

## **The Hills Above Possum Kingdom Nature Committee Newsletter**

### **Fall/Winter 2020**

**INTRODUCTION:** As we write our articles for the Fall/Winter newsletter I am reminded that today is actually the first day of Fall (9/23/20) Guess we are a little late BUT, fear not - it is NOT too late to continue to enjoy, watch and learn as the season progresses and slowly turns into Winter!!

Each season brings something different and every season we continue to learn and marvel at what nature brings to us. The hawks are beginning to migrate and plants continue to bring new learning and joy to us. In this newsletter we'll take a peek at all of this and toss in more of the history of our area for your enjoyment. So, lean back and enjoy and then go out and find and see the changes taking place around you!!

**A HISTORY OF THE AREA NEAR THE HILLS – 1930's (Lynne Brown)** - The 1930's was a period of time where many changes took place in the area. For quite a while the land around our community had a diminished population, due to elimination of rail service and poor water sources. Ranchers and farmers made up the majority of occupations. But that changed for several reasons.

The first of these was the discovery and development of oil and gas fields in the area. Production from these industries brought an influx of workers to live and work here. The Lloyd Dalton oil field and the Pickwick oil field were two of the fields developed near The Hills. Some of those pumps can still be seen within our community and surrounding properties.

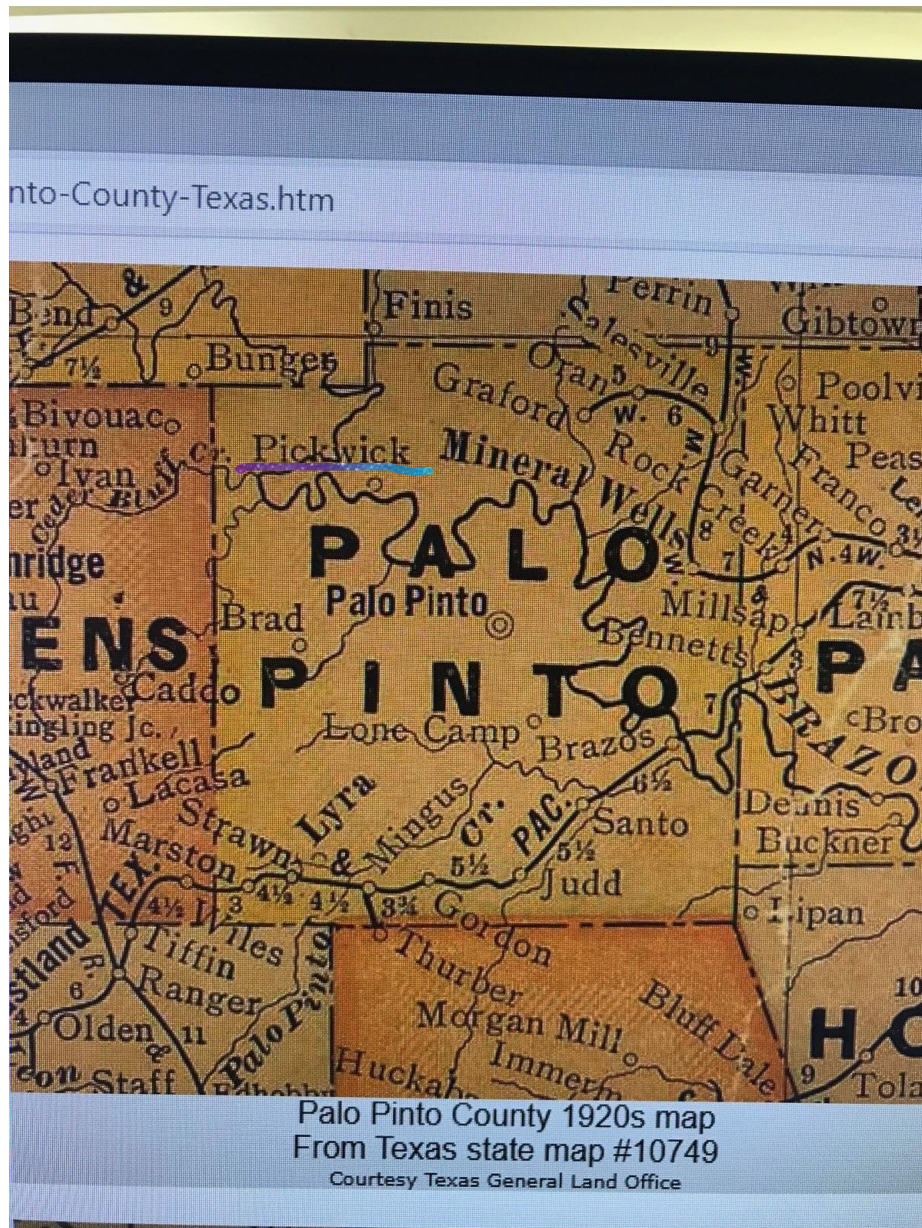
The second reason for an increased population began in 1939 with the construction of the Morris Sheppard Dam. For years and years, the Brazos River posed serious problems for the inhabitants along the Brazos River Basin. For that reason, in 1929 the Brazos River Authority was created by the Texas legislature. Its purpose was to manage and develop areas along the river's basin.

The Morris Sheppard Dam, named after the senator that helped to fund the project, began planning stages in 1936. Construction began in 1939, with help from the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The project was completed in 1941. It was the first of several dams built by the BRA. The creation of the dam displaced many farmers, ranchers, and communities. The closest of those to The Hills was Pickwick. The community of Pickwick had been around for many years, but it wasn't until 1903 that it opened its post office. During that decade the town included a saw mill, cotton gin, schoolhouse, drug store, general store and a Baptist church, to name a few. In 1930 an iron trestle bridge was built across the Brazos near Pickwick. Flooding was such a problem that in the mid-30's residents moved one and a half miles away to higher ground.

In 1935 the BRA began planning construction of the dam, and property along the proposed flood area was purchased. There was one holdout, a rancher named Ed Costello, who refused to sell his 233 acres. BRA authorities expected that the lake would take two years to fill. A West Texas storm that lasted several days changed that expectation. The lake filled in six

weeks. As the lake filled, Costello's ranch became an island. He continued to live and ranch there for a year, travelling by boat back and forth to the "mainland." Large quantities of product were moved by barge.

The buildings of Pickwick and the iron bridge were submerged. But when water levels were lowered 18 feet for dam maintenance, several building foundations and the iron bridge could still be seen.





**CEDAR ELM TREES (*Ulmus crassifolia*) (Peter Gottschling)** - Cedar Elms are one of the most common trees in The Hills. They are practically endemic to Texas with a few patches in Mississippi, western Tennessee and northern Florida. They grow almost anywhere but seem to do well in the rocky, sandy soil of The Hills, especially along the seasonal creek beds in the west post oak savannah vegetation region where The Hills is located. Probably for reasons of soil conditions we do not get the stands of black jack and post oak common towards Mineral Wells and Weatherford but we do get large stands of cedar elm.



Seeds in fall



cork-like bark growth



20 ft. cedar elm

They got the name cedar elm because in much of north central Texas they are associated with cedar trees (ash juniper) but don't let the name confuse you, they really are elms. They are the only North American elm that flowers and seeds in the fall. In September the small, oval, yellowish-green seed pods look like little yellow leaves in bunches and contain one seed. The closely related winged elm (*U. ulata*) of east Texas blooms in spring. Another characteristic is the lumpy veins of cork-like ridges of bark on some branches.

Older cedar elms can grow to 60 feet tall with 2 feet diameter trunks. The tallest cedar elms I have seen in The Hills are about 40 feet tall. The fire in 2011 destroyed the largest cedar elm in our yard but many others only ended up with scorched bark and leaves and recovered from the fire with fresh leaves and growth over the next few years. The largest cedar elms I have found are in the stand below Tucker Lake at Palo Pinto Mountains State Park near Strawn.

Cedar elms are fast growing trees that sprout vigorously and in dense stands. Pruning the low branches on young trees for several years prevents them from growing too bushy and opens the trunk. Based on my experience here, the low branches will resprout every year until the tree gets about 10 feet tall.

The tall trees with interlacing crowns provide cool shade in the summer for both people and the wildlife in The Hills. We can feel the temperature drop 5 or 6 degrees when we go under the canopy of cedar elms along our dry creek bed. (also see the fall landscape guide below)

**HAWK MIGRATION: (Lynne Aldrich)** - There are two annual hawk migrations we can see - in the Spring primarily from March through May and in the fall primarily from September through mid-November. This is the Fall newsletter so we'll talk about what is happening now around us as the hawks begin to migrate sometimes thousands of miles from the north to the south.

While there are famous hawk-watching sites like Hawk Mountain in Pennsylvania and Smith Point near Galveston Bay in Texas, we can access some interesting points close to right here in The Hills. In fact, The Hills themselves can show us that increase in hawks but not as spectacularly usually as in points where hawks historically migrate through. We see an increase in American Kestrels along with the Red-tailed Hawk about now and can get some interesting hawks passing over if we keep our eyes peeled. Broad-winged Hawks are a sure bet early on in the migration period as well. BUT, driving just a little north west of us into Throckmorton County and all the country roads they have we can begin to see the large flocks of migrating birds we read about and largely limited to the Swainson's Hawk in our area.

Some of the first hawks to begin arriving in our area are the Kestrels, Broad-winged Hawks and Swainson's Hawk. Red-tailed Hawks are resident here but many more will begin to appear on winter territories and as Swainson's hawks migrate down to South America. As winter gets closer, we can start seeing Rough-legged Hawks and maybe even a stray Ferruginous along with Merlins (which are a falcon) and maybe even Prairie Falcons. None of these latter species will occur in the numbers that the Broad-winged and Swainson's Hawks have though.

Kestrels love perching on wires and telephone poles, pumping their tails to help in letting you know who they are. The females arrive first taking up the open area habitats - leaving the males to occupy areas with more trees. The sexes do not tend to mingle BUT be certain to look for both male and female when you see some together. The male is spectacular with its beautiful slate blue wings while the female has reddish wings. Study them well and see if you can begin to pick out the differences.



**KESTREL (MALE)**



**KESTREL (FEMALE)**

When you go out looking for the large flocks of hawks in flight, pick your day right!!! Look to the weather reports for cooler weather and a cold front which brings that cooler air, usually with

the north winds bringing it, over the now warmer earth - creating thermals that allow the lift hawks will need to get themselves high up into the air and carrying them south with much less strain. The raptors, perhaps mixed with vultures, will circle within these columns of rising air as it carries them upwards. Then, as the air begins to cool it stops rising and the hawks will glide for several miles as they slowly lose altitude. They look for another column of updraft to raise them up or they might simply land on ground and wait for the air to get right again!! If you can mix your prediction of the "best day" to venture out, also consider weather that has had either rain and/or strong southerly winds that might have kept the hawks stationary for a while. When that shift comes, they are on their way!! And the good news is that hawks migrate during the day so they can be observed if they are around.

So, on the 25th of September we were out driving those Throckmorton roads. What a day!!! Over 150 Swainson's Hawks, first sitting on the ground then beginning to take off, spiraling upwards into the sky and away. What a site. We had close views and studies of the different morphs - light, dark, young & adult - taxing our identification skills.

The Swainson's Hawks comes to us from the western Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains where they nest - loving the grasslands and farm fields there and here in Texas. They love grasshoppers and landing during their migration in the farm fields around provide them that nurture for their continued journey to the pampas of Argentina. As one farmer we talked with along one of the Throckmorton farms roads said "they manage to find us every time we get out to plow - following us down the fields".

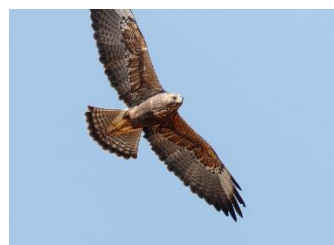
Here are some pictures of the Swainson's Hawks in flight on this nearly perfect hawk migration day in our area.



**SWAINSON'S HAWK**



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**SWAINSON'S HAWK**

With all of the different morphs that can be seen in these flocks, don't get confused thinking you might have a Red-tailed Hawk. That hawk has black in the leading edges of the wings which the Swainson's do NOT have.



**Red-tailed Hawk**

And the Broad-winged migration is in full gear apparently. Today (September 26) people in Houston are looking up and seeing hundreds of them flying over. I think these continued north winds are doing their trick and while we may not be on the exact pathway - we should be seeing some flocks of these hawks as well. Look for the black trailing edge of the wings with wing tips tipped in black and the barred tail that help in identifying this bird in flight. Broad-winged hawks are also a bit smaller than red-tailed and swainson's hawks.



**BROAD-WINGED HAWK**

The Broad-winged Hawks comes to us from the Eastern half of north america following the Mississippi Valley into Louisiana and then sharply west. The real kettles that hawks form don't usually get as far north as us BUT - they do come and can be seen early in the migration season on their way to South America as well.

As winter begins to approach we'll stop seeing the Swainson's and the Broad-winged BUT - we'll keep our eyes open for the unusual winter hawks we have - Rough-legged and the occasional Ferruginous Hawks. These are the only hawks that have fully feathered legs so if perched you can narrow down what you are seeing by this feature. These won't be common birds to see BUT, keeping an eye out for them can bring some success.

Rough-legged Hawks have migrated down from the north and get as far south as northern Texas where it will winter before winding their way back to the far north of the Arctic regions of Alaska and northern Canada to breed. They can be seen sitting in the open fields so look hard as you pass by those areas. In flight note the white tail with black terminal band..



**Rough-legged Hawk**



**Rough-legged Hawk**



**Rough-legged Hawk**



The Ferruginous Hawk has a broader winter range in Texas and can be seen in areas surrounding us but not as easily as the Rough-legged. While they used to nest in Texas, that is no longer the case as their populations continue to decrease throughout their range and are more frequently found in West Texas in the Panhandle. The Ferruginous hawk is primarily found on grassy prairies which support the many rodents and rabbits that is their primary food source. The loss of that habitat as well as the widespread control of Prairie Dogs, a vital source of food for them, has been leading the decline of this bird. They are the largest hawk in North America and can look similar to Red-tailed Hawks but you can distinguish them by the rusty color on their backs (light morph), red legging feathers and white tail, but be careful - the dark morph can be all dark but it will ALWAYS have a white tail and NO terminal band. They also will frequently be sitting on the ground.



**Ferruginous Hawk (light morph)**



**Ferruginous Hawk (dark morph)**

So, keeps your eyes focused upwards and get out and about looking for those hawks that we can be seeing now. And if you get REALLY interested in watching hawks then there are a couple of books that can be helpful. "Raptors of Western North America" (Brian K. Wheeler) shows all of the Hawks we can see here in Texas and has a range map for each. And "A Photographic Guide to North American Raptors" (Brian K. Wheeler & William S. Clark) is really good too.

### **FALL AND WINTER LANDSCAPE GUIDE (Lynne Brown)**

The months of September through February are the perfect time to plant new trees and shrubs. There are many things to think about when choosing the correct tree or shrub for your location. Of course, you will want to consider the amount of sun and shade recommended. Also, the future size and shape of the plant is a consideration. A couple of things that we don't often think about is our need for added color in our landscape. Also, consider the value to our wildlife that is added when we choose trees or shrubs that produce nuts, seeds or berries.

Whenever possible, remove a cedar or juniper and replace it with a native tree that is beneficial to our landscapes. A few of these:

**Large trees-** Cedar Elm (see Peter's article), Live Oak, (shade year around, acorns for wildlife), Red Oak, Hackberry (found often growing wild within our community -seeds, leaves, fruits enjoyed by turkey, birds, deer).

**Small trees-** Desert Willow, Mexican Plum, Mexican Redbud, Texas Mulberry, Western Soapberry, Texas Persimmon.

**Shrubs** – Coralberry, Texas Sage, Yaupon Holly, American Beautyberry

A wonderful guide with suggestions for choosing native plants for our region has been created by the Native Plant Society of Texas (Cross Timbers Chapter). Look for their website on the internet. Their guide lists MANY plants that do well in our area; whether they are drought resistant, do well in poor soil, are shade tolerant, and if they produce flowers or fruit.

Finally, don't forget that Fall (and Spring) are good times to plant your wildflower seeds. We can all use some added COLOR in our lives!

**THE NIGHT SKY OVER THE HILLS FOR WINTER 2020-21 (Peter Gottschling)** - The harvest moon will be full the evening of Oct 30 just in time for Halloween.

Well, the big news if you are into astronomy is reddish Mars which will be closest to Earth on Oct 6 and at its brightest of the year (maximum elongation from the sun) on October 13. Jupiter and Saturn are no slouches this month either. Jupiter, along with Saturn about 5° to its east, are high up in the south at dark already and will be close to setting at sunset in late November. Mars rises around sunset this October and then earlier this winter so it will be visible most of the night but not quite as bright as in mid-October. Venus is the morning "star" right now rising about 4:30 AM. Mercury will join Venus in the early morning sky by mid-November but will be much lower than Venus and both will be joined by the crescent moon on Nov 13 and are near the bright star Spica. In mid-October Mercury is in the sky very near the western horizon just left of where the sun is setting and will be hard to see even with binoculars.

This fall and winter the moon will not be interfering with the best meteor showers of the season starting with The Orionids (Oct 2-Nov 7, peak October 20-21. The Orionid meteors are fast, travelling about 148,000 mph! And right after, the Leonid meteor shower is in the air from Nov 6-30 with the peak predicted for November 16-17. Remember, meteor showers peak towards morning so the best observing is probably between 3 and 5 AM (no wonder I never see a lot!). Meteor showers are almost always associated with the debris trail of a comet when the earth passes through the trail. The Orionids are associated with comet 1P/Halley and the Leonids are associated with the orbit of Comet 55P/Tempel-Tuttle. Meteor showers get their name from the part of the sky that they appear to emanate from such as the constellation Orion for the Orionids and Leo for the Leonids. You don't have to look in these areas to see the most meteors. Simply watch the darkest part of your sky after midnight for sure and preferably after 2AM. You may get a reprieve from the above "rule" in December with the Geminid shower which predicts a peak at 1AM universal time (GMT) so since our time zone is -6 hours, you might start to see meteors as soon as it gets dark around 8PM central time the night of December 13. Getting back to morning hours are the Quadrantids (named for a no longer recognized constellation) on the evening of Jan 2-3, 2021. Clear skies everyone.