

Don't Brush Off Brush Piles!

By Caleb Clarkson

When a large storm like Hurricane Beryl passes through an area, the trees and vegetation in its path are subject to strong gusts of wind that can shear off old branches and even uproot or break the trees in half completely. I often forget the tremendous power of wind, until I am inevitably reminded by the ridiculous amount of knocked-down branches and trees that need to be moved from one place to another, brush pile after brush pile.

Making brush piles is a simple concept; gather up all the natural debris you can reach and pile it into a big mound to be removed by the local government, eventually to be mulched or destroyed. However, making brush piles, especially in the Texas heat, is hard work!

Imagine, finally, after all the scrapes, sweat, and bug bites, your brush pile is finally finished. Your brush pile is ready to be picked up and you can wash your hands of it. But as the weeks pass, and you see the other piles around town slowly fade away, your brush pile, the one you worked so hard on, remains, lost and forgotten.

Unfortunately, this is a harsh reality of debris removal. Debris pickup is a long process that often happens in multiple stages and can take many months to complete, possibly leaving lovely brush piles like yours sticking around for a little longer. How frustrating!

But, while those hard-working debris haulers (thank you!) slowly make their way to your pile, there are other, albeit quite smaller, hard-working haulers enjoying the fruits of your labor. Loads of little critters such as, birds, small mammals, reptiles, bugs, and amphibians use brush piles as valuable habitats.

The presence of a brush pile greatly increases the abundance and diversity of the animal life around it. The effect is so great that brush piles are a frequently used conservation practice. In this role, brush piles are often referred to as habitat piles, because of all the nooks and crannies that allow critters to hide away from predators, the heat, or storms.

The concentration of smaller animals living in these piles also attracts larger, predatory animals such as foxes, skunks, hawks, and owls into the area. Habitat piles work especially well with invasive vegetation removal. Cutting invasive plants (a process that increases native biodiversity) and the subsequent piling of those cuttings create a biodiversity one-two punch! Some homeowners purposely leave a brush pile in the corner of their yard to help increase the wildlife they see from their backdoor!

That wayward pile may be sitting ugly on your lawn, and it could be a nagging image to come home to, and understandably so! But maybe if we looked a little closer... or for a little longer... we could see all the birds, squirrels, rabbits, lizards, frogs, and moths that have made a nice vacation home in our pile of hard work. At night, perhaps, we can spy an owl or skunk making their rounds, now checking on your well-assembled pile, seeing if they can rustle up some grub.

There! Deep and dark into the pile I see gleaming! Is it a sliver of a silver lining? Or just the glinting eyes of a cottontail, anxiously looking out for dawn's first light?

Photo credit: Celeste Silling

Photo Caption: Brush piles are a common site along the Upper Texas Coast lately