The Hills Above Possum Kingdom Nature Committee Newsletter
Spring/Summer & Fall/Winter 2022

INTRODUCTION: We were late in getting our newsletter out for the spring/summer so have incorporated Spring/Summer with Fall/Winter. As always, we think you will enjoy it. Spring migration brought our nesting birds back to us with some strays that passed through. Some things seemed to be late this year and perhaps this is due to an earlier spring than our migrating birds are used to. There also seemed to be fewer birds in all but there were lots of Painted Buntings and the normal Eastern Bluebird seemed to be outnumbered by the usually rarer Mountain Bluebird. Whether it's climate change or just a change in pattern, there are things we can do both for the spring and for the fall migrations to help in having the nourishment our wildlife needs to survive. Planting high quality native fruits and plants can put in place permanent food for birds and mammals alike. And, keeping in place a broader swath of habitat will help in feeding as well as sheltering our wildlife as well as enhancing the beauty of our community. Keeping water out in your yards will help too – especially in the drought and heat that we have been having – in keeping the birds and even mammals watered and able to splash around in.

And, to help in preserving the birds that are migrating now an alert to the fact that we are now in Lights Out For Birds time.

Calling all Texans to go Lights Out for Wildlife to protect migratory birds during fall migration. Turn off or dim NON-ESSENTIAL lighting outside and inside from 11 pm to 6 am, August 15 – November 30. With the simple flip of a switch, each of us can do our part to protect millions of migrating birds soaring across our Lone Star skies. Learn more about Lights Out Texas at: https://tx.audubon.org/urbanconservation/lights-out-texas.

This from Laura Bush – “The spring bird migration is underway! Did you know that 1 in 3 birds migrating through the U.S. during the spring passes through Texas? That’s approximately one billion birds that travel through our state!

Most of these birds migrate at night and can become disoriented by the bright lights put off by cities. They crash into buildings and structures, dying at an alarming rate. Here's how you can help our flying friends reach their destinations safely: turn out all non-essential lights from 11 pm - 6 am every night through June 15 - especially now through May 7, the peak migration period."

So, our articles in this issue bring lots of information to you all on what we have right here in The Hills and how we can continue to keep it the wonderful place it is.

NIGHT BIRDS IN THE HILLS ABOVE POSSUM KINGDOM (Peter Gottschling)

We all know owls come out at night. Here in The Hills, we have Eastern Screech-Owl, Great Horned Owl and Barn Owl. In the denser forests along rivers, you may hear Barred Owls also. But what else do you hear calling every summer night about an hour after dusk and before dawn? Do you hear a loud bird singing chuck will's widow and saying its onomatopoeic name? Chuck-will's-widow call ? Chuck-will's-widows are in the family nightjars, also called goat suckers from the old belief that with their big mouths they latched onto goats at night and sucked their milk and even their Latin name, Caprimulgus, actually means goatsucker.

Chuck-will's-widow

Based on published range maps, the area we are in is the western edge of Chuck-will's-widows range. In the last century they have expanded their range west and also north as far as the Ohio river. They mostly sit on the ground and fly up to catch insects. During the day they sit lengthwise on tree branches, but be warned they have very cryptic plumage and blend right into the bark. If you hear one that might be sitting on your drive at night see if you can shine a light on it and spot the eye shine and silhouette of the bird. The Chuck-will's-widow is so poorly studied that there are not even documented nesting results. They arrive near the end of April and become rather silent by the end of July and leave in late August for south Texas and Mexico for the winter.

When Lynne and I first started coming out here in 2009 we heard a second species of nightjar called Poorwill. This surprised us because Poorwill is a west Texas and

southwest desert loving species. Each year since, they have become less numerous to the point that I have not heard one calling in The Hills since Sept 25, 2019. So, we have the mystery on why they seemed numerous (not nearly as many as Chuck-will's-widows) and now they are gone from here. Have the Chuck-will's-widows out-competed them? Has the habitat changed so much after the 2011 fires that it was no longer suitable for Poorwills? We have not gone to other nearby areas that still have mostly cedars instead of deciduous trees and bushes that grew up after the fire to see if we can still hear Poorwills at night but it is worth a try.

Another nightjar that you may see flying on a cloudy day here or in Graham around the street lights at night catching insects is the Common Nighthawk. They make a screeching sound with their wings as they fly around and dive through the air.

Go ahead and step outside tonight and listen to the Chuck-will's-widows.

MONARCH BUTTERFLIES (Wolf Patrick)

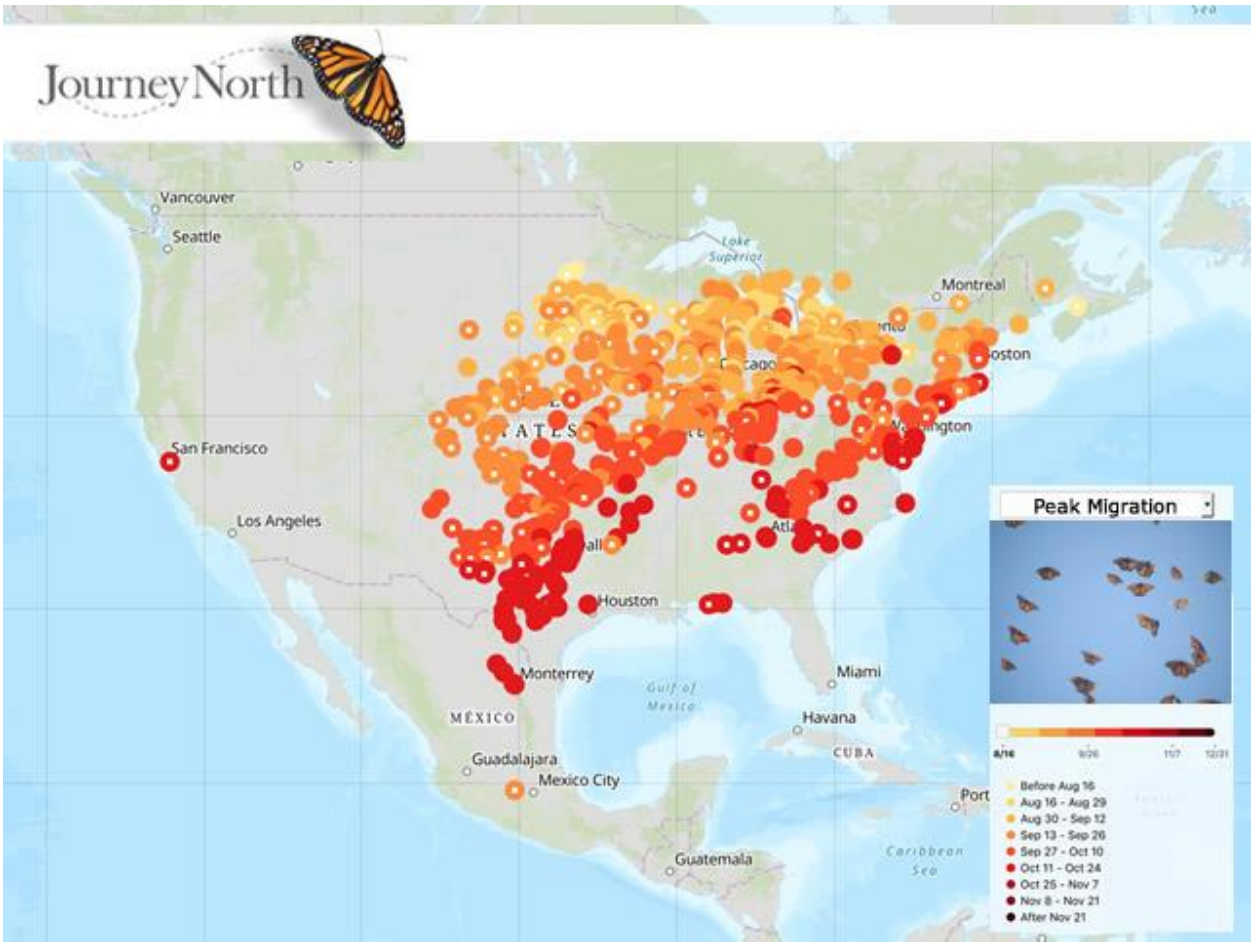
Picture by NWF.org

Here in The Hills, we are on the path for the eastern **monarch butterfly.** There have been years here when the skies were thick with them. One of the reasons why we may see more of them than other years, is the amount food source and milkweed they have available to them to make our area viable for them during their journey.

As our community grows, we tend to cut down the natural plants that feed, nest and hide our migrators. Across the US and Mexico, expansive land-use by humans, deforestation, and overuse of pesticides and herbicides, has disturbingly reduced the migrators populations. In particular, the lack of milkweed; the only plant that monarchs lay their eggs on, has had a strong negative impact.

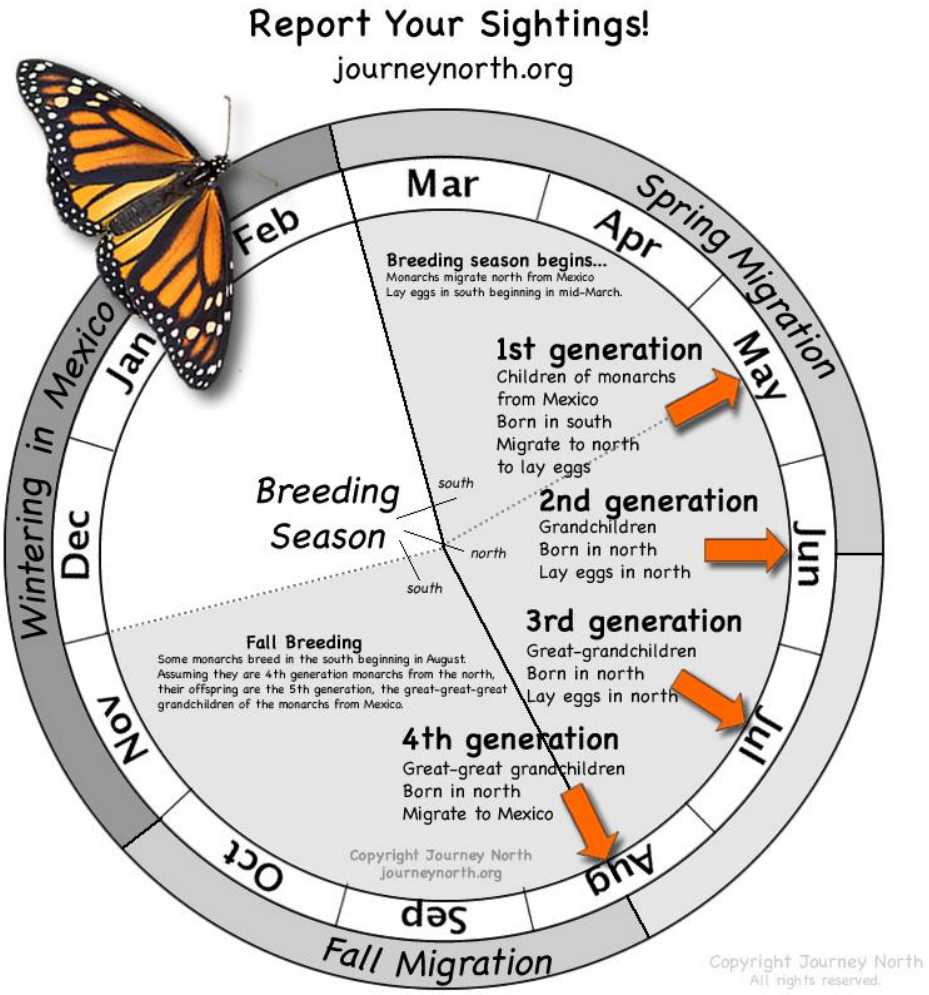
Monarchs utilize the US as their summer breeding grounds, so somewhere between August through October the monarchs are on the move - headed to their wintering grounds in Mexico, flying up to 3,000 miles. They spend November through February in Mexico then start the journey back to the US to breed. According to the National Wildlife Federation “the monarch’s migratory pattern is the most highly evolved of any known species of their kind.”

In the two pictures below, you can see the peak migration months (zoom if you need to):



Picture by journeynorth.org

See second picture below:



Picture by monarchjointventure.org

Alarming Statistics.

For the last 17 years, the World Wildlife Federation-Mexico, along with other partners, have assessed the population in central Mexico. The monarch population is measured by the amount of forest area they occupy, providing a good indicator of their status. And, as more deforestation occurs…

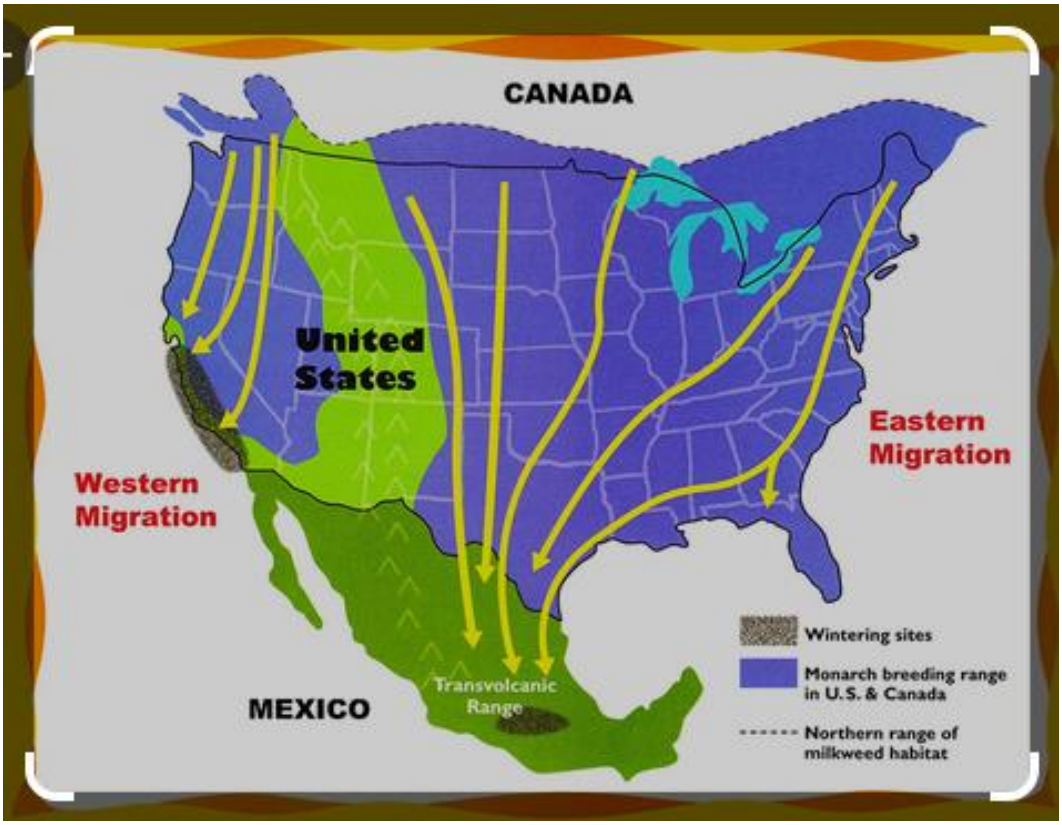
According to these annual studies, the Eastern population of the North American monarch butterfly has been in a steady decline. To put that decline into perspective - 45 acres of forest in Mexico was occupied with monarchs in the winter of 1995-1996. Since then, their populations fluctuated annually until 2003-2004 when scientists recorded only 27.5 acres of forest populated by monarchs. Since 2003-2004, scientists documented a steady downward yearly trend. The 2020 monarch's forest presence

indicated only an approximate five acres was occupied. That kind of decline can hardly be sustainable, without help.

Can a single individual have a positive impact on this outcome?

Even providing a single square foot of seeded space in your backyard, a patio pot, or a window box, is a huge helping hand to rebuild habitat for not only the devastated monarchs, but other pollinators like bumble bees and hummingbirds too. If every person did this, what a difference we could make. You can start preparing now to help these travelers make this difficult and long journey.

If you struggle with understanding how important Texans are to this effort, look at the migration paths in the picture below:



Picture by monarchbutterflyusa.com

In The Hills we have a fish pond that may be a viable sanctuary for the monarchs. The Nature Committee could seed areas around the pond; at the required times of year, to provide monarchs the proper habitat for their journey to and from Mexico. Add to that residents planting milkweed and the required plants to feed the butterflies; at the right times of year, we could make The Hills a butterfly migration paradise. Think about

visiting the fish pond, or just looking up from your backyard and seeing this (picture below):

Picture by NWF.org

PROTECTING OUR POLLINATORS (Lynne Brown)

To expand on the subject of protecting our monarch population, this article discusses the importance of protecting all of our pollinators and the role that pollinators play in our world.

First, what is pollination? It is the transfer of pollen grains from the male part of a plant to the female part. This results in fertilization which produces the seeds and fruits that are food sources for animals and humans.

Who are pollinators? Most of us think of bees and butterflies, but birds, bats and many other insects contribute to pollination. Wasps, flies and beetles are a few of these insects. All of these carry pollen on their wings and legs as they move through an area with flowering plants.

Why is protecting our pollinators so important? At least 80% of all plants require pollination (the others are cross-pollinators). The U.S. Department of Agriculture lists 130 crops that bees alone pollinate. Many of these crops use non-native honey bees as their source of pollen. But Texas has hundreds of native bee species that contribute to crop pollination, for such plants as pumpkins, squash, strawberries and tomatoes. These plants do better with a native vs. non-native bee. Some of these native bees include carpenter bees, bumblebees and leaf cutter bees.

The Xerces Society of Texas lists four steps to “Bring Back our Pollinators.”

1) Grow pollinator friendly flowering plants. Make sure to grow plants that have overlapping blooming seasons.
2) Provide nesting sites for native bees. 70% of native bees are ground nesters, so they need access to bare soil and areas underneath brush piles. Abandoned rodent holes are a favorite nesting site for bumblebees. 30% of native bees prefer cavities in dead wood or brush piles.
3) Avoid pesticides. Pollinators can be affected by direct contact, residue contact or contaminated nesting material.
4) Spread the word. There are many organizations that have created pollinator programs to help encourage and promote Texans with this issue. Just Google "how to help protect our pollinators" and you will find everything you need to know on how to get started. The Native Plant Society of Texas, Cross Timbers Chapter, has lists of plants to grow that are native to our region. The Native American Seed Company has a great catalogue listing native flowers that grow in our area, along with information on sustaining our natural ecosystems.

Our community is the perfect place to begin creating "pocket prairies" as places of habitat for our wildlife, birds and pollinators. As stated in our Monarch Butterfly article, The Hills could become an even more beautiful place if everyone made an effort to help!

Examples of pocket prairies



Some plant to use

Little Blue Stem

Blue Mist Flower

Native Texas Milkweed

ESPECIALLY TEXAN: ARMADILLO (Lynne Aldrich)

Armadillo (little armored one in Spanish)!! What a cute creature and our Nine-banded Armadillo is the only Armadillo species in North America and is a somewhat recent addition to the Texas fauna.

The Armadillo first appeared in Texas along the Rio Grande River where its migration from south was easily able to take place. By the end of the 19th century, it had expanded its range broadly and reach the Austin and Hill Country by the beginning of the 1900's. It has continued its movement northward and by the mid 1900's was firmly established throughout Texas itself and on into Louisiana and Oklahoma.

Worldwide there are many species (around 20), most of which are found in South & Central America. Perhaps we are blessed with having only one Armadillo to contend with and observe. Perhaps "observe" is an over-statement. We seldom see this creature. We've seen it here in the Hills only once and that on our game camera and then one dead one when we first establish ourselves here in The Hills.

Nine-banded Armadillo

They are very adaptable animals, have few natural enemies and can survive and reproduce in a variety of habitats. In fact, they are getting ready right now to begin mating (late summer/early autumn) and they will be giving birth in the Spring and usually produce four identical quadruplets that are born fully formed and with eyes wide open and all the same gender in every litter. They have a long life span which can be anywhere from around seven years to up to 20 in the wild.

Because they are susceptible to prolonged drought and extended periods of long freezes, they are not permanent residents West or North of the Panhandle and the Trans-Pecos regions.

They are about the size of a small dog or large cat – about 2 ½ feet in length weighing in at about twelve to seventeen pounds. Unlike dogs and cats, they don't make very good pets!! They aren't social animals and spend a great part of their life simply sleeping – about 16 hours/day in their burrows.

It has a hard exterior skeletal structure that protects it from predators, very sharp claws that help it in digging for their meals and they also burrow (sometimes in our yards and

under our houses) to make their dens. Largely they are considered pests but then – as nearly all things of nature they do have some beneficial characteristics. They help in eating some of those grubs that can be harmful to our plants. And they can help in keeping the spiders in check. While they are omnivores, about 90% of their diet is made up of insects. They are but another creature that helps us all by creating a balance that helps in keeping things in check. Because they have no hair to protect them, their browsing takes place in the early evening when it cools down.

Because of their heavy shell they are unable to cross water without sinking so they have adapted to travel across water, when necessary, by walking along the bottom under water. They can hold their breath for up to six minutes. If they need to cross a longer body of water, they will inflate their stomach to nearly twice its size so that they can more easily "float" and swim across. Once to the dry side they will release that excess air which can take several hours to do so

Someone figured out that Armadillo makes tasty food and at some places within our state you can get a taste of it -BBQ and Armadillo Chili. During the depression they were called "Hoover hogs" because they tasted somewhat like pork and the East Texans, who thought President Hoover was responsible for the depression, kept their larders stocked with Armadillos. I personally have not taken the opportunity of tasting one of these guys!

And did you know – the Armadillo is the state of Texas's "official small animal". The attempt to make it the state mammal was not successful but being a mascot worked out just fine for this mammal.

FERAL HOGS IN TEXAS AND THE HILLS ABOVE POSSUM KINGDOM COMMUNITY **(Magyn Whitaker)**

When Nate and I moved to the Hills I had no idea that hogs were such a problem in Texas and even in our neighborhood. We had lived here for about six months and had minimal hog damage on our property. A little out on our land but none near the house. That was until December 2019. I woke up to the following damage that completely destroyed our manicured backyard:

Texas is home to an estimated 2 million feral hogs (Sus scrofa), about 50 percent of all the feral hogs in the United States. From the panhandle to the Gulf coast, from the arid southwest to the eastern pineywoods, feral hogs may be found in nearly every Texas county.

The population and range of feral hogs have expanded dramatically because they are extremely adaptable animals with a high reproductive rate. Relocation by hunters, disease control in domestic animals, the management of rangelands, and habitat improvements made for livestock and wildlife also helped feral hogs. Hogs are prized by hunters but despised by landowners who suffer from their damage.

Feral hogs are domestic hogs that have escaped or been released into the wild. With each generation, the animals' domestic characteristics diminish as they develop the traits necessary to survive in the wild.

Their original breed and their nutrition during development determine the size and color of feral hogs. Coat color and pattern are highly variable. Solid black is the predominate color, but hogs also may be brown, red, white, spotted, belted (black or brownish red with a white band across the shoulders and forelimbs) or have rare blue or gray roan patterns. Bristles of feral hogs are shorter than those of Eurasian boars and hybrids. Bristles are less thick than those of Eurasians but thicker than those of hybrids. Bristles are a solid color and split at the tips. The underfur and bristles are the same color Feral hogs may have neck wattles and syndactylous (webbed) digits.

Feral hogs have poor eyesight but excellent senses of hearing and smell. Their specially developed snouts are flattened and strengthened by a plate of cartilage, which allows them to root in all types of soil.

Hogs have 44 teeth; the molars have low crowns with simple cusps. The permanent teeth are in place by the time a hog is 22 months old. Males of all three types of wild swine have four continually growing tusks (canine teeth) that they use for defense and to establish dominance for breeding. Tusks project from the sides of the mouth, can be extremely sharp, and may grow 5 inches before they are broken off or worn down from

use. The upper tusks (sometimes called witters or grinders) function as whetstones to the lower tusks, keeping them sharp. If an upper tusk is damaged or deformed, the corresponding lower tusk can continue to grow in a complete circle and re-enter the lower jaw.

Feral hogs have adapted well to a wide range of ecosystems in Texas. They prefer moist bottomland and are commonly found in riparian areas near rivers, creeks, streams, lakes, ponds, marshes, bogs, swamps and sloughs. They also prefer dense vegetation that conceals them and protects them from temperature extremes. Only poor habitat and extremely arid conditions seem to limit their distribution. Hogs usu- ally concentrate where food is plentiful. They may rest during the day in dense, shady areas and move at night to more open areas for food and water.

Feral hogs are usually nocturnal. They may be active for a while during early morning or late afternoon, but only when temperatures are conducive and when seeking suitable shelter and wallowing areas. They seldom move around at mid-day unless disturbed. Major disturbances can cause feral hogs to permanently shift their home range several miles away. Infrequent or minor disturbances will cause hogs to move only a short distance, and they will return once the disturbance has passed.

Feral hogs are well established in Texas, and because of their adaptability, reproductive capability, and skill at survival, they are here to stay. The value of feral hogs is a matter of opinion. Landowners suffering from feral hog damage may be very eager to get rid of them. Hunters look forward to having them show up on their hunting grounds. Entrepreneurs enjoy the economic returns from feral hog hunting fees and the sale of captured hogs. Biologists have ecological concerns as feral swine interact with and harm native wildlife species. Whatever one's opinion may be, the management of feral hogs should be part of any property management plan.

To help control the population of hogs in The Hills, traps have been placed in different areas of the neighborhood where they were causing the most damage. As of today, 65 hogs have been trapped and hauled off of our community and sent to a taxidermist to be processed. The picture below is of the hogs being hauled off from our community.

LET'S TALK ABOUT SPOT LIGHTS (Peter Gottschling)

OK, I hear a lot of groans out there from all you avid Nature Committee Newsletter readers (there must be at least 5 or 6 of you) saying here we go again, Peter is going on again about dark skies. Well, yes, I am. But minimizing lights at night is not just about astronomy. Bright lights also affect the health of our wildlife and especially migrating birds which mostly migrate between 11 PM and 6 AM. The bright spot lights that shine into the sky disorient birds and can cause them to lose their way because they are attracted to bright lights. The bright lights also disrupt our nocturnal wild animals' feeding, hunting and mating. Oh, and bright spot lights shining into your neighbor's house and yard can also disrupt their enjoyment of the night sky because they are blinded by the lights. Please be kind to your neighbors and shield your spots so they only shine in your yard and not beyond. Try aiming them down instead of out to minimize this and certainly don't leave them on all night. If they seem too bright to you when you do this, they are obviously too bright, period and should be replaced with lower wattage lights.

More information on Lights Out Texas for migrating birds and about dark sky lighting can be found at these web sites.

Lights Out Texas

https://www.darksky.org/