

The Hills Above Possum Kingdom Nature Committee Newsletter Spring/Summer 2021

INTRODUCTION: Spring is here!!! (the first day of Spring this year was March 20) and along with Spring came the Bluebonnets!! Time to put the freeze behind us and begin to get outside, look around and see what magical appearances nature has in store for us. We suspect there will be changes in the plant life we had (already seeing some dead things that most likely will not survive) but nature has a way of healing itself - and us right along with it. So much to appreciate out here in The Hills where we continue to work to retain the natural habitat that helps in feeding and sheltering our wildlife and the dark skies that provide us an opportunity of seeing things not seen when living in a city. The Nature Committee (Lynne Aldrich, Lynne Brown, Peter Gottschling, Wolf Patrick and Magyn Whitaker) have worked to bring together this edition of our seasonal newsletter. There are many new people in our community and we encourage you to go to the POA webpage, click on this link and begin to read some of the past newsletters we have shared with our community. <https://www.pkhillssassociation.com/nature-committee.html>. You will find different articles on many different aspects of our wonderful habitat and those that occupy them as well as history of The Hills and our local community. As has been said, The Hills is one of the best kept secrets with our natural setting, trees and wildlife, quietness and serenity, dark skies. We are unique and may we all continue to enjoy this magical land we call our community. And enjoy this newsletter then go outside and begin to commune and learn on your own just what an incredible place we are living in here. Also please note that we have an updated Bird Checklist which we'll have sent out separately. We've added a couple of new birds to that list!!!

FUN TURKEY FACTS (Lynne Brown) - Some of the best bird watching in our Hills during the Spring has to be our beloved turkeys. Who doesn't enjoy watching those big male turkeys strutting around the females with tail feathers spread into a beautiful fan! Following are some facts that you may or may not know about turkeys:

The wild turkey lost by one vote from becoming our national bird, instead of the bald eagle.

Most wild turkeys were eliminated from North America by the early 1900's. State wildlife programs have increased turkey populations and today there are more than seven million turkeys throughout North America, Canada and Mexico.

The turkey is the largest game bird in Texas. It is related to the chicken, pheasant and peafowl.

Turkeys can fly up to 60 miles per hour. They can fly straight up into the air, then away.

Turkeys have a very strong sense of hearing. They can hear another turkey gobble up to a mile away. What is a turkey most afraid of? Loud noises!!

A turkey's eyesight is three times greater than humans, but they have very poor night vision. They can see in color.

They have powerful legs and can run up to 25 miles per hour.

Turkeys roost in trees at night, but they also have nests of dried leaves on the ground.

Male turkeys are called toms, females are hens, very young are poults, juvenile males are jakes and juvenile females are jennies.



Male & Female



Female



Displaying male

The lifespan of a turkey is three to five years.

Females lay ten to twelve eggs, once a year. Eggs hatch in 27-28 days. The female incubates the eggs.

Turkey eggs are twice the size of chicken eggs. They are pale tan with specks of brown.

Hatched wild turkeys are born with feathers. They leave the nest with their mother within 24 hours to look for food. Father turkeys have no part in incubating or raising their young.

Turkeys are omnivorous. They enjoy grains, grass and seeds but also enjoy small insects and reptiles.

An adult turkey has about 5,500 feathers, including 18 tail feathers on the male's fan.

Alaska and Hawaii are the only two states without naturally born wild turkeys. I'd bet that Texas has the most wild turkeys of any state! We sure have lots of them in The Hills, based on the gobble, gobble I hear out my window right now.

FOUR CREATURES THAT JUST MIGHT CONFUSE US (Lynne Aldrich) - Nature can be confusing!! And some of the critters we have out here in The Hills can be just similar enough to confuse it. So, the four critters I'm going to talk about here include two birds and two mammals. I'll start with the birds. There are two that we can hear and/or see that are very much alike BUT that have differences that if we are aware of them can help us in making the proper identification. One of these birds is a Wilson's Snipe and the other is an American Woodcock. Here is what they look like side by side. The second picture of the Snipe (thanks to Kathy & Ron Ritchie who found it (outside their door) is more likely how you will see it - hunkered down.



Wilson' Snipe



Wilson' Snipe



American Woodcock

You can see how similar they are!! The Snipe the Ritchie's had appeared during our deep freeze this winter and is a common winter resident and we have spring migrants from mid-March to mid-May. The Woodcock is our winter resident and is rare here but it is thought they may be more regular and common than we know because of their secretive and nocturnal status.

The Woodcock begin to arrive in mid-November and we do have spring migrants beginning in mid-February to mid-April. You will likely hear it lots more than you will see

it as they fly around. Go to this site to see what it sounds like.

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

If you are lucky enough to see a Woodcock you will see a plump bird with a long straight bill. They can be in our yards almost anywhere in our community and if you sit outside as dusk begins you could see them flying about displaying and giving that buzzy call. They will often sit on our driveways where we can more easily observe them but you would likely need a spot light to help in mesmerizing them before they fly. They are Robin size and well camouflaged.

A Snipe sounds totally different and just like the Woodcock is easier to hear than see. https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Wilsons_Snipe/sounds It likes muddy banks and other wet habitat that have thick, heavy vegetation which they can easily hide in. They are more likely to be seen down by the Cabin along the lake. They too will display in the air making their winnowing sound and if you see it feeding on the ground you will notice their heads bobbing up and down as they search for their food. They too are Robin sized and well camouflaged.

And now to two mammals - the Foxes and Coyote. This may sound simple but I will tell you I have confused the two on our game camera!!



Common Gray Fox



Red Fox

First, there are two fox species in Texas - the Common Gray Fox and the Red Fox. The Gray fox is native to Texas and the most likely one to be seen. The Common Gray Fox is the only Fox we have seen in The Hills but the Red Fox does occur state wide and was an introduced species (for purposes of hunting). Both foxes are about the same size but the Red Fox is distinguished by its reddish color and black legs and **white tipped tail**. Both the Coyote and the Common Gray Fox have a **black tipped tail** BUT - in good light the fox will look salt and pepper grey on the back with reddish brown legs and a white throat. It also has a more cat like face.



Coyote



Coyote

The Coyote can almost always be separated by its larger size (almost double the size of either Fox), longer legs, longer snout and longer face. So, if one were lucky enough to have them side by side no problem at all, correct? The col

ors in all of them can be very variable But hopefully some of these attributes I've discussed will help in separating them out when we are lucky enough to see them!! So here they are again. Have fun!!



Red Fox



Common Gray Fox



Coyote

RECLAIMING HABITAT, BALANCING NATURE AND GARDENING WITH WILDLIFE IN MIND (Wolf Patrick)

It is no secret that wildlife habitat is decreasing around the world. More people often means less nature. But we can do our part in The Hills to balance out our existence with our wildlife brethren. Residents of The Hills have always had an unofficial creed that we are a wildlife friendly community, we cherish the ability to reside in a “natural” environment, where concrete is replaced by little blue stem growing naturally and beautifully without our intervention. Still, more and more of those types of surroundings are being destroyed as we build, so in this article I would like to talk about ways to balance that effort. If we do not, we could lose what we moved here for, for as one new neighbor recently said to me “I thought there would be more wildlife here....”.

The National Wildlife Federation (NWF) is a great resource and proponent of reclaiming habitat for wildlife. One of the things they point out is reclaiming habitat for wildlife using native plants not only helps the animals, but also protects the watershed. If we use the

plants native to our area you will find they require little to no maintenance or assistance from you. The cost of watering and feeding is minimum if not zero. These plants are already drought tolerant and ecological sources of food and shelter for the wildlife species that are here.

I have done a lot of testing over the years with transplanting vegetation from The Hills to see what will tolerate the uprooting. I have transplanted a variety of grasses, yuccas, and flowering plants. I found them to be the saving grace for stopping erosion on my front slope, which was bare after building. The root systems of these local plants are what is required to hold the local soil, and the plants already thrive naturally.

So, how do you incorporate the habitat already growing around you without it appearing like a rat's nest. Again, the NWF assists here by pointing out that utilizing borders, paths, or a variety of framing, can give natural vegetation a more organized look. Keeping the tall wavy grasses may seem to some unsightly, but if bordered by yuccas, agaves, cactus, etc. you can create a grass island or mound that is structured. Include wildflower seeds amid the grasses and you could just have a habitat from heaven, smorgasbord for butterflies and hummingbirds, hiding places for young birds and baby deer, erosion control, and an eye pleasing landscape. This type of landscape can take a little time to get it to that eye pleasing state, but it will be well worth it.

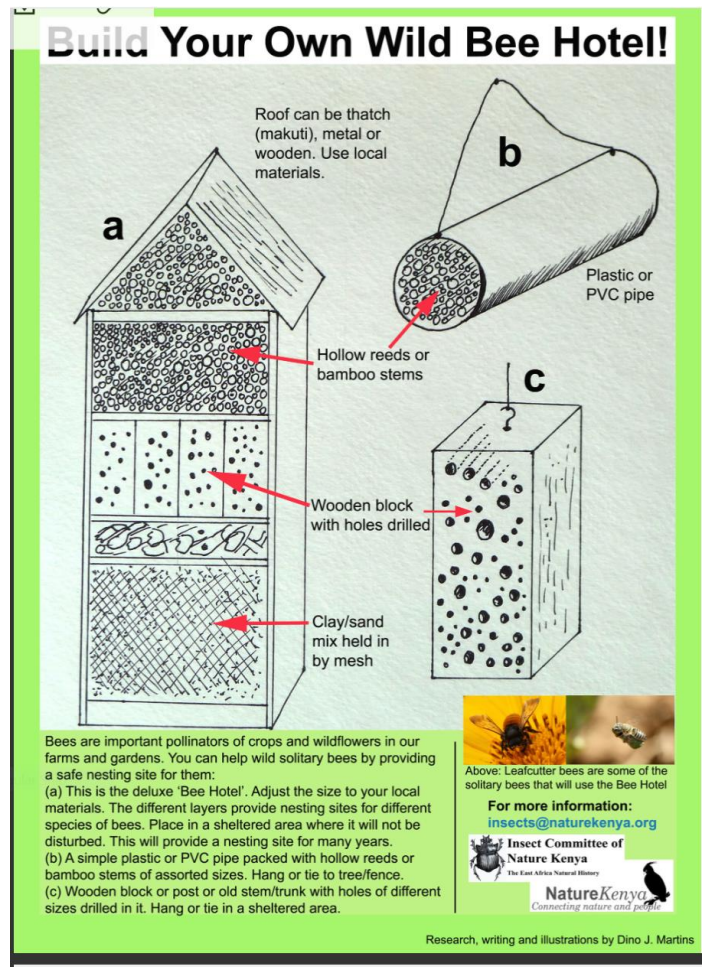
If your natural vegetation has been destroyed to some extent you can go to **Plant for Diversity** to learn how to plant to provide food, water, shelter, and young raising places for our wildlife. You can also go to **Native Plant Finder** enter your zip code and it will help you identify the plants you need for your area.

Another way to support our wildlife is to garden with wildlife in mind. Choosing to plant zucchinis and squash for instance, supports Squash Bees, where Mason and Bumble Bees love those tomatoes, and peppers. Fruit trees and berry bushes will feed birds, raccoons, our beloved opossums and other omnivore mammals. Butterflies benefit from peas, beans, and the leafy vegetables to lay eggs. Also consider garden ponds of any size. These are essential for frogs, toads and the like, who help with control of mosquitoes. And who does not love to hear a croaking toad - it helps remind us where we are.

To help your garden thrive and keep the wildlife healthy, avoid using chemicals. Instead, create beetle banks by mounding soil and using bunch grass. During the plant growing season the beetles will move into your garden and eat insect pests like aphids and consume weed seeds like pigweed and ragweed; how great is that??!! Other species that provide natural pest control are the dragon and damsel flies, lady bugs, praying mantis, spiders; if they stay in the garden, I can deal with it, and yes - parasitic wasps. As much as bugs can be disliked some are desperately needed for pollination and essential food for our wildlife.

Bees are of utmost importance for pollination and unfortunately are in great decline. You can often attract and encourage them by using bee hotels. Here are several design

examples from <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/media/build-your-own-bee-hotel/> that you can build yourself.



And, be certain to check out the new PK Magazine (spring edition) which will be released at the end of April produced by The UPS Store at PK Plaza. www.pk-magazine.com It is going to have an article on our very own Chris & Erika Carter's bee keeping venture here in The Hills - how to do it and be successful in doing so.

In summary, let's continue to be wildlife and nature friendly in The Hills and do our best to incorporate the natural vegetation in a way that enhances our beauty, and let us try to garden in a way that feeds us and them. It will not only be less effort and cost for us but will keep our wildlife here among us.

TEXAS BLUEBONNETS (Magyn Whitaker)

I am a Native Texan. Born and bred. I've lived all over the world and couldn't wait to get back to Texas to live forever. My favorite time of the year is the Spring. I absolutely love seeing bluebonnets on the side of the road. It makes my soul happy and grateful that I live in the beautiful state of Texas!

Scientifically named *Lupinus texensis*, the bluebonnet is the official flower of Texas and was adopted by the Texas state legislature in 1901. Also known as the buffalo clover, wolf flower, and “el conejo” (“rabbit” in Spanish), the vibrant sapphire blue petals are said to resemble the bonnets worn by pioneer women to shield them from the sun.

Bluebonnets typically germinate in the fall and then peak in mid to late April and can often be seen blooming in fields and roadsides throughout central and south Texas. They are not hard to spot as their centers typically have white or yellow spikes and the flower can grow to around 1 foot tall.



Bluebonnet field - photo by Erika Carter

The origins of the Bluebonnet are chalked full of myths, legends, and quirky stories, but the flower remains one of the most beloved and recognizable symbols of the great state of Texas. The plants determination to come back, year after year, despite soil and weather conditions, is symbolic of the resilient people who call Texas their home.

Texas is the only place you'll find both the *Lupinus Texensis* and *Lupinus Subcarnosic* species of Bluebonnets, but it's not the only state where bluebonnets can be found. You might be able to spot the flowers in Florida, Louisiana, and Oklahoma because the flowers thrive on 8-10 hours of sunshine a day, alkaline soils, and low moisture.

That being said, Texas has more bluebonnet flowers than any place else in the world with flowers popping up on roadsides, fields, sidewalks, and of course in Texans gardens. In fact, after the Texas Highway Department was organized in 1917, officials noticed that bluebonnets were the first to poke out of the roadside cuts and fills. Instead of getting rid of them, officials started to maintain the flowers and now the Texas Department of Transportation buys and sows about 30,000 pounds of wildflowers each year!

Contrary to the myth, it is not illegal to pick bluebonnets in Texas, according to the Texas Department of Public Safety. That being said, there are some areas where you should not pick bluebonnets, most notably the Texas State Park for wildflower viewing where it is against the law to pick, cut, or destroy and plant life on park grounds. When hunting for the best bluebonnets, also make sure that you are not on private property, as trespassing is illegal and is taken very seriously in Texas.

Other than that, the average Texan will most certainly find bluebonnets on the side of the road whether they are looking for the flower or not. Although you might be able to get away with picking up a few, never dig up large clumps of flowers or drive your vehicle into a flower patch. Keep in mind that many of the roadside wildflowers are annuals that won't reseed if they are picked or trampled. Therefore, the Texas Department of Transportation discourages picking and taking pictures among the wildflowers if doing so will damage them. But if you are planning a photo shoot by the road, remember to not cross lanes of traffic on foot, obey all signs that prohibit parking on the roadway, and if allowed, park parallel to the road in the direction of traffic. Wildflower season is fast approaching so hopefully you can get outside and enjoy the treasures that attract many visitors each year!

One of the best places to see bluebonnets is Ennis, Texas which was named the official bluebonnet city of Texas in 1997. Ennis hosts the Official Texas Bluebonnet Trails where up to 100,000 people visit each year to feast their eyes on 40 miles of wildflowers. Of course, you can find bluebonnets all across Texas roadways in the spring. I think I see a road trip in my future!

EVENTS IN THE 2021 SPRING AND SUMMER SKY ABOVE THE HILLS AND WHAT YOU AND YOUR NEIGHBORS CAN DO TO HELP KEEP THE SKY DARK IN THE HILLS (Peter Gottschling) - If you moved out here from a urban area or city you probably did not look up in the sky much because it was washed out by all the city light pollution. It is totally different in The Hills. We can still see the grandeur of the milky way here and would like to protect it. And if you have lived out here 10 years already, don't take the dark sky for granted because development in our area has gradually eroded the darkness.

With probably 60-70 new neighbors out here in The Hills I think it is time to let people know again about the effect of uncontrolled bright lights on the seeing of the stars above us, its effect on nighttime animals and especially also the effects on you and your

neighbors' enjoyment of living in The Hills. I am going to reprint the dark sky article we published in 2017 with a few additions.

And if I have not alienated you with talk of controlled lighting there is also an article on finding galaxies with just binoculars (and at least one with your eyes only!)

Preserving The Hills Dark Sky - If you recall from the Fall 2016 nature newsletter I spoke about how The Hills is situated in a dark corner between Graham, Mineral Wells and the bright eastern sky polluted by the lights of DFW and Weatherford. Please see the map on page 10 of the Fall newsletter to understand this http://www.pkhillssassociation.com/uploads/2/9/8/8/29882847/fall_winter_2016.pdf.

So how can we prevent light pollution from washing out the sky over The Hills? The biggest thing to preserve dark skies is not to have street lights so we are already a step ahead of most communities. However modern society requires outdoor lighting for safety, aesthetics and commerce. The International Dark Sky Association recognizes this but advocates that any required lighting be used wisely. To minimize the harmful effects of light pollution, lighting should

- Only be on when needed; If you are inside the house you don't need a yard light on. There is nobody out here but us coyotes and bobcats. We hunt your rats and rabbits better in the dark.
- Only light the area that needs it; Shield your lights so they don't shine on your neighbors' lot or in their eyes when they look in the direction of your house; be considerate of your neighbors.
- Be no brighter than necessary; No airplane landing lights please! Keep architectural vanity lighting muted, it looks better that way.
- Minimize bluish light emissions which increase glare in human eyes, especially aging eyes, and disrupts circadian rhythms of our wildlife.
- Be fully shielded (pointing downward) so light does not leave your property.

Below are some examples of lighting that is terrible, as well examples of shielded lighting. Unshielded lights waste energy by shining where there is no need and unshielded lights also make it harder for you to see at night because they shine and glare in your eyes and ruin your night vision. Read how properly shielding oilfield lighting improved worker safety by preventing glare

https://www.hillcountryalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/oilfield_lighting_can_coexist.pdf. Shielded lights shine down where you need to see and also preserve the darkness of the sky so you can enjoy the sight of the Milky Way. If you have a vista from one of our hilltops then also remember that even a normally shielded light can still let light disturb your neighbors in the valley. A little extra side shielding will prevent that and still illuminate what you need to see while allowing you a grand view of our night sky's wonders.

If our community is serious about preventing light pollution then we should incorporate a dark sky policy in our ACC guidelines before it is too late. Did you know that even The Cliffs has a lighting policy guideline? As an example, the city of Dripping Springs was the first city in Texas to become a dark sky community

<http://www.cityofdrippingsprings.com/default.aspx?name=dsc.home> . You can find all kinds of lighting information on the IDA website <http://darksky.org/lighting/lighting-basics/> . LED lighting brings another challenge. Because LED uses less energy there is a tendency of cities and people to install brighter LED lights than what they replaced. LED is bluish light and is very bad for glare and light pollution. There was an interesting article in the New York Times about the controversy in Rome, Italy brought on by the city installing LED lighting and people complaining that the light created ugly night scenes. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/27/world/europe/rome-streetlights-led-lights.html?_r=0 . It has been proven that bluish lights affect circadian rhythms of both wildlife and people. Some modern LED lights now come in soft white (warmer tones) versions and I highly recommend these if you are moving to LED lighting in your home. A color temperature of 3000°K or below is recommended. Believe it or not, Home Depot has a dark sky lighting page with IDA approved fixtures.

<http://www.homedepot.com/b/Lighting-Ceiling-Fans-Outdoor-Lighting/Dark-Sky/N-5yc1vZc7qvZ1z0u5mk>

I hope you all keep our dark sky in mind when you turn on your outdoor lights. Look at them and see how you can minimize their upward and sideways glare and then put some after-market shielding on them. Go ahead, ask your neighbors what they think of your outside lighting. See the lighting chart on the last page for acceptable lighting fixtures.

Spring and Summer Sky Highlights for The Hills - The sky will rotate major constellations during the period from March through early June. Probably the first big change comes from the change to daylight savings time two weeks before the Spring equinox. All of a sudden it gets dark an hour later and by the end of May it won't get dark enough to really enjoy the sky until after 10 PM! This will make amateur astronomers into real night owls.

The dominant visual constellation from winter, Orion, will gradually fade into the west helped along a little faster due to the time change. Leo, the lion, has the head shaped like a sickle and two triangles forming the front and rear of the body. The bright star Regulus in the "front" below the sickle has had various names with similar meanings in different cultures from king in Latin to the name in Arabic which translates as "heart of the lion" showing that this constellation has similar lore in Greek, Roman and Middle Eastern cultures. The bright star at the "rear" of the lion is named Denebola, a contraction of an Arabic word meaning "tail of the lion". According to the book "Sharing the Skies, Navajo Astronomy", Denebola is the first in a series of 6 bright stars that rise in the spring and along with the current constellation of Pegasus form the large

constellation of the Thunderbird which corresponds to spring and storms in the Navajo seasons.

The other bright group of stars when you look up and north in the spring is the big dipper which is part of the constellation Ursa Major (Latin for big bear). By late April it will be at 12 O'clock position as darkness falls in relation to the North Star, Polaris. The big dipper circles Polaris, the north star, every night but is only visible to us down here at 33° north latitude from late winter to late fall because part of it goes below our horizon sometime during the night. Up north you can see it all night long and judge time by it. To locate the North Star, follow the end stars of the bowl of the big dipper and it will point to the North Star. Polaris has long been used by sailors to stay on course and determine latitude. It is the first star in the "handle" of the little dipper which is easily visible here in the dark skies of The Hills. The big dipper also has one of the few double stars visible to the naked eye (for some of us). Check this article out.

<http://earthsky.org/brightest-stars/mizar-and-alcorn-the-horse-and-rider> . Can you see the horse-and-rider? I was never able to see it until I got new glasses and now, once my eyes are dark adapted, I can see it fading in and out of my perception.

The big dipper points to other bright stars in the summer sky also. If you follow the arc of the handle you will notice Arcturus stands out and then spike in a straight line to the next bright star, Spica. Yes, the old saying to locate these stars really works. Arc to Arcturus and then spike to Spica.

Want to see some galaxies? Don't have a telescope? With a pair of binoculars under the dark skies of The Hills you can see some of the brightest galaxies in the sky. You should be able to spot M81 and M82 and compare their different round and cigar shapes. You can even make out the galaxy pair in Leo of M65 and M66. You can find M51 near the big dipper as well as gigantic M101. As the great square of Pegasus rises further up in June you can find the furthest galaxy you can see with the naked eye, M31, and then admire it with binoculars. Nearby is another large smudge, M33, which is the real test of a dark sky when you can see it with the naked eye. Light pollution around here does not allow that. But it is easily viewed with binoculars on moonless nights.

There are several apps and websites that can help you locate these galaxies and other binocular astronomical objects. These were covered in the last page of the Spring 2020 newsletter here:

https://www.pkhillssassociation.com/uploads/2/9/8/8/29882847/newsletter_spring-summer_2020.pdf (press ctrl+click to follow link). If you are an analog person consider getting a nice planisphere like The Guide to the Stars northern hemisphere for latitudes 30° to 60° north.

https://www.highpointscientific.com/david-levys-planisphere-small-11-diameter?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cse&utm_term=KEN-11E&gclid=CjwKCAjwjbCDBhAwEiwAiudBy3yEeXvKUgHeElpNC85g0F2dE-pjl-0Gj2vZZnzTpqQaQydX4W9lIhoC1ZkQAvD_BwE .

By dark in Mid-April, the harbinger of summer, the summer triangle peers over the northeastern horizon with the bright star Vega in constellation Lyra moving up followed by the other two, Deneb and Altair. Along with the triangle comes the summer milky way which is very bright in the Hills. Under the darkest, clearest skies the summer Milky Way at the zenith can be bright enough to cast shadows on a moonless night.

Enjoy the night sky in The Hills by keeping the night sky free of stray and unnecessary light.

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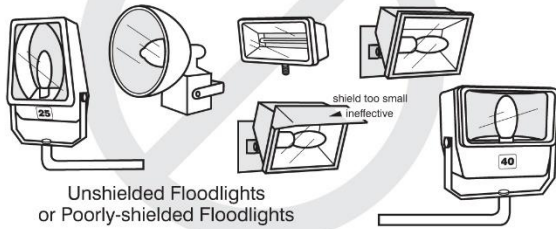
CONTINUE ON NEXT PAGE

The next page has some outstanding examples of lighting that is best for both seeing your own property in the dark and at the same time shielding your light from your neighbors and our dark skies. Print it out for your continued use. And remember, wildlife like the dark and in fact those that hunt at night require it so shutting lights down when not needed is always a good idea. AND, you will likely have fewer insects hanging around that are attracted to light!!

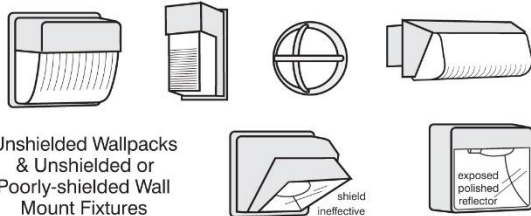
Examples of Acceptable / Unacceptable Lighting Fixtures

Unacceptable / Discouraged

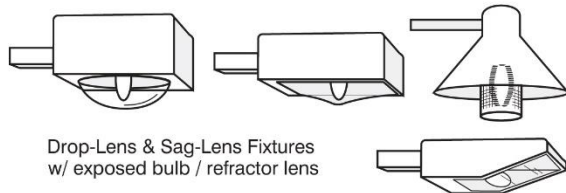
Fixtures that produce glare and light trespass



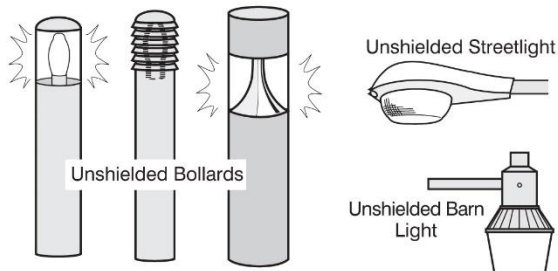
Unshielded Floodlights
or Poorly-shielded Floodlights



Unshielded Wallpacks
& Unshielded or
Poorly-shielded Wall
Mount Fixtures



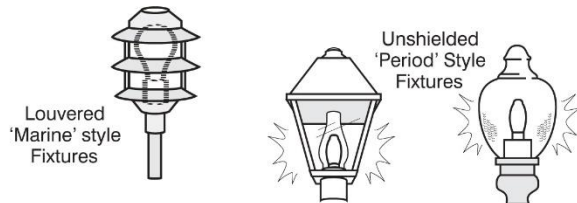
Drop-Lens & Sag-Lens Fixtures
w/ exposed bulb / refractor lens



Unshielded Bollards

Unshielded Streetlight

Unshielded Barn
Light

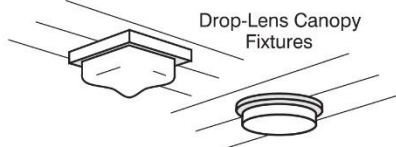


Louvered
'Marine' style
Fixtures

Unshielded
'Period' Style
Fixtures



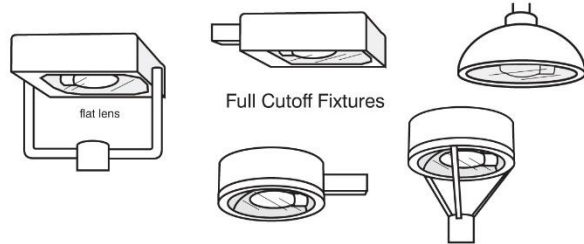
Unshielded PAR
Floodlights



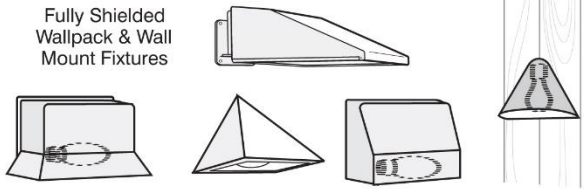
Drop-Lens Canopy
Fixtures

Acceptable

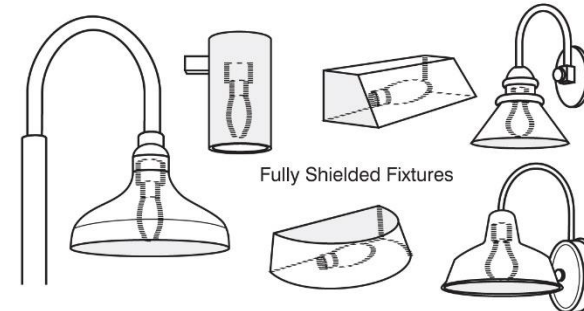
Fixtures that shield the light source to minimize glare and light trespass
and to facilitate better vision at night



Full Cutoff Fixtures



Fully Shielded
Wallpack & Wall
Mount Fixtures



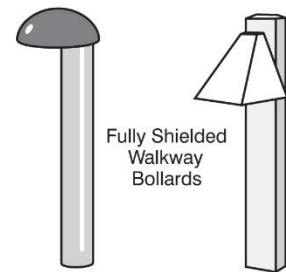
Fully Shielded Fixtures



Full Cutoff Streetlight



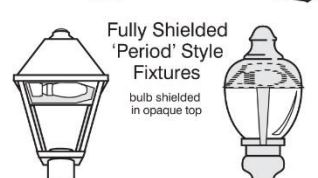
Fully Shielded
Barn Light



Fully Shielded
Walkway
Bollards



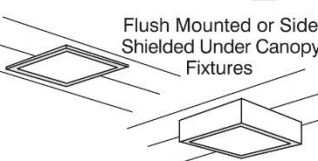
Fully Shielded
Decorative
Fixtures



Fully Shielded
'Period' Style
Fixtures



Shielded / Properly-aimed
PAR Floodlights



Flush Mounted or Side
Shielded Under Canopy
Fixtures