

Natural History and Bird Watching Committee Group Newsletter

Winter Season Update

WINTER IS APPROACHING – and the Nature Committee (Lynne Aldrich, Lynne Brown, Peter Gottschling, Wolf Patrick & Colleen Stegal) thought a short update to this season which is fast approaching might be in order. As our Fall/Winter newsletter said, winter officially begins December 21 just before midnight. Although our weather here over the past several days belies the fact that winter is close, with temperatures recently in the 60's and only an early freeze November 22, the cold of what we consider winter here in Texas will be here soon. And as that cold begins north of us so too will the influx of more of the winter birds escaping that cold themselves to settle into more desirable climates. Texas and The Hills Above Possum Kingdom will provide some of that relief for them and as the days progress we should see more and more species that like to winter here. Some of those winter birds are here – the Harris's Sparrow and the Dark-eyed Junco have arrived and the first Pine Siskins we've seen this season arrived on December 2nd with just a few of them making themselves happy at the feeders. We're also beginning to hear (and see) the Sandhill Cranes who are flying over us making their very distinctive call as they soar by. They are flying high up so scan the sky in the area you hear them and you will see a flock flying in a 'V' shape. On Dec 5 we saw two groups totaling about 150 cranes. Go here to find out more about this bird and to hear the wonderful call. The flight calls we hear are like the first call on this web site, the loud rattle calls:

https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Sandhill_Crane/sounds

Soon there will be many more and the bird seed will need replenishing much more frequently. The Chipping Sparrow is joining the Rufous-crowned Sparrow which is here year-round. The ducks are slow in arriving this year and we are waiting for them to make a bigger appearance so we can schedule our "duck sweep" field trip – looking for as many of them as we can find in the ponds around our development along with some of the other winter birds we will be privileged to see. Some are just now beginning to arrive and we will keep you posted on the date for the field trip.

One of the very interesting things we are seeing in The Hills right now is the gathering of large flocks of turkeys – anywhere from 20-30 in a flock. The flock/s are being seen throughout the whole development and providing lots of photographic opportunities as well as great fun and joy to all of us. Many noticed that the turkeys seem to be **VERY** interested in snatching the last remaining berries from the Sumac trees we have and they have been seen jumping up to eat the cedar berries. If you click on this link (or paste it into your browser) it should take you to a short video on YouTube showing them strutting around and grazing on the Sumac.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7tyE2TGuBN0>

As mentioned in the Fall/Winter newsletter, the Sumac we have here is Prairie Flameleaf Sumac (*Rhus lanceolata*) and is native to our area. Watching the turkeys eat the berries reminds us of the importance of having habitat that supports all the wildlife we enjoy in The Hills. Other birds we've seen snatching the berries are Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Northern Cardinal and Mockingbird.

We featured Monarch Butterflies and the Milkweed it depends on in our Fall Winter Newsletter. And as we continue to watch the wonderful wildlife we have here in The Hills we will see more and more

the intricate mesh and inter-dependence between the habitat itself and the wildlife that lives in it. Another one of the joys of where we live!!

In this update we wanted to specifically talk about **TURKEYS** and some of the behavior we have been seeing and a little background on their life style. We began seeing small turkey flocks about a month ago – six to seven individuals in a flock. The flock has grown in size over the past week or so and are being seen throughout the development in these large flocks. The turkey flocks we are now seeing are a mixture of male with a few females and flocks of females with broods of their young.

The breeding season for Wild Turkeys is March through June. The males breed with multiple mates but do not provide any parental care. A newly hatched chick will follow its mother around but it doesn't take long for the young to find food on their own and as the chicks grow they begin to band into groups which are composed of several different hens with all the broods.

The flocking behavior of the turkey is fascinating and has been fun to watch this year. After breeding the males began to form all male flocks and in the winter they are beginning to band together into larger flocks. Fall flocks usually consist of adult hens and their new brood with some of the older gobblers (males) segregated into distinct groups or ranging individually. By winter, many (but not all) of the young of the year gobblers have separated from family flocks to form young gobbler flocks. The flocking behavior of wild turkeys continues through the winter months. It is common for several groups of turkeys to flock together on good feeding grounds – and The Hills provides lots of that!! Old gobblers, young gobblers and hens often feed together. These 'gangs' of up to 30 are pretty spectacular and offer plenty of prime time for watching!! While the flocks may be mixed of old and young gobblers and females while they are feeding, they will roost separately and usually will show some degree of separation even on the feeding grounds. What we have observed is usually the males parading through first – followed by the females and their broods. It is not uncommon for a hen group and young gobblers to move off the feeding ground when older gobblers move in.

Turkeys range varies depending on the food source and abundance. On a daily basis a flock may use only a few acres but can suddenly move a mile or more into a new range. The question that bedevils us is are the flocks we are seeing different flocks or is it one very large flock moving throughout our whole development. More study to be done and more observing to take place!!!

Star Party Proposed Dates – We will have a sky observing session after the holidays. Since some of the most unusual sights require a dark sky with no moon, the ideal weekends coming up would be Jan 8 or 9 and Feb 5, 6 and 7, Mar 4, 5 and 6. We would propose we do the observing starting about 90 minutes after sunset. The observing would be scheduled for Friday or Saturday with Sunday being the fallback date if Saturday's weather is clouded out. The best we can do is make the decision the morning of the scheduled day for go/no go for observing. Due to space limitations these "star parties" will be limited to the first 10 people that respond when the date is set. We are open to suggestions from interested people whether scheduling a Friday or Saturday night would be better. Please send your suggestions and interest to petergottschling@sbcglobal.net .