

## **The Hills Above Possum Kingdom Nature Committee Newsletter Spring/Summer 2025**

**INTRODUCTION:** Spring has begun (officially started March 20<sup>th</sup> with the start of summer to beginning on June 25<sup>th</sup>) and we are beginning to see spring itself happening. We continued to have the normal back and forth of cold and then warmer weather right up through the middle of the month of March. BUT we did begin to see the first beginnings of spring with some new birds arriving and the winter visitors slowly disappearing. Soon the grasses will begin to grow and we already have some weeds sprouting up and just a few wildflowers beginning to bloom. The Nature Committee has been doing this quarterly newsletter since Fall/Winter of 2015 (TEN FULL YEARS!) and we continue to totally enjoy letting our community know about the beautiful nature and natural habitat we have in our lovely community. There is something to learn about everything all the time. We have also put together a compilation of ALL of the newsletter articles we have written and have linked this to the POA Webpage where you can go to see any article that may interest you!! We have attached this compilation with our most recent newsletter so you will have a copy of it. There are many new people in our community who have not seen many of our articles so we encourage you all to go back and research things that interest you and catch up on what nature in The Hills has been offering us. Hopefully we can retain much of the natural habitat we have so that we can continue to enjoy the beauty of what surrounds us.

We would like to specifically mention that in our original newsletters Lynne Brown was a member of our committee. She was actually the person who suggested the idea of starting this project and we are deeply indebted to her. With her deep interest in the history of the area, many articles were authored by her and let us all know the background history of The Hills Above Possum Kingdom and the area around us.

The current members of the Nature Committee (Lynne Aldrich, Peter Gottschling, Wolf Patrick, Ron Ritchie, Debra Wallace, Magyn Whitaker) hope you all enjoy this new addition of our quarterly newsletter. So now let us begin to celebrate the beginning of our eleventh year with this Spring/Summer 2025 edition.

**SANDHILLCRANES:** (Lynne Aldrich) **Wait!!!** What is that we are hearing in the skies? <https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/90482201> **YES!** The Sandhill Cranes are beginning to flock and fly over us in up to a hundred at a time and beginning their Spring migration back to Canada and the northern states where they will breed and be until time to leave the cold again and migrate back to their winter grounds. So their leaving is our clue to the fact that Spring is near. And while winter is their time here and you may think should have been in our Fall/Winter newsletter we can't help but think that their loud departure in Spring is quite appropriate to make you all aware of this wonderful bird and how it spends its life.

The Sandhill Crane is a majestic creature. It stands up to five feet tall and are largely gray with a red patch at the top of their heads. They have slender necks, long legs and are rather robust overall. They love to rub the mud of the earth they are on so at times will look little rusty.



In flight they will beat their wings very slowly but steadily and can look like they are mostly gliding. The calls you hear are possible because of their long windpipes which coil into their breastbone.

The habitat they prefer are open wetlands, prairies and grasslands and they particularly like wet areas. The food they like are grains, roots and insects and will occasionally snap up a small mammal or reptile. One of the things we won't see while they are here in Texas is their wonderful mating dance moves although Peter and I have seen them dancing while birding in the later winter in the Throckmorton area. The open fields around that area are a good place to go looking for them in February just before they begin their Spring migration. Their real courting behaviour will not take place here but it is just great to watch them stretch their wings and pump their heads and then bow and jump into the air.



But if you want to see a truly spectacular site of them in the dead of winter you will need to travel further afield to someplace like Muleshoe National Wildlife area where there are thousands of them gathering together. It is truly spectacular to stand along the shores of the water and watch them – along with the geese – fly over and about. Another place in Texas is along the Gulf Coast at Attwater National Wildlife area. The following clip was from a video I did in Bosque del Apache. It is short so just clip and enjoy. Click the link below and wait for it to load.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nyj9q3zVgmQ&ab\\_channel=Laldr](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nyj9q3zVgmQ&ab_channel=Laldr)

They will form long lasting pairs and once hatched the young will take up to two months to become independent. All of the birds we are seeing here in Texas are adults – the young have migrated with their parents and will look just like them when they get here. At the Spring migration all will be ready to return and breed.

The main bird you might confuse with the Sandhill Crane is the Great Blue Heron. The Heron is smaller but there are other differences that make the Sandhill Crane stand out. In flight the cranes will stretch both their necks and their legs out. On the ground they can be distinguished by their rounded rear end that looks like a bustle. They stride in a stately fashion on the ground with this great bustle very obvious.

The Sandhill Crane has let us know that spring is here, and if you want a closer look at these birds go to where they are in the winter. I am attaching an eight minute video of cranes in Texas in winter. It is very much worth looking at and I hope you will. Then, you will be looking forward to winter again and know just what you can do to make this winter even better. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=api8-lqqrPc&ab\\_channel=TexasParksandWildlife](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=api8-lqqrPc&ab_channel=TexasParksandWildlife)

**GOLDEN -CHEEKED WARBLER (Wolf Patrick)** Recently, I read an article from the US Fish and Wildlife service (USFWS), about the Golden-cheeked Warbler (GCW). The article was drafted under section 6 of the Endangered Species act. In The Hills we are blessed to have USFWS habitat, which this beautiful bird frequents. Due to that, I thought it might be helpful to inform our residents about this unique bird, and how we can help it thrive, and not violate the Endangered Species Act.

The USFWS suggests in management of endangered species, to look at the “big picture,” of managing habitat. Bull dozing, even the hand cutting of trees that removes **closed** canopies, is very detrimental to GCW habitat.

“The golden-cheeked warbler is endangered because many tall oak and juniper woodlands have been cleared to build roads, houses, and stores.”

<https://earthjustice.org/press/2025/u-s-fish-and-wildlife-service-review-announces-endangered-species-act-downlisting-for-golden-cheeked-warbler>

It is paramount to the GCW for land clearing in habitat areas to not take place during the March-August nesting. This doesn't mean clearing cannot occur but knowing what sections of your property GCW territory will help in making decisions on how to proceed. Juniper (cedar) trees are a primary habitat, though a mix of juniper and hardwoods is best. Selecting trees to cut that does not remove a closed canopy system is crucial.

Woodland vegetation is also very important. Woodland vegetation is woody plants; trees, shrubs, and bushes, that cover a large area.



<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=golden+cheeked+warbler+in+texas>

<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1d&q=golden+cheeked+warbler#vhid=HccACldn-UKy6M&vssid=l>

One of the difficulties for this bird, is that it breeds “exclusively in the mixed juniper-oak” and only in central Texas!! It depends solely on us to maintain habitat for it, so this is our bird. Its nesting range in Texas is approximately 33 counties, that’s it. This ranges from Palo Pinto County to Kinney County and the GCW **is the only bird** species with a breeding range indigenous to the great state of Texas.

These guys build their nests using fine strips of bark from the cedar trees and tie them all together with spider webs. Being a non-fan of spiders, I don’t mind that disruption to the spiders’ efforts.... but that’s just me. It has been noted that females do not proceed with building a nest when fine cedar bark is not present. Warblers lay only **one** clutch of eggs **per season**, producing 3–4 white eggs with brown and purple dots. The babies will leave the nest 9–12 days after hatching and will stay with mom and dad for about a month.

The warbler does not eat seeds. They are considered insectivorous, eating only insects, spiders and caterpillars. So, pesticides do affect their food source.

It is important for all owners in The Hills to be aware of how important we are to this Texas bird. We can help in the conservation efforts by selecting tree removal that will maintain a mixture of juniper and oak, keeping a canopy in place wherever possible.

**MONARCH - THE BUTTERFLY WHO WOULD BE KING** (Ron Ritchie) Most of us bought property here in the Hills because we appreciate the rugged beauty of this region of Texas. The extreme temperatures we experience in summer and winter expose a harsh landscape of dark green juniper trees, dormant grass, and rocky terrain. But in the spring, our landscape will explode into color with Bluebirds, wildflowers and cactus flowers. The color I look forward to the most is the orange and black of the biannual migration of the Eastern Monarch Butterflies.



As I write this, they are still in their winter breeding grounds in Mexico. However, around the second week of March, they will start their spring migration to their summer destinations across the eastern United States. Their migration path crosses most of Texas, including Palo Pinto County.

The migration of Monarch Butterflies is remarkable. There is no other species of Butterfly in the world that migrates like the Monarchs of North America. The Spring migration starts once the Milkweed plants have begun to grow. If the Monarchs leave too early, Milkweed will not be available on which to lay their eggs. The Spring and Summer Monarchs only live three to five weeks, during which they fly north and east looking for Milkweed. It takes about 30 days for an egg to hatch into a caterpillar, for the caterpillar to form a chrysalis, and for the adult butterfly to emerge. There will be three to four generations before the end of the summer migration, taking them up to 3000 miles from their winter homes.



*A Monarch Caterpillar*



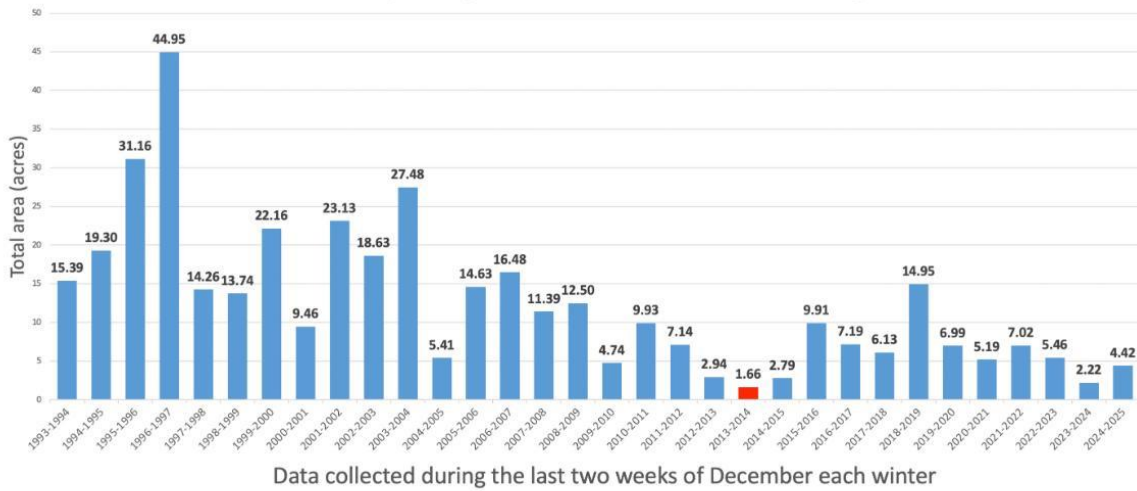
*Adult Monarch Butterfly*

It is, however, the fall migration in which the real mystery lies. The change in the weather, coupled with shorter days, transforms the season's final generation of Monarch butterflies. During the Spring migration, the butterflies only live for a few weeks and just follow the Milkweed; this final generation of the year is born with extra fat and will live for up to 9 months. They somehow instinctively know the path back to their winter grounds in Mexico. These delicate insects will survive a flight of thousands of miles to find the exact spot their great-great-grandparents left the previous March. These same Monarch Butterflies will survive the winter in Mexico and start the spring migration the following March.

It is hard to predict how many Monarchs we will see this spring. The population of Eastern Monarch Butterflies varies a lot from year to year. Their numbers in Mexico this winter are almost double last winter. But despite this very positive news, there has been a steady decline in their numbers over the last three decades. This is due to the increased use of pesticides and loss of habitat for the Milkweed, which is crucial to their life cycle. Nevertheless, each female can lay over 300 eggs during her lifespan, so their numbers can explode in the three to four generations that span each year.



### Area of forest occupied by monarch butterflies hibernating in Mexico



Property owners here in The Hills can help the Monarch thrive by protecting the Milkweed that grows on our lots. Even though the word “weed” is part of its name, we need to stop thinking of it as a weed. I try to identify where Milkweed is growing on my lot and avoid disturbing it.



Both the spring and fall migrations coincide with the most comfortable temperatures of the year here in North Texas. It's the perfect time to sit outside and watch. In the spring, they gracefully fly from south to north. At times, they will fly past in a steady stream, one after another. As the Spring migration peaks, you may see dozens in the air simultaneously. Then, sometime in September, we can watch as the Monarchs retrace their path, flying north to south, back to their winter home in Mexico.

It is mysterious how these meager insects have managed to accomplish this migration, year after year, for centuries. But in the coming weeks, when I see the first Monarch butterflies of Spring fly by, I won't be thinking of the mystery. I will just be enjoying the spectacle.

## BIRD MIGRATION TIMING FOR THE HILLS AND PALO PINTO COUNTY (Peter Gottsching)

Are you new to bird watching? Are you curious when spring and summer birds will arrive in The Hills or when winter birds are leaving?

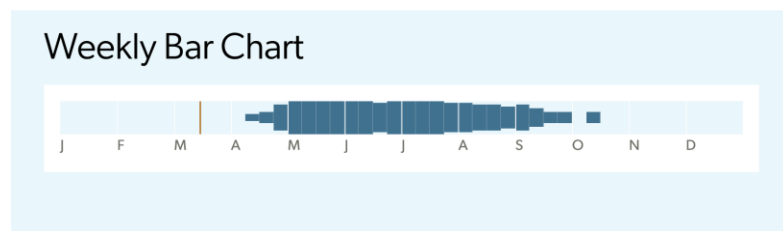
Well, thanks to eBird records and bird watchers recording their sightings for the last 20 years or so you can now find out by simply opening the [eBird Explore page](#) and typing in the species of bird you want to explore on the left side of the page. Type in for example, Painted Bunting. When the picture of the bird comes up go to the upper left where it says DATA FOR: World and click the down arrow. Then enter Palo Pinto, the county name, for the region you want to explore



Q Palo Pinto

Palo Pinto, Texas, United States (US)

You will then see a bar chart for the times of year the Painted Bunting is seen here.



So now you know when to start looking out for Painted Buntings. It is mid-April. The first sighting of the season is always the most exciting. There is always a little rivalry among birders on who spots the season's first bird.

While researching this article I found a way to get around the tedium of searching for birds individually. Go to the [eBird Explore page](#), under "more ways to explore" click on bar charts. Under "select a region", the default is United States, scroll down the states list and select Texas. To the right, choose counties in Texas and at the bottom of the page press continue. Scroll down the county list and select Palo Pinto from the list and press continue. You will get a beautiful list of bar charts for each bird that has been seen in Palo Pinto County.



It took Lynne and I 15 years of living in The Hills and Palo Pinto County to learn the migration patterns. Now even beginners can know anything they want at the touch of a button. I hope you enjoy spring migration this year also.



**NATIVE PLANTS AND WILDLIFE IN THE HILLS** (Debra Wallace) Beside all the great reasons to grow native plants, one very important reason why we should preserve and/or grow natives here in the Hills, is to provide food and habitat for all the wildlife we enjoy here. In this article I've provided some of the native plants, and their benefit to specific wildlife, that you might see on your property or while walking around the Hills. Also, for those that want to include a native plant for wildlife in your landscape design, I mention a few options too. Listed is the wildlife the plant is used by, what it attracts, and if it is a larval host; meaning it's a plant where insects lay eggs and its offspring will hatch and live there. Note: The pictures provided are primarily from the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower center site - [wildflower.org](http://wildflower.org).

First let's look at some trees:

**Ashe Juniper (aka Mountain Cedar)** *Juniperus ashei*

This tree is pretty abundant all over the Hills and fairly recognizable. The female Ashe Juniper provides the berries and the male provides all the yellow pollen that gives some of us bad allergies!



- Wildlife uses: The berries are enjoyed by many species of birds such as robins, cedar waxwings, cardinals and mockingbirds. Raccoons, coyotes, gray fox and deer will also eat the berries. The bark (as mentioned in the previous article) is used for nesting material by the rare golden-cheeked warbler. The tree also provides nesting sites for various songbirds, wild turkeys and other wildlife.
- Attracts: Butterflies
- Larval Host: Juniper Hairstreak butterfly, Olive butterfly

**Mesquite** *Prosopis glandulosa*

This is a small tree you can see everywhere in the Hills and is very recognizable.



- Wildlife uses: Excellent tree for nectar bees and nectar insects and especially native bees since it also provides nesting material for them. The seeds and pods provide food for dove, coyotes and deer. Birds, including Hummingbirds, use for nesting.
- Attracts: Butterflies
- Larval Host: Reichers Blue butterfly, Purple Hairstreak butterfly, Long Tailed Skipper butterfly

### **Desert Willow** *Chilopsis linearis*

This tree is a native that I haven't seen growing here but it is a small multi-trunked tree that grows fast and makes an excellent addition to a native landscape. The leaves look similar to a willow and it has beautiful fragrant ruffled pinkish purple flowers.



- Wildlife uses: The flowers provide nectar for hummingbirds, bees, butterflies and other nectar insects. Also, the seeds are eaten by some birds. Native bees use parts of the tree for nesting material.
- Attracts: Pollinators
- Larval Host: White Winged moth

### **Live Oak** *Quercus fusiformis*

Several properties in the Hills have this tree either in open spaces or included in their landscape design. This is another good native tree addition.



- Wildlife uses: The acorns feed birds, wild turkeys and deer. It provides cover and nesting sites for birds. The leaves attract some insects which also provide food for birds.

- Attracts: Birds, Butterflies
- Larval Host: Hairstreak butterfly, Horace's Duskywing butterfly

Next are a few shrubs, cacti and succulents:

### **Smooth Sumac** *Rhus glabra*

This shrub can be seen all over the Hills usually in large thickets (or stands). Interesting fact: this shrub is the only shrub native to all 48 contiguous states.



- Wildlife uses: Deer will eat leaves, twigs and fruit all year long. Birds and wild turkeys will eat the berries as well. The dense thicket provides cover for small animals and insects.
- Attracts: Birds, Butterflies
- Larval Host: Hairstreak butterfly

### **Agarita** *Berberis trifoliolata*

I think I've seen this native shrub on our property so you may see it in the Hills as well. It is one that can be purchased at a nursery and included in a landscape bed too. It gets small yellow flowers in early spring and has red berries in early summer. It is evergreen and has holly like leaves.



- Wildlife uses: Songbirds eat the fruit, as well as raccoons and opossums. The flowers provide a nectar source for bees and other pollinators. Birds use for nesting sites. This shrub is highly deer resistant for obvious reasons!
- Attracts: Birds

### **Prickly Pear** *Opuntia engelmannii*

This cactus can be found on many properties in the Hills or purchased at a nursery.



- Wildlife uses: Nectar and pollen for bees and butterflies. The “pads” provide good food for coyotes and birds like doves and woodpeckers. The cactus stores large quantities of water which makes them important hydration for animals.
- Attracts: Bees, Butterflies

### **Arkansas Yucca** *Yucca arkansana*

Like the Prickly Pear, this cactus can be found on many properties in the Hills or purchased at a nursery.



- Wildlife uses: This cactus is a food source for Yucca Moths. Yucca Moths are important for the Yucca since they are the only pollinator of the yucca flowers. The flowers are a nectar source for hummingbirds and butterflies. It provides shelter and nesting sites for small animals, reptiles and birds.
- Attracts: Hummingbirds, Butterflies
- Larval Host: Yucca Moth

### **Red Yucca** *Hesperaloe parviflora*

The Red Yucca is a cactus that can be added to the landscape as its not seen in the wild very often. It can be purchased at a nursery and can be easily divided when they get large and be placed elsewhere in the landscape.



- Wildlife uses: The flower spikes attract hummingbirds for the nectar during the day and night-pollinating moths at night. Deer will eat the flowers but not the leaves.
- Attracts: Hummingbirds, Bees, Butterflies

Finally, some perennials and annuals:

**American Basketflower** *Centaurea americana*

This is an annual wildflower that will reseed each year. These can be seen in open areas throughout the Hills. They can be grown from seeds fairly easy if you want to have them on your property.



- Wildlife uses: The flower provides nectar for butterflies, native bees and hummingbirds. The seeds are eaten by a variety of birds.
- Attracts: Butterflies, Native Bees

**Milkweed – Butterfly and Antelope Horn** *Asclepias tuberosa* and *Asclepias Asperula*

This is a slow growing perennial which grows in the Hills. Many are familiar with Milkweed due to it being a food source for the Monarch Butterfly. Milkweed can be purchased at nurseries or native plant sales. If purchasing from a nursery make sure not to purchase Tropical Milkweed *Asclepias curassavica*. Tropical Milkweed can have a parasite that can kill Monarchs. Tropical Milkweed isn't native and unfortunately looks similar to the Butterfly Milkweed, so please read the label for the botanical name to ensure a native.





- Wildlife uses: A high nectar source for butterflies and hummingbirds. Milkweed serves as the sole host plant for the Monarch butterfly. It is a food source for many other insects as well as habitat and shelter.
- Attracts: Monarch butterfly, Queen butterfly, Hummingbirds
- Larval Host: Monarch butterfly, Queen butterfly, Grey Hairstreak butterfly

### **Horsemint (aka Lemon Balm) *Monarda citriodora***

Like the Basketflower, Horsemint is an annual wildflower that will reseed each year. They can be seen in open areas throughout the Hills and can be grown from seeds fairly easy.



- Wildlife uses: Nectar for butterflies, bees and other nectar insects. The plant contains oils that deer don't like to eat.
- Attracts: Butterflies, Bees, Hummingbirds
- Larval host: Spicebush Swallowtail butterfly

### **Texas Lantana *Lantana urticoides* or *Lantana horrida***

Texas Lantana is a native perennial that can be purchased at a nursery and added to the landscape. There are many types of Lantanas that aren't native, and some that are even invasive, so look for the botanical name when purchasing.



- Wildlife uses: Nectar source for butterflies, nectar insects and hummingbirds. Cardinals will eat the ripe berries. This plant is deer proof.
- Attracts: Birds, Butterflies

### **Tall Goldenrod** *Solidago altissima*

This is another perennial that is a great addition to your landscape. This plant is often mistaken for Ragweed but its pollen doesn't cause allergies.



- Wildlife uses: Nectar source for butterflies and bees. This plant blooms late in the summer and provides a food source when other nectar plants have already finished blooming. Monarch butterflies will use the goldenrod nectar to fuel up for their migration.
- Attracts: Birds, Butterflies

### **Leavenworth Eryngo** *Eryngium leavenworthii*

This annual plant can be seen all over the Hills. I'm not aware of any nurseries that have them but seed can be purchased from native seed sellers. Once you have them, they will reseed themselves.



- Wildlife uses: Nectar source for nectar insects and seeds for birds. This plant provides cover and habitat for small animals and birds. The flower has spines which repel deer.
- Attracts: Butterflies, Bees, Moths

These are just a few of the native plants in our area that provide food and shelter for many of the wildlife we see here. If you would like to find out more about these plants, or find out what other native plants grow well here and what wildlife they benefit, please look at the NPSOT (Native Plant Society of Texas) native plant database.

<https://www.npsot.org/resources/native-plants/native-plants-database/> You can narrow down your selection by type of plant (i.e. shrub, tree) and the type of wildlife that it

supports or is attracted to it. It's a great resource for those who want to know more about native plants and the wildlife they benefit.