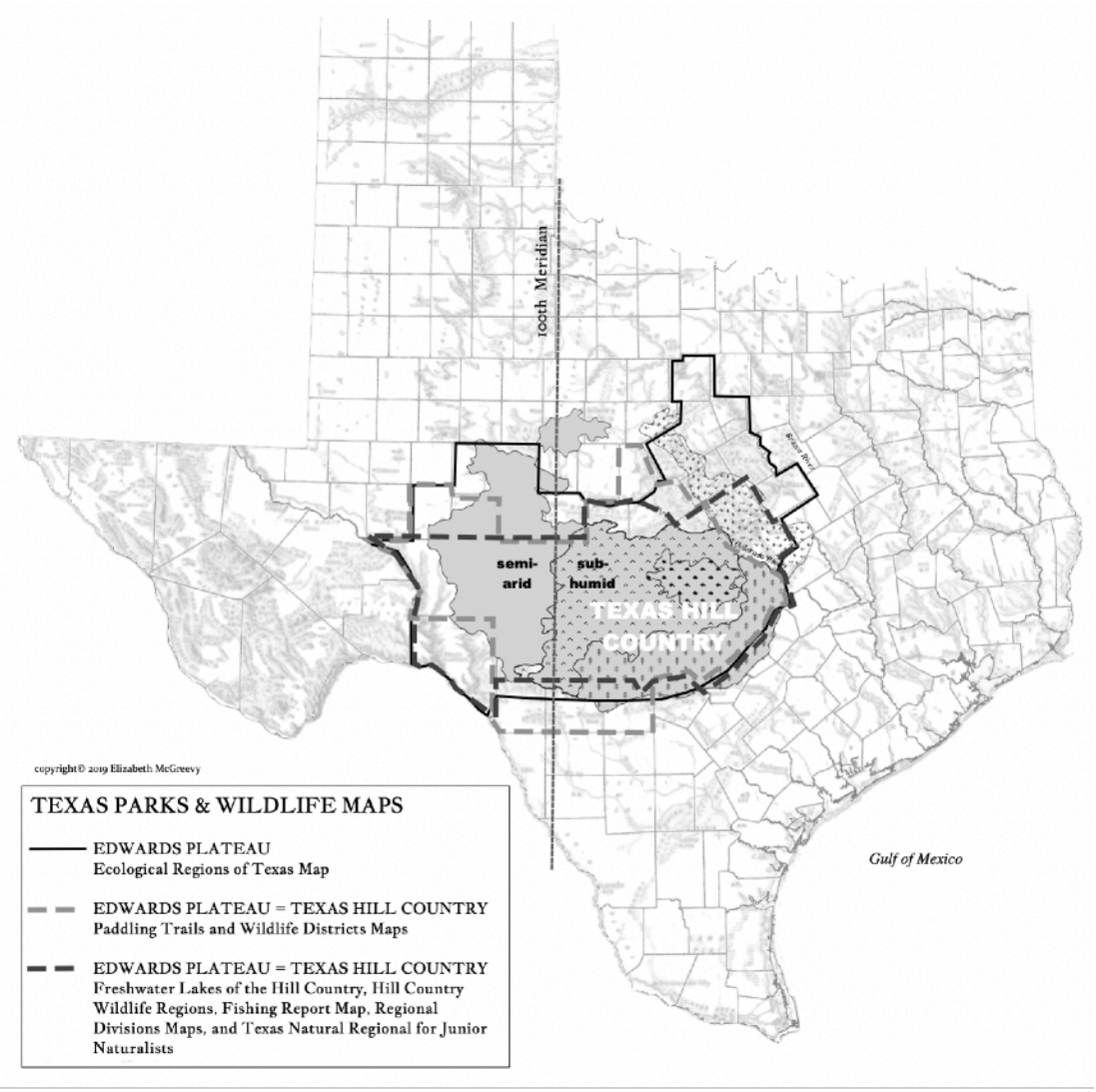
subjected to hecklers in crowds. Never in my life have I come across a more determined group of people, than those determined to annihilate a single species of tree.

Forget that, in days bygone, the tree was held in high esteem. Today, most people despise the tree.

Where Exactly is the Texas Hill Country?

One of the most confusing things about Mountain Cedars is explaining where they grow in Texas. There is a general misnomer that the Texas Hill Country is the same as the Edwards Plateau.

For instance, in a StateImpact Texas online report, a reporter wrote, "The Edwards Plateau, the technical name for the Texas Hill Country, is an island of hills in the ocean of the Great Plains." [Ramirez, 2015] It is likely this belief stems from the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department online sites and maps that repeatedly link the two regions. On the TPWD Texas Ecoregions website page, it states "The Edwards Plateau region comprised an area of central Texas commonly known as the Texas Hill Country." Other books, such as The Natural History of Texas, repeat the same, proclaiming the Edwards Plateau is the Hill Country. [Chapman and Bolen, 2018]



Inconsistent Texas Parks & Wildlife maps contribute to the confusion about the boundaries of the Hill Country, especially since most of their maps consider the Edwards Plateau and the Texas Hill Country to be the same region. map by Elizabeth McGreevy

But the Texas Hill Country is not the Edward's Plateau. It is a PART, a subregion, of the Edwards Plateau. It consists of the sub-humid, dissected, eastern half of the plateau. It approximately starts east of the 100th meridian.

The Hill Country includes the Balcones Canyonlands, Llano Uplift and the Edward's Plateau Woodland. Some maps consider the Lampasas Cut Plains to the north of the Balcones Canyonlands to be an extension of the Edward's Plateau. For that reason, I prefer to include the Lampasas Cut Plains with the Texas Hill Country. Others, such as the Hill Country Alliance, do not include the Lampasas Cut Plains. More specifically, the Hill Country"consists of all or parts of fifteen counties west of Austin and San Antonio: Bandera, Blanco, Burnet, Gillespie, Kendall, Kerr, Kimble, Llano, Mason, Real, Lampassas and western parts of Comal, Hays, Travis, and Williamson." [Roberts 2018]

The main reason for this clarification is that the western third of the Edward's Plateau is semi-arid and was predominantly grassland when the Europeans arrived more than 150

years ago. Here, "annual precipitation is too low to support the dense cover of woody vegetation found eastward on the plateau." [Chapman and Bolen, 2018] This part of the plateau is also less dissected and more open and thus would have more easily accommodated the continuous spread of grassland fires and buffalo stampedes. The Eastern half of the Edward's Plateau historically had more woodland cover, with the Balcones Canyonlands reporting the greatest amount of tree cover prior to the 1880s. [Weniger, 1997; Foster, 1917; Diamond, 1997; Foster, 2001, Smeins 2001, Bray, 1904b; O'Donnell, 2019]

John Graves, a beloved Texana author, described the Texas Hill Country best:

> "It is a swath of rumpled terrain whose eastern and southern edge sweeps in an arc some two hundred miles long from the Austin area down past San Antonio and west not too far from Del Rio…this curving boundary is a rise of hundreds of feet from lower, flatter lands to the east and south and is known as the Balconies Escarpment…containing all or parts of more than twenty counties, the hills have a less emphatic border on their northwestern inward side, where valleys and draws grow swallow and blend into the ranching grasslands of the wide, semiarid Edwards Plateau, of which the Hill Country itself is the eroded fringe." [Graves 2003]

Why We Want Them Gone

The popular stance in the Hill Country is that the Mountain Cedar is bad. As a result, many support cedar removal, if not outright eradication.

Why is this? Well, for starters, there is cedar fever. Cedar fever is a winter time allergy that announces its descent upon our unwary nostrils with massive clouds of cedar pollen. Once it enters our delicate nostrils, it plagues us for weeks and months, causing itchy, snot nosed, feverish allergies.

Golden-cheeked Warbler in an older Mountain Cedar. photo courtesy of Gil Eckrich

Oh yes, that.

If ever there was an emotional reason to hate a tree, this would be it. (see Chapter 8)

Another reason people don't like Mountain Cedars is because they are so darn persistent and seem to grow everywhere, especially where you don't want them. For landowners, getting rid of cedars is a non-ending nightmare. They clear their cedars to get more grass, and within a few years everything is cedar again. (see Chapter

Pollen being shaken from a loaded male Mountain Cedar. photo by Elizabeth McGreevy

10)

On top of this frustration, landowners were told in the mid-1990s that they could no longer clear ANY Mountain Cedars because an endangered little bird, the Golden-cheeked Warbler, needs the bark of Mountain Cedars to build its tiny nests. Even though it was later clarified that only the older Mountain Cedars were involved, people didn't listen. All they knew is the government was telling them what to do.

The idea of not being able to clear whatever Mountain Cedars they wanted drove many landowners into a frenzy and stuck like a burr in the side of any landowner out there hell bent on protecting his property rights and developers trying to get higher prices by clear cutting to expose dramatic hilltop views.

This endangered species debacle was closely followed by a study that compared the water use of oaks to cedars. The results suggested Mountain Cedars use about two times more water than oaks and confirmed in everybody's minds that Mountain Cedars were causing our water shortages. Almost overnight the Mountain Cedar gained was branded as a tremendous water hog. (see Chapter 15)

That was when all hell broke loose.

The war on cedar, which had been simmering for decades, was finally set to full boil. Before long a series of myths, or Cedar Tall Tales, were created to justify continuous removals of the tree.

About this Book

The underlying purpose of this book is to propose and prove that a single species of tree does not harm the local ecology or a rancher's pasture. Rather, it is the lack of hydrated soils.

When explorers and settlers first arrived in the Texas Hill Country, they described a land of beauty and bounty of which Mountain Cedars were fully a part. After decades of clear cutting large, older Mountain Cedars, overgrazing, over burning, over pumping and toxic chemical over spraying, humans NOT Mountain Cedars caused the severely eroded and dehydrated conditions we see today.

So how did Mother Nature respond to our transgressions upon the land?

She threw a blanket of pioneering cedar thickets across her eroded, dehydrated skin. This means Mountain Cedars did not causes our problems, they are only a symptom of our problems.

To address the many issues that revolve around the Mountain Cedar, I will be writing three volumes.

Volume One, Current Issues will focus on our issues with the Mountain Cedar. Since the trees are most common in the Texas Hill Country, most of the focus will be here. *Volume One* will analyze and fact check each Cedar Tale Tale about the trees as it pertains to their character, growth and water use.

Once we get down and dirty, you will realize how convoluted the truth has become due decades of 'fake news' and incomplete and sometimes distorted science and exaggerations by the media.

Do not expect black or white answers. For instance, whereas I could just say, "nope, the live oak is not a water hog" and everyone would believe me, it will take several chapters to back peddle and explain

Tom Spencer discussing Mountain Cedars with me on Central Texas Gardener. photo by Linda Lehmusvirta, © Central Texas Gardener 2019

everything regarding water and the Mountain Cedar. And although I will do my best to keep my writing simple, I will not oversimplify and generalize just to appease the masses. This is because issues of ecology never are never that simple.

Volume One, will be followed by *Volume Two, A Better Plan*. this volume will ooze with optimism. Regenerative land restoration strategies that focus on soil health will be explored and proposed. A brief outline of *Volume Two* is included in Chapter 19.

Leaving the optimism of *Volume Two*, *Volume Three, Looking Back* will explore the historical ecological and cultural context of the Mountain Cedar since the end of the last ice age over 10,000 years ago. Vegetation changes in response to changing climates, ecologies, soils, and human and wildlife influences will be explored. The purpose of this last volume is two-fold. First, it will debunk the myth that when European settlers arrived the Hill Country was mostly covered with grasses as far as the eye could see (side chapter 10a briefly explores this topic). Besides pre-1890s vegetation descriptions and artwork, reports by Native Americans, soil types, presence or lack of wildlife, place names, and descriptives used.

Am I Going to Say "Don't Cut Your Cedars?"

When most folks find out I am writing a book on the Mountain Cedar, they are instantly suspicious. I can hear them thinking, "Is she with us or against us?" Most often, they assume I am against them. They tell me, "Don't go trying to get us to stop cutting down our cedars."

Rest assured, that's not what I'm saying. In fact, that's why I ended up calling my book Mountain Cedar: Wanted Dead AND Alive.

I wanted to make it clear from the get go that this was to be a book based on balance. No hidden agendas here; no obligations to political agencies nor financial glory to be achieved by writing this book.

Nope. Just me getting the story straight and promoting the facts and solutions.

What I am proposing is that the time has come to push the reset button; to step back. We need to view what we've been doing to manage our Hill Country lands and find new, sustainable solutions.

Because, guess what? What we've been doing for the last century for the most part has not worked.

Wrap Up: A Hopeful, But Not Unrealistic, Goal

When you finish this book, I do not expect you to suddenly burst out, "Damn, I love that tree" and run outside to hug a pollen ladened cedar. However, I do hope you will put down this book with a better understanding of why and how this veteran of our Hill Country now spreads so easily. You will also learn that there's more to the story than meets the eye.

If this book can get you to see the Mountain Cedar in a new light, no matter how dim, the Hill Country will benefit. The Mountain Cedar is a key part of this ecosystem. And in

Older Mountain Cedar along cedar posts supplied by its ancestors. photo by Elizabeth McGreevy

response to more than a century of improper land management, Mother Nature herself has been using these trees to clothe the earth, to protect it—much as a bandaid serves to protect an open wound and enable that would to heal.

Until balance is restored, thickets of bushy Mountain Cedars will prevail. Balance is what we need, and this demands a balanced approach.

Perhaps you'll finally come to realize, even if begrudgingly, that not all Mountain Cedars are bad.