

PK Natural History and Bird Watching Committee Group Newsletter

Fall/Winter Season

INTRODUCTION: Summer is over and fall officially begins September 23rd at 3:21 a.m. The days will begin to get shorter and the nights longer until December 21 at 10:48 p.m. when fall ends and winter officially begins and the days now begin to get longer. Those birds you have been seeing all through the summer are birds that have nested here in The Hills and some of us have been very lucky to see this activity in action. On the lake side the Purple Martins made their presence known. The Black-capped Vireo – a bird that has in the past been very restricted in its habitat to areas in the Hill Country - has been expanding its range and this year was heard and seen all summer long. The Dickcissels made a massive appearance also and have been here all summer as well. See our summer newsletter for more information on the summer birds. All of these summer birds we have been seeing have nested on our properties. But now fall approaches and the birds we have become familiar with during the spring and summer will be migrating to their wintering grounds – not to appear again until next spring. The greenery and flowers we have become familiar with in our yards will turn color, shed leaves and wither. One of the most prolific native shrubs found throughout The Hills is the Prairie Flameleaf Sumac. During the summer, this shrub has large clusters of white flowers, followed by red fruit. The red



fruit is what we

are seeing now.



In the fall,

leaves will turn a brilliant red/orange. The prairie sumac is extremely drought tolerant and is a significant food source for many of our birds and mammals. The fruit also makes a lemon flavored drink high in vitamin C. Go to this site to read a little more about this beautiful plant.

<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/ornamentals/natives/RHUSLANCEOLATA.HTM>

So what do we now have in store for us? There is never a dull moment in The Hills Above Possum Kingdom! Peter Gottschling is the Board liaison and the current committee members are Lynne Aldrich, Lynne Brown, Peter Gottschling, Wolf Patrick and Colleen Stegall.

OVERVIEW: It is fall and as we mentioned many of the birds we have been seeing bred here and will begin to migrate to their wintering grounds. Some birds will stay but over 2/3 of the birds of Texas migrate. The fall migration (there are two migration periods – fall and spring) will have birds leaving for warmer climates where food will be more plentiful. For us, we have the chance of seeing, but only fleetingly, birds that have nested in more northern habitats as they migrate south to their wintering grounds just as our own nesting birds begin their migration south. But as we enter fall and winter the birds we will have with us will be birds that are year round or permanent residents. There will be a gradual buildup of northern birds that winter in our area like ducks and sparrows and finches. Interestingly enough some of our “permanent” residents” will be replaced and augmented in numbers by the same species that bred up north and will stop here to winter while ours may shift south for the winter and we won’t be able to tell

the difference. Some birds we would consider 'permanent residents' are the Great Blue Heron, Red-tailed Hawk, Turkey and Black Vultures, both the Eastern-screech and Great-horned Owl, Wild Turkey, Bobwhite Quail, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Greater Roadrunner, Eastern Bluebird, Mockingbird, Lark Sparrow, Rufous-crowned sparrow, Carolina Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, Bewick's Wren, Carolina Wren, Canyon Wren, Northern Cardinal and Crow to mention a few.

BIRDS: A few of our hummers are still around (Black-chinned Hummingbirds seem to have mostly left but the Ruby-throated is still here and some continue to migrate in and out). Most of the hummers we have at our own feeder are the young of the year and are dwindling in numbers. But for fall we should all be on the lookout for the Rufous Hummingbird. This bird will be migrating through anytime between mid-August and mid-September and will be very distinctive with its rufous color overall. But its appearance will be brief so you need to be alert. The Upland Sandpipers have been migrating as well and if you stand outside and listen carefully you may hear them flying over calling with a mellow "toodle-oo". You can go to this site to see and hear more about this bird. http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Upland_Sandpiper/sounds. Another bird to be on the lookout for soon is the Sandhill Crane. This large bird will be here all winter and feeds in large undisturbed open fields. Again, you will more likely hear them flying over and they will be in flocks that are magical to watch as they fly over. These birds are likely to put down along the shores of the lake so keep an eye out for them there. Go to this site to listen to these fantastic calls that will surely catch your attention. http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Sandhill_Crane/sounds. Ducks will be coming into our ponds very soon. Keep your eye peeled for not only them but for the "duck sweep" we plan for this winter bird watching trip for which we will send an announcement when we get a date finalized. We will visit all of the ponds we have here at The Hills and bird along the shore over on the Ritchie Cabin side of the lake. There are at least 14 species of duck that can be seen in our development and we are still counting!!! While we won't see that many in any one field trip we can at least begin to get a feel of what is possible (and where to find them) along with what to be looking for.

We mentioned the owls in the overview and their status as permanent residents. Owls are different in that their nesting season is different from the other birds we have been watching in spring and summer. They like to begin courting and nesting in late fall and early winter, NOT the spring as other birds. Great-horned Owls will begin looking for nesting sites in late September and will begin breeding in December. You will surely hear this very large owl calling now and if you are not familiar with that call go to this site. If you are lucky you will hear them dueting!!! http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Great_Horned_Owl/sounds. This owl is more apt to be out in the open as it calls, even on chimneys of our houses where the sound vibrates through the whole house! For nesting sites they will often use the abandoned nest of the Red-tailed Hawk that nested before them but they will also use the crotch of trees, cactus and even the ground.

The Eastern-screech Owl can begin to nest as early as December but is a slightly later breeding bird with hatches occurring by mid-March. It is a truly nocturnal bird – more so than the Great-horned Owl and will sleep during the day in a tree cavity or even a wood-pecker hole. Their nest will be in a hollow stump or a wood-pecker hole. This is one of the advantages of having at least a few dead trees around!! The dead trees are not only good perching spots for some birds

but it is the dead trees that are used frequently for hole nesting birds such as bluebirds and screech owls. They can also be attracted to proper nest boxes set up for that purpose. Go to this site to listen to the different calls of this bird and pay special attention to all the different calls and note on what those calls are for. http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Eastern_Screech-Owl/sounds Both of these species will be done with their nesting before our spring birds begin to come back.

Some of the wintering birds we will begin to see include the finches and sparrows which include the Spotted Towhee, White-crowned and Harris's sparrows, House Finch, American Goldfinch and the Pine Siskin. These birds can be very common during this season and will eat you out of house and home at your feeders. The Pine Siskin might be confused with either the goldfinch or the house finch but if you look closely you will be able to pick out the Siskin with the most distinguishing feature being the yellow wing bar on the siskins wing and some yellow in the tail. Siskins can get aggressive and become the dominant finch at your feeder.

Winter Sparrows will begin to appear but this newsletter is getting long so we will wait for another newsletter to address these species in more detail on the different kinds and what they look like. And, we can even organize yet another bird walk through our community that can focus on the winter sparrows.

NIGHT SKIES: How about a little eyeball astronomy. We have fairly dark skies here at PK Hills. A measure of how dark they are is how dim a star you can spot on a clear moonless night. My eyesight is only fair and I can see the 5th magnitude star in the four dipper stars of the little dipper in the north. I know some of you out there can see the 6th magnitude star in the middle. That is really good eyesight. If you want to take the eye test (and test the darkness at PK) here is the link. <http://www.rocketmime.com/astronomy/Telescope/sky.html#Dipper> Under really dark skies like in the Davis mountains you can see stars as dim as 6th and 7th magnitude.

The upcoming astronomical event to watch for in September is the total eclipse of the moon on the evening of Sept. 27 starting at about 7:11 PM with peak darkness at 9:47 and ending at 12:22 AM.

What else can you see? The largest galaxy near ours is the Andromeda Galaxy also known as M31 to amateur astronomers. This galaxy is about 2.3 million light years away and is the furthest object that can be seen with the naked eye. Its apparent size is about 3° which is 6 times bigger than the full moon! Here is a link to simple charts on how to look for it.

<http://earthsky.org/clusters-nebulae-galaxies/andromeda-galaxy-closest-spiral-to-milky-way#pegasus> In mid-September it can be found about 9:30 or later and in October as soon as it gets dark about an hour after sunset. But the higher in the sky it is, the easier it is to see. Since it rises in the east the lights of Weatherford and Fort Worth may make it too dim to see until it gets overhead.

For you early risers nothing beats the treat of seeing very bright Venus in the east about an hour or more before sunrise at this season. Why does the "morning star" change with the season and become the "evening star" seen after sunset? As fall goes on, Mercury will be there well below Venus and Mars and Jupiter will be rising also. Depending on where you are, the hills may block your view of all but Venus until early winter. Some detailed information is here.

<http://earthsky.org/astronomy-essentials/visible-planets-tonight-mars-jupiter-venus-saturn-mercury>

What I hope will be a treat later this year is some scheduled deep sky observing at the Aldrich-Gottschling StarBird Observatory. Watch this space <http://www.pkhillssassociation.com/> for upcoming Nature Committee events. Due to limited space these sessions will be sign up only with a limit of 8.

FEATURED SPECIES – Monarchs, Migration and Milkweed: Let's help boost the dwindling Monarch Butterfly population! By recognizing native milkweed that already grows in our area, and by planting native milkweed varieties along with nectar-producing wildflowers, we can help increase the monarch's chances for survival.

Monarchs migrate in the spring and fall – from Mexico to the cornbelt in the Mid-West, and then back again. Texas is central to the monarch's flyway. Peak dates for migration in our area is the end of September through mid-October. Milkweed is important for these butterflies because it is the **ONLY** plant where they will lay their eggs. Because of drought, pesticide/herbicide overuse, and general loss of habitat due to population expansion, milkweed growth is in decline.

It takes four generations of Monarchs to complete their seasonal migration. The eggs that have been laid on milkweed (during spring and sometimes fall migration) become caterpillars, who then feed for 3 weeks **SOLELY** on the milkweed plant before forming a cocoon. When the Monarch Butterfly emerges, it gains strength from nearby wildflower nectar before continuing with its migration.

There are numerous varieties of native milkweed. Antelope Horns (found in the Hills and



surrounding area) and common milkweed should grow well here. Go to this site for more on Common Milkweed.

http://www.fcps.edu/islandcreekes/ecology/common_milkweed.htm Basically, the best way to grow milkweed is to mix its seed with wildflower seeds that will have spring and fall nectar. Seeds planted in the fall will produce seedlings in the spring. The wildflowers may bloom that year, although the milkweed may take a bit more time. Once established, milkweed will often bloom in the spring and fall, but that will depend on yearly weather conditions.

There are many good resources for information on wildflowers and/or Monarch migration. My favorite is Native American Seed out of Junction, TX. They have a wonderful catalogue full of photographs, planting instructions for flowers and native grasses, and general guidelines to help create a native landscape. Look at www.seedsources.com for an online catalogue or call 800-728-4043 to receive a catalogue or ask any questions that you might have.

The Native Plant Society of Texas – www.npsot.org, has a chapter in Weatherford that I am in the process of investigating. In the meantime, this website has many online articles/videos on topics that might be of interest to those wanting to plant native.

For more information on Monarchs and their migration, just look on the internet and you will have an abundance of websites to choose from to learn more details about this fascinating butterfly. Here are pictures of a male and female Monarch Butterfly. Note the dark spots on the hindwings of the male which separates the two apart from one another.



MALE MONARCH



FEMALE MONARCH

FINAL WORDS: You can see from what we have said in this newsletter that we are beginning to plan many new things. We will begin having some bird watching trips – a winter search for the ducks that frequent our ponds and the lake and one to look for winter sparrows. A “star party” to observe what is in our night skies. Lectures that will inform us on many different aspects of what The Hills have to offer all of us. We will keep you up to date on when these activities are planned and you can keep us up to date on what you are seeing in your own yard!!