

The Hills Above Possum Kingdom Nature Committee Newsletter FALL/WINTER 2025

INTRODUCTION: It is now officially **FALL** which formally started on September 22 at exactly the moment the sun crossed the celestial equator – providing twelve hours of daylight and twelve hours of darkness. And here is your **Fall/Winter 2025** Nature Committee newsletter – providing you interesting, fascinating and fun things about nature. This committee has been doing this for many years starting with a Fall/Winter 2015 edition!! We have now compiled a listing of ALL of the articles we have written over the years with the topic of each one of our newsletters and then each edition linked to the POA Webpage where they are archived. All you will need do is click on the link of the digest on any edition you want and it will take you directly to that edition. And if you want, you can just simply start at the very beginning and slowly work your way through. We are sending this document to you as well as this current newsletter so enjoy both.

If there is anyone in the community who is interested in joining us in creating documents focused on the nature and habitat that is so special to our community let us know and we would welcome you aboard this Committee. We put out our newsletter in the Spring/Summer and Fall/Winter so only two editions a year. Only an interest in nature and what surrounds us is important and some creativity is required for this venture.

So for now – enjoy this most recent edition of the Nature Committee's newsletter. The current members of this committee are Lynne Aldrich, Peter Gottschling, Wolf Patrick, Ron Ritchie and Debra Wallace

MOUNTAIN LIONS IN TEXAS AND THE HILLS (Peter Gottschling)

With the recent post on our community Facebook page of a mountain lion sighting in The Hills, it makes 5 or 6 sighting reports I am aware of in the last 15 years. That is pretty impressive for an animal that is listed as rare in Palo Pinto county. The only one documented by TPWD was the road kill on 337 north of Mineral Wells on about March 2, 2018.



Driver who killed mountain lion on 337. Quite a load

Mountain lions are uncommon to rare in most of Texas except in the west, especially in Big Bend state and national parks and the Davis and Guadalupe mountains. They seem to be getting more frequent in north Texas the last few years. Perhaps they are moving up from the hill country south of Palo Pinto County. Mountain lions are solitary except during mating season and have a home range of about 100 square miles. The Hills are surrounded by ranches so there is plenty of territory for a mountain lion.



How big is a mountain lion? They are BIG! Males can be over 200 pounds and females can get near 150 pounds. Males are about 7 feet long with a 3-foot tail. Females approach 6 feet with tail. They are tan or tawny in color with pale undersides. Their long tails easily distinguish them from our local bobcats which are only about 3 feet long with a stubby 4–7-inch tail that is white underneath and 15-30 pounds weight, spots on their legs and tufts on their ears. So a mountain lion is about 10 times heavier than a bobcat. If you see one it should make quite an impression on you.

Mountain Lions don't like to chase their prey very far and prefer to ambush prey by jumping out of a tree or off a cliff. They can leap 20 feet. Their favorite food is deer which they will partially bury or cache and take 3 to 4 days to eat. They will take rabbits, porcupines, and skunks also and hopefully, around here, small feral hogs. Did I say jump out of a tree? Mountain lions are good climbers and tend to sleep in trees during the day also. Mountain lions are usually nocturnal so people taking a morning walk should have nothing to worry about.

How do you detect their presence in the area if you don't see one? They have large paws about 6-7 inches and tracks have no claw marks (bobcat tracks are only 2 inches). When they walk their hind paws overlap with the front making it hard to distinguish front and rear. Their scat is long and large, up to 10 inches long containing hair and bone. They mark their territory by scraping leaves and brush into a small pile and urinating on it. They also claw trees with claw marks always higher than 5 feet whereas a bobcat's claw marks are always under 4 feet high.

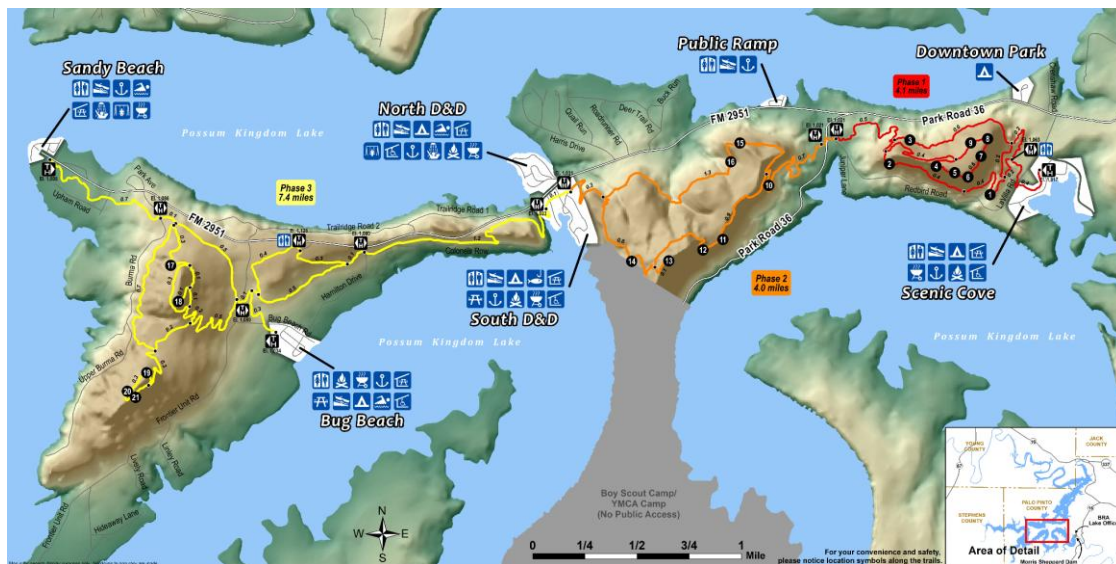
What if you see a mountain lion up close? All the recommendations I read are to stay calm (good luck), do not turn your back or run or make sudden movements, speak loudly, and look bigger than you are by raising your arms or opening your jacket and back away slowly to give

the animal room to leave. If you are with small children, get them behind you. Mountain lions, like almost all animals are afraid of humans.

HIKING UP JOHNSON'S PEAK (Ron Ritchie)

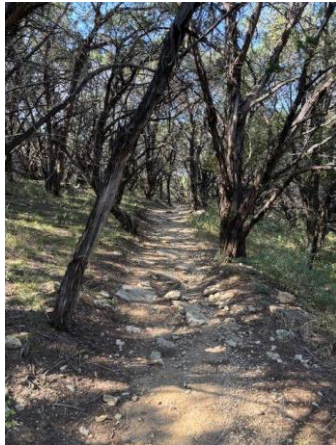
Fifteen years ago, when I first started looking for a second home, I visited Possum Kingdom lake. I soon recognized that this is a very special part of Texas. On that first visit, driving down the peninsula, I saw a sign for the Redbird trailhead. I decided to pull over and take a hike. That hike through the beautiful forested hills surrounded by water convinced me that this was the place for me to build.

Throughout the Peninsula, a network of hiking trails is available. 16 miles in total with 12 separate trailheads. The trails are maintained by the BRA and are a great way to connect with nature. Over the years, I've hiked them all, some many times. But my favorite is the hike to Johnson's Peak. I've hiked it more than a dozen times, and I'm going to hike it again today.



There are two Trailheads that lead to Johnson's Peak. One on Park Road 36 and the one at South D&D. Johnson's Peak is about 1.7 miles from the Park Road 36 trailhead, but today I'm taking the shorter 1 mile hike from South D&D. South D&D has two trailheads, one on the West side and one on the east. Johnson's Peak is on the east side. I check the elevation, the trailhead is 1030 feet above sea level. The hike to Johnson's Peak has the greatest elevation gain of all the trails on the peninsula. Soon after starting the trail splits, the path to the left will take you on a 3 mile loop, first to the Park Road 36 trailhead, then back to South D&D, I take the trail to the right, the shorter path to Johnson's Peak.

The trail is rugged, sandy in spots and rocky in others. It goes through dense forested terrain, Oak, Mesquite, and mostly Juniper trees block the sun. On a weekend, I would likely encounter other hikers on the trail. Families or young people camping by the water. But today is a Monday and I have the trail all to myself. Near the trailhead, I can hear cars on FM 2951, but as I walk deeper into the forest, the sounds of civilization soon fades away. Now all I hear are the calls of birds and rustling of animals in the forest. The forest is full of animals, deer, armadillos, possums, skunks, wild turkeys, and of course snakes. I've seen animals on previous hikes but don't see any today. But I know they are there.



For the first 5 minutes the trail has been fairly level, but now it starts gaining elevation. Not a steep grade, more of an undulating up and down, but I'm definitely gaining elevation. After 15 minutes, I come to a clearing, the ground is level, and filled with bright sunlight. I check the elevation, and I'm at 1140 feet. I've already gained 110 feet in elevation. I'm in the sun for only two minutes before I'm back in the shade of the forest and climbing again. 22 minutes into the hike, I see the first signs of civilization since the trailhead. Up the hill to my left are the bright blue tanks where the Possum Kingdom Water Supply stores water. When the PKWS flushes their tanks, the water runs down the hill into the lake. It crosses the path here and can make it muddy, but it's not too bad today. I continue up the trail and reach one of the scenic overlooks. I check the elevation, and I'm at 1260 feet above sea level. I've gained 230 feet so far.

There are many scenic overlooks across all the trails. These are spots where the trees have been cut back to give hikers spectacular views of the lake. They usually have a bench for hikers to rest and a sign giving a brief description of the view. This stop is called Bone Bend, named after a bend in the Brazos river. But the sign is missing, probably blown down in one of our many storms. But what's important is the view. Since the trailhead is located where the peninsula is at its narrowest, this spot gives you a view of the lake on both sides of the peninsula at the same time. A rare and special vantage point indeed!



View from the Bone Bend Scenic Outlook

I continue hiking through terrain that is heavily forested with Ashe Juniper (also called Mountain Cedar). The cedar smell is strong and brings back memories from my childhood. I've always loved the smell of cedar (but not the pollen). At 40 minutes into the hike, I come across another split in the trail. If I continue straight, I will loop back around to the trailhead. To the right is the trail to the top of Johnson's Peak. The sign pointing hikers to Johnson's Peak is missing. Fortunately, I'm familiar enough with the trail that I don't miss the turn. But it would be easily missed by someone hiking the trail for the first time. The grade becomes steep and very rocky. At some points I must use the rocks as steps.



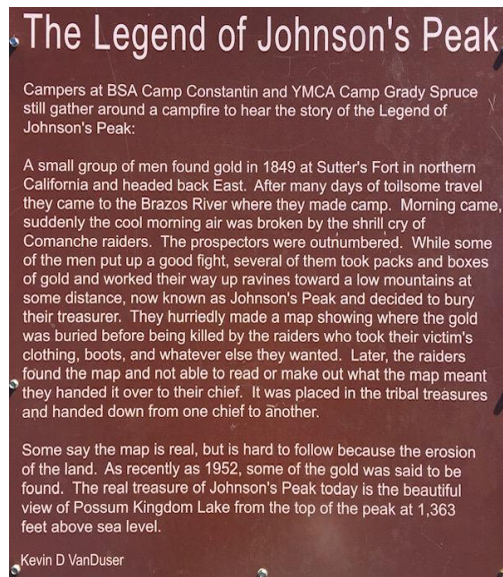
Hiking trail as I approach Johnson's Peak

In less than 10 minutes from the last split in the trail I reach the top. There is a bench at the top where I can sit and rest. I check the elevation, and I'm at 1370 feet. I've gained 340 feet of elevation. The views to both the north and the south are amazing. To the south I can see the lake as it curves around Camps Constantin and Grady Spruce. I can see Hells Gate and Devil's Island in the distance. If I turn around I can see the lake as it stretches to the north. If I brought binoculars, I might be able to see our community in the distance.



Johnson's peak with view to the south

There used to be a sign up here that told the legend of Johnson's peak. Unfortunately this sign has also blown away in a storm. Below is a picture I took of the sign more than a decade ago.



After spending a few minutes enjoying the view, I head back down the trail. The hike can be completed in less than 1.5 hours, but there are paths of many different lengths on the peninsula. Some are more level, while others also have significant elevation gains. There are 21 different scenic outlooks across all the trails. They all give amazing views of the lake and I encourage hikers to seek them out.

I never get tired of hiking these trails. I always notice something different, something new, something I hadn't noticed before. And I wonder if it's the trail, or me, that has changed. Then I remember a quote from the ancient Greek Philosopher Heraclitus.

*No man ever steps in the same river twice,
for it is not the same river,
and he is not the same man.*

THE FOXES OF TEXAS AND WHICH ONE WE CAN EXPECT IN OUR COMMUNITY (Lynne Aldrich)

Who would have thought there were foxes here in The Hills. But there have been a couple of sightings very recently which lets us all know that yes – we do have foxes to add to the wonderful wildlife we have in our community so let's try to learn a little bit more about them.

There are actually four fox species in Texas. The **Gray Fox** is the most common, is native and can be found statewide and is the one that has been seen in The Hills. The **Red Fox** is an introduced species (introduced for purposes of hunting) and can be found in the eastern and central parts of our state and could find its way into our lives here. The **Swift Fox** is found in the Panhandle and the **Kit Fox** is found in the desert regions of the state and both would be very rare to arrive here. There has been some discussion as to whether the Swift Fox and the Kit Fox are separate species but no conclusive decision has been made with their range distinction and habitats being quite different. Both the Gray Fox & and Red Fox are about the same size but as you can see below are very different in color. Below are pictures of each of these very interesting animals.



Kit Fox



longer eared



Swift Fox



shorter, rounded ears

So let's find out a little bit more about each of these animals – starting with the ones we will not see here.

Kit Fox – This fox is about the size of a house cat and although small and dainty are hearty and very adapted to the hot dry desert life. They also like habitat that has very scarce ground cover with desert and desert grassland areas. They are similar in appearance to the Swift Fox but their large ears are very distinctive. Many years ago, poison was put out to help in controlling the wolf and coyote populations but had a drastic effect on the Kit Fox which almost totally disappeared but they have made a comeback - but they are again beginning to decline in some areas. They have fur on their foot pads which helps protect their feet from the blazing hot desert sands and they have very large ears which help them dissipate the heat. They do not suffer from the scarce water habitat but rather rely on hydration from their food which is largely small animals such as Kangaroo Rats, Pocket Mice, small rabbits, birds, lizards & some insects. Their activity takes place during the night and they spend their days in burrows which

also help in protecting them from the heat – and from predators. They do not stray far from the burrows and tend to prefer living in pairs or in small groups.

Swift Fox - While the swift fox historically occurred in 77 counties in North Texas, today it is found only in the two most northwestern Panhandle counties: Dallam and Sherman. More research is needed to determine if it still occurs in other parts of the state. This apparent decline is not limited to just Texas — it is estimated that swift foxes currently inhabit only 40 percent of their historic range. This decline is primarily attributed to shrub encroachment, changing land uses, historical hunting practices and predation from coyotes. In Texas there is little research on the Swift Fox so specific scientific information on them is limited. The Swift Fox is slightly larger than the Kit Fox and also uses burrows for shelter and protection during the day. There has been a lot of discussion as to whether the Kit Fox and the Swift Fox are separate species with most now agreeing they are separate species. They occupy different habitat with the Swift Fox preferring and found primarily in short grass prairie. Their food also consists of mostly rabbits and small rodents, lizards, birds and insects. While the Kit & Swift Fox can appear similar in appearance, the Swift Fox has smaller and more rounded ears as a good distinguishing feature. Its tail is also short in length in relation to its body size than the Kit Fox.

Now on to the two foxes that occur in our area and are the most prevalent in Texas of the four species of Fox.



Red Fox



Gray Fox



Red Fox - The Red Fox is the largest of the Fox species and is a non-native fox, being introduced around 1895 for sport and used in training for fox hounds. It's main habitat is within the east, west and central Texas but It has spread across most of Texas, especially in the North-Central Texas. This fox would be very rare to be seen here in The Hills but with changing climates and habitat who knows what might be in store for us – especially given the fact that it will move from one space to another frequently if they become dissatisfied with where they are. While the Red Fox is of the dog (canid) family it possesses many cat like (feline) characteristics that include hissing, arching it's back with fur erect and it's hunting strategy is more like a cat in that it will stalk it's prey and hunts individually. While Canid eyes normally have round pupils, the red fox has elliptical (vertical-slit) pupils like those of a cat and it has sensitive face whiskers that are proportionately longer than those of other canids. Its feet are also more cat-like. The Red Fox is streamlined and swift capable of sudden sprints clocked at

45 mph. While their color is usually red with black legs but they can vary with some even being all black and have been sub-categorized into 45 subspecies based on the coloration differences.

Gray Fox – Now to the Fox we are most likely to see here in The Hills. A few years ago, we had a Gray Fox walking up our driveway (captured by our game camera) and we have seen at least one in a tree along Balcones Ln. And most recently a neighbor of ours reported seeing one when he came off of Balcones onto Canyon Wren. They are around.

While the Gray Fox may look somewhat like a Swift Fox (which we won't see here) it is slightly larger and more grizzled looking and the Swift Fox is frosty tan in color while the Gray Fox are primarily salt and peppered. The Gray Fox will have a black tip to the tail and the Red Fox has a white tip with white in the chest area. The Gray Fox loves wooded habitat and will climb trees easily so be vigilant on your walks and be certain to look into trees for what might be lurking there. In fact we have seen a Gray Fox perched in a tree very near our house here in The Hills). This Fox is one of only two canine species to climb trees, the other being the Raccoon which we also have here in The Hills.

Given that the Gray Fox has been seen here it is likely that it is breeding here as well. The Gray Fox mates for life. Mating season begins in January through March with the gestation period being up to 53 days and birth being usually between April & May. The litter can be four to up to seven kits but four is the average. The kits will remain with the parents until they are adult – around seven months. The Gray Fox returns to the same nesting site so if one has built a burrow around your house the chances of your seeing one at some point in time is pretty good, although they are very secretive and active usually only at night. The Gray Fox will also nest in hollow trees and among branches in the trees and is known to even use an abandoned Hawk nest. The Gray Fox life span is anywhere between 12 to 16 years when all goes well.

The Gray Fox is omnivorous so they will eat fruit, insects, field mice (that's good for us) but it does not like to have a ruckus taking place so they are very unlikely to raid a chicken coop!!

Now – can a Gray Fox be confused with a Coyote? Well, probably not if you know what you are looking for. A Coyote is much larger than a Gray Fox and he has a black stripe down his back, which is distinguishable. There is also a lot of red around the face and chest area. Both will have a black tail tip so don't let that confuse you.



Gray Fox



Coyote

One final thing about the Fox – seeing a Fox (well, almost any wildlife) is an exciting thing and it will flee when it sees a human so savor the moment and be thankful we have both the habitat and the things that use our habitat around us to enjoy day in and day out.

CREATING AND PRESERVING A WILDLIFE HABITAT ON YOUR PROPERTY IN THE HILLS (Debra Wallace)

Most of us probably bought our home or property in the Hills to enjoy the nature and wildlife that exists in our community. With more and more families moving and building here, if we want to continue enjoying the things that attracted us to this community in the first place, it's important to make sure we are preserving and creating wildlife habitat.

The definition of a Wildlife Habitat is any land that can be used as a shelter, breeding ground, or food source for wildlife. A wildlife habitat should strive for a minimum goal of 70% native plants. A wildlife habitat needs to provide four elements: Food, Water, Cover and Places to Raise Young while using sustainable practices.

Food: Native plants provide food eaten by a variety of wildlife. Feeders can supplement natural resources.

Water: All animals need water to survive; some need it for bathing and breeding as well.

Cover: Wildlife need places to take cover from bad weather and to hide from predators.

Places to Raise Young: Wildlife need places to reproduce and to protect and feed their young.

The National Wildlife Federation (NWF) has a Certified Wildlife Habitat program which provides the guidelines and elements of creating and preserving a wildlife habitat. (I will discuss how to certify, and the benefits of certifying your Wildlife Habitat at the end of this article.) Your property probably already has some of the elements “naturally” or you might need to add some. You might even have more than the number of sources mentioned.

Food: Need at least 3 food sources:

- Native Plants – striving for at least 70%
- Pollen and Nectar
- Butterfly host plants – like Milkweed for Monarchs. There are many other plants that are hosts for a variety of butterflies.
- Berries and Seeds
- Fruits and Nuts
- Insects
- Sap – like from Oak trees
- Fallen leaf litter
- Foliage and twigs

Examples of things you can add: Suet, Bird feeders, Hummingbird feeders, Squirrel Feeders and Deer Feeders.

Water: Need 1 or more sources:

- Bird Bath
- Butterfly Puddler – this is very easy to make using a large plant saucer and placing some pebbles with a few larger rocks; then add some water.
- Rain or water garden
- Fountain
- Year-round pond
- Lake
- Stream or spring
- Seasonal creek or pool of water – could be a creek that carries run off, or a pond that is only full at certain times of the year.

Cover: Need at least 2 sources:

- Wooded areas
- Bramble patch – basically a thicket or dense shrub area
- Ground cover – Native Frogfruit grows very well here. I found it growing on our property.
- Rock piles
- Roosting box for birds and/or squirrels
- Brush or log pile for insects – a firewood pile works great.
- Burrow
- Meadow or prairie
- Leaving dead perennial stems until late winter for overwintering insects like native pollinators.

Places to Raise Young: Need at least 2 sources:

- Mature trees
- Meadow or prairie
- Nesting boxes
- Wetland
- Burrow
- Dead trees
- Fallen leaf litter
- Host plants for caterpillars

Beside the four elements needed for the wildlife habitat you need to implement at least 2 practices within the following 4 categories. Implementing 1 practice in each category is ideal.

Category 1: Soil and Water conservation

- Capture rainwater from roofs using rain barrels/rain harvesting system (prior to install needs to go to AAC for approval)
- Xeriscape – also known as water wise gardening
- Drip or soaker hose irrigation versus overhead sprinkler
- Limit water use – by planting native plants, once established very little supplemental water is needed.
- Reduce erosion by planting densely
- Use mulch – preferably natural items like wood chips, leaf mulch
- Leave the Leaves!

Category 2: Controlling Non-Native species

- Remove non-native plants – doesn't mean you need to dig up your favorite rose bush but work toward almost all natives.
- Practice Integrated Pest Management (IPM) - this is an environmentally friendly, common-sense approach to controlling pests with the use of chemicals being the very last resort.
- Use native plants
- Reduce lawn size

Category 3: Reduce pollution

- Eliminate chemical pesticides
- Eliminate chemical fertilizers
- Turn off outdoor lights at night and/or replace with amber lights
- Switch gas powered tools with electric tools

Category 4: Reduce-Reuse-Recycle

- Compost
- Eliminate the use of plastic and fabric weed barrier
- Use leaf and tree mulch as natural mulch

These guidelines may seem daunting but I think you might be surprised how much you already have on your property to meet the essentials for creating and preserving a wildlife habitat.

As mentioned previously, the National Wildlife Federation has a Certified Wildlife Habitat program. So besides bragging rights, why certify your wildlife habitat? When you certify your property you have access to education from native plant experts, news about native plant sales and discounts. Once certified you can purchase and place a small 9x12 aluminum sign in your yard noting your property as a Certified Wildlife Habitat.

Certifying shows you are committed to preserving and maintaining your wildlife habitat, but more importantly helps you get the word out about wildlife habitat gardening. The following link will take you to the application online. <https://certifiedwildlifehabitat.nwf.org/>

There is a \$25 application fee which provides you a personalized paper certificate, a 1-year NWF membership and a subscription to National Wildlife magazine. It also includes a subscription to their monthly e-newsletter and the ability to purchase a Certified Wildlife Habitat sign.



Regardless of whether you certify your property or not, please consider implementing the guidelines to create a wildlife habitat that will help preserve our beautiful community and the wildlife here now as well as in the future.