

# The Hill Country Steward

## Where Water Meets Land - Riparian Areas

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Often, when we think about the health of our Hill Country creeks or rivers, our tendency is to look straight down in the channel. Is there any water down there? How much? See any fish?

No doubt, these are important questions. However, by narrowing our focus solely onto what is in the stream channel, we disregard the extensive natural infrastructure that sustains our creeks and rivers. A key part of this natural infrastructure is the riparian zone.

“Riparian” is not a word we hear too often in Texas—perhaps to our detriment. This term refers to the narrow and verdant vegetated areas along our waterways. These transitional zones between a creek, river, or lakebed and the drier uplands are fairly small, making up only about 1-2% of the Hill Country, but crucial to the broader region.

When comprised of a diverse and healthy mixture of plants, riparian zones provide many benefits to humans, wildlife, and livestock. Intertwined roots of grasses, shrubs, and other plants help stabilize creek banks, keeping that part of your property in place. While a deep cradle of roots stabilizes the soil and stream channel, the above-ground plant growth in the riparian zone helps slow down water, storing it in creek banks and the broader floodplain like a sponge for drier times.

Slowing down water - whether rising flood waters or runoff pouring down a hillside - is an important first domino to stewarding healthy riparian areas. As vegetation, downed tree limbs, and logs left along the banks of riparian zones slow down flowing water, they help mitigate the destructive and erosive forces of flood surges. These areas

also trap particles of sediment. Trapping sediment rich in organic matter helps enlarge the floodplain, which in turn absorbs water like a sponge, recharges groundwater, and sustains creek flows.

It is this domino effect, starting with riparian vegetation, that provides many values we seek as landowners and residents. Values like clean and abundant water, forage for livestock, fish and wildlife habitat, bank stability, and recreational opportunities all emerge from a healthy, functioning riparian zone. What happens in our riparian areas impacts everyone downstream.



Photo Credit: Jerry Sargent

Riparian zones are a small, dynamic, and remarkably resilient part of the landscape. Often, if we can identify the stressors (e.g. overgrazing, over-mowing, overabundance of native or exotic deer) and manage them effectively, riparian zones will restore themselves. Sometimes planting native plant species can help expedite the recovery process.

The challenge and opportunity for each riparian land steward is to find the right balance, given their stewardship goals. This could mean maintaining recreational access with targeted

access points interspersed by riparian “grow zones,” or possibly limiting the timing, frequency, and / or duration of grazing along the creek to maintain the riparian plant community. Thankfully, there are numerous technical, educational, and financial resources to support riparian land stewards in these efforts.

To learn more and connect with folks who care about your piece of Texas just as much as you do, visit [www.texasconservation.org](http://www.texasconservation.org). If you have questions related to stewardship or conservation, you can email them to [DearStew@texasconservation.org](mailto:DearStew@texasconservation.org) and you might just see them answered in a future column. And be sure to come back next month as we dive into stewardship as it relates to our region’s wildlife. Looking forward to learning more with you. – The Hill Country Steward

*The Hill Country Steward – not a person, but a partnership of local experts dedicated to sharing the best information, tips, and lessons learned. Have questions? Send them to [DearStew@texasconservation.org](mailto:DearStew@texasconservation.org). Learn more at [www.texasconservation.org](http://www.texasconservation.org).*

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