



Highland Lakes Steward

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MISSION

The Texas Master Naturalist program is a natural resource-based volunteer training and development program sponsored statewide by Texas A&M AgriLife Extension and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

The mission of the program is to develop a corps of well-informed volunteers who provide education, outreach, and service dedicated to the beneficial management of natural resources and natural areas within their communities for the state of Texas

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

by Cris Faught

Can you identify this animal?

1. Omnivore.
2. Lives in close proximity to you.
3. Range up to 4500 acres in rural areas.
4. Has a reputation for being very smart.
5. Has an average of six siblings and lives up to 12 years.
6. Can't fly but can climb.

Ok, no big surprise, but the fox is an amazing animal to have around, as you know, if you have ever had the opportunity to watch them. I had the pleasure of watching a pair of red foxes feed at my sunflower seed feeder on several occasions and they are amazing!

They represent what is wild and balanced in nature to me. They don't need anything from us, and they are intelligent enough to live right where we live, up close and personal. In fact most of us have a fox den within walking distance of our house, yet they are seldom seen in action. Their presence, however, is hard to miss because of their territory markings (scat). They eat what is available including lizards, rabbits, hares, birds, bugs, seeds, fruits and small rodents which they hunt with the characteristic pounce. They don't chew their food, rather they use their carnassial or shearing teeth to cut the meat into manageable chunks.

They are known to be nocturnal, but the pair I observed came to the feeder at all times of the day and would often

come and go many times instead of staying for an extended time. My feeder is within easy sight and sound of the front porch, and they never seemed to mind us looking at or talking about them. These are wild though, so they know what boundaries are and closely watched us to monitor any infractions of their safety lines. They can make over 40 sounds including yips, howls and growls. The one I heard sounded enough like a scream or a raven call that I knew I was being warned to come no closer. I didn't.

The next time you see their boundary marker or their playful antics, I hope you will stay long enough to observe them in action. They love to play with each other or other house pets or a ball and even a seed feeder for that matter.

These are the neighbor you love to love.

Stewardship

An ethic that embodies cooperative planning and management of environmental resources with organizations, communities and others to actively engage in the prevention of loss of habitat and facilitate its recovery in the interest of long-term sustainability

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Please submit pictures, articles, reports, stories, announcements, etc. to

chili865@gmail.com.

Photos should have captions and appropriate credits. The deadline for submissions to each month's newsletter is the 10th of the month and publication will be by the 15th.

AUGUST PROGRAM

by Melissa Duckworth

Kelly Tarla, our newly appointed Burnet County A&M Agrilife Extension Agent will be our speaker at the August meeting. She will be speaking on a variety of issues regarding her goals in her new position.

Kelly earned a Master's Degree in Agriculture and a Bachelor's Degree in Agricultural Services and Development from Tarleton State University. She has been an agricultural science/FFA teacher, an Agrilife Extension Agent for 4H and youth development in Bastrop County, and a fifth grade teacher in Florence.

Kelly fills the position held by the "retired" Wade Hibler.



THE COMMON NIGHTHAWK

by Joanne Fischer

Your assignment this month is to get out your smart device (if it has a bird app on it) or go to a computer and look up and listen to the call of the Common Nighthawk (on the computer I suggest you use what-bird.com). The reason I want you to do this is that Common Nighthawks are most often heard before they are seen and they have such a distinctive call – which is described as a sharp, electric *peent* - that once you hear it you may likely say - “I’ve heard that sound before”!

Common Nighthawks are most active in the morning starting about an hour before sunrise until about a half hour after sunrise and in the evening from half an hour before sunset until an hour after sunset. They fly with looping, bat-like bouts of continuous flapping and sporadic glides. But it will be their call that will give you a clue that they are overhead. Usually during the day they are very difficult to spot because they most often roost motionless on a tree branch or the ground.

The Common Nighthawk is a member of the nightjar family (Caprimulgidae) and is a medium-sized slender bird with very long, pointed wings and a medium length tail. It is grayish brown to black (considered well camouflaged), with a distinctive white wing stripe about two-thirds of the way to the tip of its wing. If it is not too dark when you see one you may also notice a V-shaped white throat patch which contrasts with the rest of the bird's darkish plumage and a white tail band.

The Common Nighthawk is the only nighthawk occurring over the majority of North America (the exception is extreme northern parts of Canada). It also has one of the longest migration routes of all North American birds. It travels through Mexico and Central America to reach its wintering grounds which are in southern South America. Although in summer breeding season we will most likely see them at dawn or dusk and solely or in pairs, during migration they are known to migrate at all hours of the day in large flocks. To demonstrate the length of their migration journeys - the northbound migration begins sometime around the end of February with the birds reaching



their breeding destinations as late as mid-June. The southbound migration commences mid-July and concludes in early October.

Common Nighthawks can be found in both rural and urban settings and in many varied habitats. In towns they are often seen over brightly lit billboards or stadiums or near streetlights hunting bugs that are drawn to the lights. The nighthawk's diet consists almost exclusively of flying insects. They also drink in flight by scooping water when flying over rivers, lakes, ponds or streams. The Nighthawk has a very small beak but a cavernous mouth suited specifically for

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COMMON NIGHTHAWK (Continued from page 3)

gathering up insects on the fly. Although they forage when the light levels are low, it is reported that they locate prey by sight.

The Common Nighthawk is another species that engages in a rather spectacular courtship display (although again I have never witnessed it). Males attract their mates with a steep power dive that ends in a "boom" made when the bird flexes his wings downward to pull out of the dive and the air rushing across his wingtips makes a deep whooshing or booming sound.

The Common Nighthawk nests most frequently on the ground often in unsheltered open areas but sometimes near fallen limbs, near grass clumps or under shrubs. They will lay their eggs directly on the ground or they may build a very marginal nest foundation on which to deposit their eggs. They have also been known to nest on flat gravel roofs. The female incubates the eggs and both parents feed the hatchlings.

From a conservation perspective, the Common Nighthawk is considered common and classified as a species of Least Concern by the North American Breeding Bird Survey even though the population has been declining over the last 40 years. Across North America, threats include reduction in mosquitoes and other aerial insects due to pesticides, and habitat loss

including open woods in rural areas and flat gravel rooftops in urban ones. Nighthawks are also vulnerable to being hit by cars as they forage over roads or roost on roadways at night. And finally, like other ground nesting species, the Common Nighthawk's eggs and nestlings are at risk to predation by ground carnivores such as skunks, raccoon, snakes and domestic cats.

The Common Nighthawk is sometimes called a "bull-bat", due to its perceived "bat-like" flight, and the "bull-like" boom made by its wings as it pulls from a dive. Another common name that dates back to ancient times is "goatsucker" (the scientific name *Caprimulgidae* means "milker of goats" in Latin). An ancient myth from Greece claimed that these birds milked goats. This misconception is believed to be the result of people seeing the nighthawks flying low in pastures at dusk catching the insects that were attracted to the goats. And finally, regarding this bird's name - the term "nighthawk" is actually a misnomer. The Common Nighthawk is not really nocturnal (it is active at dawn and dusk but not during the middle of the night) and it is not, nor does it even bear any resemblance to a hawk.

My parting advice - remember to take out your phone or go to a computer and listen to the call of the Common Nighthawk so you are prepared to identify this intriguing bird flying overhead at dawn and dusk.

GALLERY



Bobwhite calling from the edge of a pot in our backyard
by Mike Childers



Asclepias viridiflora (Wand, Green Comet Milkweed) planted itself in our backyard.
by Mike Childers

Fringed Earthstar mushroom
(*Geastrum fimbriatum*)
By Pat Cambell

