

The Hills Above Possum Kingdom Nature Committee Newsletter Fall/Winter Season 2018

INTRODUCTION: Summer is over and fall (Fall Equinox) officially began September 22 at 8:54 p.m. The days will begin to get shorter and the nights longer until December 21 at 4:23 p.m. when fall ends and winter (Winter Solstice) officially begins and the days now begin to get longer. Those birds you have been seeing all through the summer are birds that have nested here in The Hills and some of us all have been very lucky to see this activity in action. The Black-capped Vireo – a bird that has in the past been very restricted in its habitat to areas in the Hill Country - has been expanding its range, appearing in The Hills for the past three years and this year are still being seen AND are still singing. The Dickcissels that for the past two years made a massive appearance were scant this year. Now the fall migration will begin and the birds we have become familiar with during the spring and summer will be migrating to their wintering grounds – not to appear again until next spring. BUT, keep a watch out for the fall migration of the Monarch Butterfly!! They will be looking for food to eat and will roost in trees overnight. While in the Spring the Monarch depends upon the Milkweed for both food and to lay their eggs on, in the fall they will be looking for nectar wildflowers of all kinds to depend upon for survival during their migration. Another reason to plan your mowing and brush cutting to help in making certain wildflowers and food material is available for our wildlife. Late fall – after the wildflowers are gone - are generally better times to do that work. This Spring we'll probably be talking about mowing again and how timing our mowing helps the wildlife we have in The Hills.

So, what do we now have in store for us? There is never a dull moment in The Hills Above Possum Kingdom! We are extremely excited to bring to you in this issue a 'continuing' history of The Hills Above Possum Kingdom and our area. Refer back to our Spring/Summer 2017 Newsletter which you can find on The Hills Web Page. Click on Committees then Nature Committee and scroll down to find that issue. Lynne Brown has researched more on the history of The Hills and close by communities which we think is exceedingly interesting reading.

THE EARLY PIONEER SETTLEMENT OF PALO PINTO COUNTY: (Lynne Brown)

Texas became a state in 1845, but the first permanent pioneers didn't settle in our area until 1854. Most of the early settlement took place in Northern Palo Pinto County, not far from the Hills. In fact, the Hills is a crossroad for many of the important trails and roads used by military, pioneers, and Indians.

To set the stage, we know that the historic Comanche Trail passed through, or at least nearby, our community. The trail entered Palo Pinto County at the Brazos River at the mouth of Caddo Creek, past McAdams Peak and along to the Dillingham Prairie (the area just to our east and north of Graford). Comanches made their way from watering holes to natural springs, most likely stopping at some of those on our property (see previous history article for some locations). A historic marker on Hwy. 337 marks the trail crossing, just east of our community.

The Ft. Worth/Ft. Belknap road was a military road connecting Ft. Worth to Fort Belknap (a fort created to help control Indian problems). This road passed through Graford, towards the Brazos River and through the Hills, up to the fort – across the Brazos and west of Graham. You can follow the historic Forts Trails signs around our area.

The first settler in Palo Pinto County was George Bevers who, in 1854, built a log cabin. It was located just east of present-day Graford, on the Flat Rock Crossing of the Big Keechi. It was near the military road, which provided some safety and occasional companionship. At the same time, Rueben Vaughan built a

stone and cedar cabin two miles north of Graford. He farmed and raised livestock. The military road was well travelled by wagon trains filled with supplies headed west, military and Indians. By 1857 a stage coach also carried passengers to and from the fort and towns east. A store was opened on the road, 1 ½ miles west of present-day Graford by Ansell Russell and Willis Mills. This store provided supplies, but was also the only mail drop for those living in the surrounding area. Even those living on the other side of the Brazos had to cross the sometimes dangerous river in order to retrieve their mail.

The first settlers had to contend with many problems, and the worst of those were Indian attacks. The story of Marcus Dalton is just one of many examples. In 1855, Marcus Dalton and his wife lived on a ranch at the mouth of Rock Creek and the Brazos (not far from the Hills). He became a successful cattle rancher, driving his herds up the Chisholm Trail to Kansas. In 1869, after a returning to the area through Weatherford, Dalton and two cowboys were attacked by Indians a few miles east of Graford. They were riddled by arrows and scalped. The Indians stole all that they wanted, but failed to notice the \$11,500.00 Dalton had hidden in the toe of an old boot. Dalton's wife received the fortune and continued to raise her family without him. Their descendants continue to live in our county today.

Throughout the 1850's and 60's, hundreds of men, women and children were either killed or captured by Indians. If their lives were spared, they were in constant danger of livestock, crops and personal possessions being stolen. They also battled drought, frigid winters, and plagues of grasshoppers that filled the skies and blocked the sun for days. By the time the American Civil War broke out, most settlers had fled to the safety of Weatherford or Ft. Belknap. No census was taken because of the lack of inhabitants. But even with all of these troubles, intrepid farmers and ranchers continued to try to make a living on the land. The last settler to be killed by an Indian in Palo Pinto County was in 1873. The days of Indian terror was behind them – now the days of the cattle rustler!

HYBRID HUMMINGBIRDS - SOMETHING NEW IN THE HILLS? (Colleen Stegall)

One of my favorite birds in the Animal Kingdom is the beautiful and wondrously busy hummingbird. I am endlessly entertained by their antics of fighting one another off the feeders containing far more than one bird can consume. Typically in our area, we see the Black-chinned hummingbird beginning in March, followed by the Ruby-throated hummers beginning during their migration in August lasting until October with an occasional lingerer in November. Always be on the look-out for the migrating Rufus hummers that occasionally pass through our area.



Black-chinned



Ruby-throated



Rufus

Thanks to our friends Lynne Aldrich and Peter Gottschling, avid bird watchers and seekers of new adventures, we have learned of a new possibility. During their recent trip to the Davis Mountains, they learned of the Hybrid hummingbird. Although the possibility exists for other hummingbirds to breed with other species, the one we are most likely to see is the cross between the Black-chinned and Ruby-throated.

Who knew?? Though they have been around for years this is a new discovery for us. We were actually excited to see one of these at our feeders. Lynne said to be sure to note the flash of orange color on their chin as they sweep in as opposed to the dark purple of the Black-chinned and the bright Red/pink of the Ruby-throated.



According to research on hybrids, the male hummingbirds love the ladies and are apt to choose whatever species is around. It is more likely to occur when one or the other has a low population. All of the above photographs were taken in the Oklahoma/Texas area where 11 hybrids have been banded suggesting that hybridization occurs more frequently than previously thought.

Are hybrids able to reproduce? According to a NY Times article there may be some difficulty stating, “Often, however, hybrids die young, and even when hybrid offspring survive until adulthood, they may be sterile or have trouble attracting mates. When hybrid offspring do not pass on their genes, the mating that produced them cannot be considered totally successful from an evolutionary perspective.”

What is our take from this? Always be on the lookout for the wonder of nature in The Hills. There is always something new to see or discover around us. We are only a small part of this beautiful country. Don't miss it!

THIS SEASON'S FEATURED ANIMALS – MOUNTAIN LION & BOBCAT (Lynne Aldrich)

In March of this year the Lake Country Sun had an article featured on the front page of a **Mountain Lion** (Puma Concolor) that had been killed on February 28th south of Graford where it was struck by a car on highway 337. The cat weighed in at 200 pounds, was a male and the first **confirmed** sighting of a Mountain Lion in 15 years according to a Palo Pinto County game warden. Texas Parks and Wildlife indicate that the Mountain Lion's range had been largely in the Trans-Pecos range and also found in parts of South Texas and the Hill country but that they now occur in more counties than they did ten years ago and are expanding into central Texas – and probably right here into The Hills based on reports we've heard.

The Mountain Lion is also known a Puma, Panther & Cougar and is the largest cat in North America. Their diet consists largely of deer but also of coyote, rabbit, rats, mice – almost anything it can catch. It's main threat now is habitat loss & fragmentation and being hit by cars. There is no mistaking a Mountain Lion. I (Lynne) personally have seen one in our area – along highway 16 just past RCWSC pump station 1 and

very close to The Hills territory. I was riding my bike and one crossed the highway in front of me – stood on the far side of the road and watched me carefully as I rode by. Believe me, I did NOT stop nor slow down!!!

When our community was first developing there were reports of Mountain Lion sightings from builders. While not common, they surely are around although no firm confirmations as in photos or real bodies in the road and I don't know of anyone who has their web cam captured a picture yet, but perhaps sometime soon as we have that verification and know for certain they are close by.

Mountain Lions rarely will attack humans but they have been known to do so – in the last 100 years only 20 fatal encounters. If you do encounter one don't run but keep eye contact (I had eye contact with the one I encountered) keep moving and attempt to look bigger than you are. Don't make sudden movements and move away slowly. I will say my encounter had me nervous as the cat was paused and was watching me carefully. But as I approached it and moved on up the road it sauntered into the grass and away.

Mountain Lions cannot roar but they have low pitched hissed, will growl, they scream and they purr – just like our domestic cats. Go to this sight for one of the screams of a Mountain Lion.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hM2Sw8dsMDQ>

The diet of the Mountain Lion is primarily deer but they also take feral hogs, racoons, coyotes, possums & rabbits. After having a large kill, they will bury it and come back later to continue eating on it. As are nearly all species we encounter the Mountain Lion plays a role in our environment. They are solitary with the exception of the mating season which is generally between December/March but can occur anytime. They will travel large distances in search of food with a home range of anywhere between 10 square miles to over 300 square miles and can travel at a 'leisurely' 10 mph with up to 50 mph in a sprint. So here is what you will be seeing when you do encounter one. A pale, large cat with erect ears and a long bushy tail.



Mountain Lion

Bobcat (*lynx rufous*) We definitely have this cat and it is documented. Peter & I have been lucky enough to see them during the day on our property – one who took to coming to our water bowl (put out for birds) on our front porch. This mammal is also very distinctive as well. Note that it does NOT have a long tail – the only cat like mammal we are likely to see that fits that description. Also distinctive are the stripes on the legs which can be used to identify specific individuals.



Bobcat (female) in our yard in daylight

Bobcats are actually seldom seen but we've seen it broad daylight and up close to the house itself. The Bobcat is the most widely distributed of all felines and prefer rocky hillsides well vegetated – welcome to The Hills where we seem to have lots of the right habitat!!!! Although stated to be about twice the size of a common house cat I have to say that the ones I have seen seem VERY much larger than that but perhaps because in the excitement of the time they seem to be pretty darn big!! The coloring of the Bobcat will depend upon the habitat they are living in. In our area they will be lighter in color and have fewer markings which allows it to remain camouflaged in its surroundings. They mainly hunt small mammals – rabbits, hares, birds – and are normally nocturnal, sleeping in their rock or tree dens during the day. But they do come out to hunt in the early morning and early evening – but again we've seen them in broad day lite. They are solitary mammals and only come together during the breeding season which begins in the winter. Births usually occur in the later winter/early spring and the young stay with their mother until the next winter. Our coyotes and our owls are going to be the major predator of the young Bobcat with PEOPLE as the major predator of this magnificent mammal. Mountain Lions have LONG tails so if you see a LARGE cat in the area – be certain to look for the signature 'bobbed' tail of this feline and if you see one with a long tail you know you have the other cat!! Here is what the Bobcat looks like. Note the shorter tail. This Bobcat picture was taken in our back yard during the daytime!!!

We've been lucky to be able to observe our "resident" Bobcat strolling up and down our driveway for nearly three months now – nearly every night captured on our game camera. We've noticed a drop in rabbit population and we know for certain that it is taking the rats we have around here. We've observed it going up our drive then back down again after about ½ to ¾ of an hour – once with a rabbit and once a rat in its mouth. We're pretty certain it has a den somewhere around here and was feeding the young.



Bobcat with rat



Bobcat with rabbit

Females are smaller than males, less stocky and weigh less. The pictures above are game camera pictures of her carrying prey that we decided was being taken back to feed young.

We are now certain she has had a young as we were lucky enough to witness great Bobcat behavior in our back yard In Mid-September. The female came out to our water bowl in the front of our house, circled our house several times, perched upon the rocks in front sniffing about with mouth open. She then disappeared into the lot next door only to emerge a short time later with her young kitten!! She took it to the rocks she had been sniffing and shortly thereafter her kitten came prancing out with a rabbit in its mouth. You can observe all of this that we managed to get on video on the following YouTube sight.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXmP2Vull4k>

We're pretty certain what the Bobcat did was kill the rabbit herself, stashed it in our front yard then got her kitten to "search & kill" on her own by leading her close to it and then letting her kitten find it on her own. As you can see the kitten was quite happy with itself and mom came leaping out following her at the very end. Another spectacular event happening right here in The Hills.

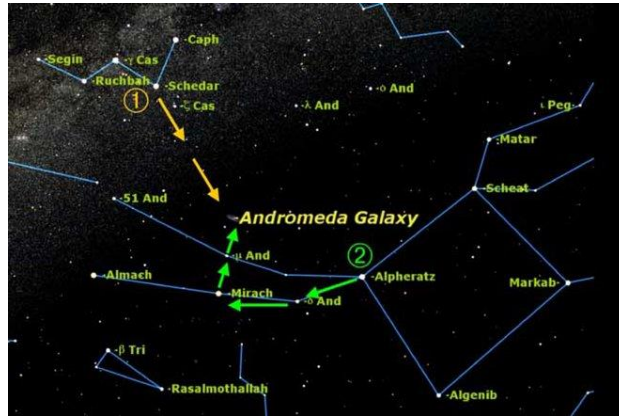
NIGHT SKIES - HALLOWEEN SKY: (Peter Gottschling):

Welcome to the Halloween night sky report for All Hallows Eve! Tonight the sun sets an hour earlier at about 6:45 PM compared to the last days of summer in mid-September. The moon will not rise until All Saints Day begins at midnight (the witching hour!) so it will be very dark in The Hills. The dark will not only make it spooky but also great for sky watching. It may look creepy on Halloween and the dominant thing in the sky is Mars' bright red eye staring at you from the center of Capricorn in the southwest and keeping track of trick or treaters (BOO!). Are you ready to find a dim ghost in the night sky?

The last of the ghostly bright summer Milky Way extends into the summer triangle (formed by the stars Vega, Deneb and Altair) and from there through seated Cassiopeia the queen. Do you see the bright Milky Way going through Cygnus the swan? Look at the large dark slash in the center of the Milky Way here. This truly is the absence of starlight. No telling what lurks out there. How creepy is that? This patch of sky is obscured by a giant dust cloud between us and the Milky Way arm going through Cygnus. The beginning of the winter Milky Way has already risen in the east in Perseus, Auriga (a large pentagram star pattern with bright Capella) and the Gemini twins following. Around 9 PM you can even catch Orion the kneeler getting up.

So, what's creeping around the sky tonight? You can see a ghostly presence tonight. You can use your naked eyes to see big galaxies. Do you see the big square of Pegasus almost overhead in the southeast? The brightest star in the square, Alpheratz (alpha (α) Andromedae), is the starting point to find the fuzzy,

ghostly glow of the Andromeda galaxy. Or, if it is easier for you to locate Cassiopeia, the chart below shows how to find the glow of one of the closest galaxies to the Milky Way and it is the other gravitationally large galaxy in our local group. With your eye you are looking 2.8 million light years into the past!



<https://www.space.com/7426-starhopping-101-find-andromeda-galaxy.html>

The Andromeda galaxy and our Milky Way galaxy are being inexorably drawn to each other by gravity. They are predicted to collide! Another scary thought on Halloween. This will happen about 4 billion years from tonight. About the same time our sun starts turning into a red giant and consuming the earth, so scary ghosts are only a minor problem for mankind.

If you have a small telescope or binoculars you may see this in your view of Andromeda.



<http://earthsky.org/?p=2848>

Hard to believe but the Andromeda Galaxy covers at least 3° of sky. That is 6 times the size of the full moon (which is not out to compare tonight).

Another large bright galaxy to test the Halloween darkness is M33, the Triangulum Galaxy. In very dark skies this galaxy, just a few degrees south of the Andromeda galaxy, also shows a dim glow but I have never spotted it here. How dark is our sky in The Hills? Not as dark is it could be if everyone here and in nearby PK (and the oil rigs and tank farms) shielded their outside lights to only shine down on their property and not up to brighten the sky and dim our view of the stars.

Binoculars are a great way to get people interested in astronomy. You can see hundreds of bright objects in the average pair of 7x35 or 10 power binoculars. The better models have a wider field of view and are still

reasonably priced. A good pair of binoculars is a much better investment to enjoy the night sky than a cheap, rickety telescope from a discount store. The only other tools you will need to navigate the sky are a sky atlas and planisphere to see what are coming up in the sky.