

PK Natural History and Bird Watching Committee Group
Spring/Summer Season

INTRODUCTION: The Hills Above Possum Kingdom are a magical place for nature – our birds, our animals, our dark skies, our plants and yes, even our snakes, lizards and spiders! All of the natural aspects we see around our development are special and our purpose and goal is to help in showing and educating our community to them. So we are pooling our collective knowledge and looking forward to everyone sharing their own expertise as we begin to learn more and more about all that surrounds us. This ‘newsletter’ will serve as our beginnings in bringing us all together through nature through the seasons – Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter – all having their own special and different things to observe and learn about. And we’ll provide quick updates on things of special interest that we may become aware of. We hope to expand to nature walks, creating a check-list of the birds, plants and other critters of our development, bringing in special speakers and anything else that help in leading to our broader appreciation and understanding of where we live. And we’ll send out quick emails when something special occurs – like the nesting Red-tailed Hawk we have this year on a nest with fledglings (at least one young) along Evening Primrose road (remember that when approaching any nest use caution and be respectful of the birds so they are not distressed and abandon the nest!!) Our intent will be to communicate with as many of the owners of property in our development so that we can make those not yet living here see more of what our community has to offer. We hope you will share your own experiences and if you are interested in being on our committee please let us know. Peter Gottschling is the Board liaison and the current committee members are Lynne Aldrich, Lynne Brown & Wolf Patrick

OVERVIEW: It is spring (well it is into the spring season) and the time the birds begin to appear that will and have been nesting with us. Birds migrate (more on that subject in another newsletter) in the spring to their nesting grounds and in the fall to their wintering habitat. In the spring one can see birds that are just migrating through but we are going to concentrate on those birds we would expect to see staying to raise their young. It is also the time that some of the spiders and snakes begin to make their appearance more known. Each year seems to be just a little different!! This spring we have had incredible rains which have had an impact on the wildlife and the plants. Everything is lush and in bloom and we are looking for someone who can help us more with plant life here.

BIRDS: An interesting phenomenon this year has been the influx of a bird we (Peter Gottschling and Lynne Aldrich) have not seen before in the four years we have lived here. We first became aware of them on a bike ride in early May when we observed hundreds of them in the fields along Highway 16. We thought at the time that they were in migration BUT – over the next few days we began to realize that these birds were dispersing throughout the area and then became very prevalent within the development itself. And just what was this bird – it is called a **Dickcissel** and is a beautiful bird that loves to sing and has been doing so for the past couple of weeks throughout The Hills. Here is what



the bird looks like BUT you will be lucky to see it as it prefers to be close to the ground and hidden away in shrubs. But, it is now currently attempting to find mates so you may be lucky to see it higher up in one of the trees. This bird will certainly nest in The Hills this year with them finding the lush undergrowth we now have ideally suited to their nesting preference. Its song is described as “skee-dlees chis chis chis” or maybe even “dick dick ciss ciss ciss’ but it’s best to try to find a call somewhere to see how it REALLY sounds!! Here is a link to the YouTube video and song of Dickcissel <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAi0oAdzEj0> .

Some of the more common birds this time of year that are nesting are Painted Bunting, Bewick’s Wren, Northern Mockingbird, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Roadrunner and Eastern Phoebe. This picture is from Wolf’s house – the traditional place Eastern Phoebe likes to put their nest – under eaves!



You will see some birds in flight now – especially the Cattle Egrets that fly out in the morning to find a feeding spot in the fields (and you’ll see them hanging around the cattle because of the insects that are kicked up by the cows) and then fly back again in the early evening to roost in the trees around the lake. They are all white and smaller than the Great Egret which you can see fly by also but they are usually solitary in flight while the Cattle Egrets are in small flying flocks. The Great Egret is more easily seen down along the lake sides

Our hummers are here with the two seen in the Spring being Black-chinned and Ruby-throated. Each one, if seen in good light, can be georgous. The Ruby-throat will show a totally ruby red throat while

the Black-chinned has a hint of purple lining just below the really black throat. If one doesn't see them in good light they can look very much alike!! And then the females are another story – takes a lot of time and skill to separate them out. In the early spring you will hear and can see the hummers doing their flight pattern swooping in a semi-circle attempting to attract the females!!

Some of the birds you will hear but have a hard time seeing that are now here are Bob-white and Chuck-wills-Widow. The Bob-white will be calling from the ground during the early morning and recently throughout the day and although they will perch up just off the ground and in dead trees they are hard to find. The Chuck-wills Widow begins to call (and keep some of us awake) at the beginning of dusk and VERY early in the morning. Their call really does sound like they are saying – chuck-wills-widow. Another bird of the dusk time is the Night-Hawk which you can hear in the air and can see fairly easily once you get your eye trained on them. Their call can be hard to track but if they are low enough you will see a hawk like bird with fairly large white patches on their wings just before wing tip. Their call is described as a descending buzz BEErzh and is very loud and distinctive noise coming from the sky. Here is a link http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Common_Nighthawk/sounds to the call and diving sound made by their primary feathers. And of course we are all aware of the owls we have – the Great Horned (LOVES to sit on our house tops and chimneys so that their calls reverberate through the house. The other common owl is the Eastern Screech Owl whose call can in fact sound very much like a screech when they call back and forth to one another. More on these birds in the winter issue of the newsletter.

All of the birds – as is very much of the natural life in general– can help mankind in keeping in check some of those things we view as 'pests' – insects, snakes, mice for instance. They all help in maintaining the natural balance of nature. And if you want to know more about the birds and get help in identifying them we can recommend a couple of books and at least one App that will also have the calls and songs of these birds. One of the best books (and Apps) is Sibley's Guide to Birds, second edition. The App has the songs of the birds that can be helpful. Others are National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America and Birds of Texas Field Guide. This latter book is helpful for those who want to have some limitation as to what is just here in Texas rather than sorting through birds that never occur here. All of these are available from Amazon.com. And when we get our bird check-list up and running that will help you in knowing what is right here in our own backyards! We've started by including some of the birds of spring that can be seen here – some more common and some a little rare (like the Black-capped Vireo). But ALL of them are fun to look for!!

NIGHT SKIES: One of the things that is fun to look for is the International Space Station that flies over head and can be picked out if one is vigilant. To get the times for when we can see this in our dark skies go to this site. United-States-Texas-Fort-Worth-PM@lists.hq.nasa.gov.

And right now some of the fairly easy to see things in the sky above us are two planets which should be visible for the full month of June!! Planets do not flicker as do stars so they can be easy to identify just from that standpoint. Right now, Venus – the brightest star-like object in all the heavens – totally predominates over the western sky as darkness falls. However, you can't miss another brilliant beauty – the planet Jupiter which is the second brightest planet – above Venus in the evening sky. These two dazzling worlds will come closer and closer together on the sky's dome all month long. In fact, in late June and early July, Venus and Jupiter will stage their closest conjunction until August 27,

2016! An interesting historical aspect of these two planets is that starting on June 30th they will be very close for eight days in a row. This conjunction will be similar to what may have been interpreted in 3 BC as the bright star of Bethlehem!!

With a scope you may even be able to see the rings of Saturn and pick out at the four Galilean moons of Jupiter – discovered by Galileo in 1610. This was the first observation of bodies revolving around other planets that led Galileo to state that the earth was no longer the center of the universe – and led to his near excommunication!! Pretty remarkable to think just how much we know of our night sky through these early naked eye observations which were certainly helped by the very dark skies that were the norm at that time. A couple of links that give updated information are <http://www.skyandtelescope.com/observing/sky-at-a-glance/> AND <http://earthsky.org/tonight> plus there are many others.

THIS SEASON'S FEATURED ANIMAL: Yes – the coyote. We are all pretty much aware of this animal and probably most of us have seen them roaming our neighborhood and certainly have heard them howling at night. The Coyote is a member of the Canidae family (there are 16 subspecies with ours being the Canidae Larans) and share some of the traits of others within that family – wolves, foxes, jackals and our own dogs. (they will even mate with dogs). The coat of the Coyote is variable but it is generally grayish or buff colored. Coyotes are fairly solitary creatures and as we know highly adaptive. In the winter they do form packs to help in hunting. They, as some of the birds mentioned above, hunt largely at night and sleep during the day. They can run as fast as 40 mph and they run with their tail DOWN as opposed to dogs and wolves that tend to run with their tails UP. They are monogamous and pairs will remain together for several years.

The coyote will eat about anything but their primary food is rodents, rabbits, insects, snakes, frogs and carrion. They are also not hesitant to eat some of the plant life we have and this can easily be tracked in the scat they leave behind!!! February through March has been their breeding season so we are now seeing some of the young of those broods and by this fall those young will be able to hunt on their own. They become of mating age at close to two years old and they have a life span of about 14 years.

But we need to remember that the coyote will not be hesitant to take on dogs and cats as their own food source so keeping track of our domesticated animals becomes our responsibility to help in securing their safety while remembering the good that these animals can do in keeping pests more at bay. As do birds, this mammal (as do many others) help in keeping our nature in balance and while sometimes viewed as a pest and they can be are in fact quite beneficial to us here in The Hills in helping to control some of the things we would prefer NOT to have around.

FINAL WORDS: This is just the start. There are many more months and seasons to go and we look forward to bringing to our community some of the things within nature itself that The Hills has to offer. Let us know if you have suggestions, when you see something that is of interest that we can share and if you want to become a member of the committee itself. We hope to offer many different things and ways of keeping us all aware, informed and entertained!! And as mentioned above we will be working on a full check-list of the birds we can expect in The Hills and other check-lists as we go along and as our expertise allows!! Meanwhile, we've attached a list of those birds that are pretty generally around right now.