

POST OAK SAVANNAH WILDLIFER



July 2016 Information for landowners and hunters in and around the Post Oak Savannah Volume 8, Number 1



Photo by Billy Lambert

Abundant spring rainfall should result in above-average reproduction for many wildlife species throughout the area.

MORE CHANGES

Billy C. Lambert, Jr.

Wow, it seems as if a lot has changed since the last issue of the newsletter. Weather changes, disease changes, personnel changes, regulation changes, seems like everything is changing. And, it appears that even more changes are on the horizon.

To start, for the first time in recent memory, all of the area sits pretty good relative to rainfall, at least for the time being. After several years of hit-or-miss precipitation (mostly miss), last year went down as the third wettest year on record for the College Station area, despite an almost complete lack of rainfall during the summer months. While the long-range weather forecasts called for a cold winter, temperatures were unseasonably warm, and we followed that up with another very wet spring. Now that we're entering the summer months, though, we'll see how well the weather cooperates.

For some welcome news, for the first time since around 1999, District 5 has a new biologist position. Not just a new biologist, but a brand new position. For the last 16 or so years, District 5 has had 6 regulatory/county biologists,

which isn't very many considering that the district covers 31 counties. But last year, we were able to steal a position from an adjoining district and move it to District 5. It was decided to base the new position out of the Richland Creek WMA to cover Limestone, Freestone, Navarro, Ellis, and Dallas counties. In August of last year, Taylor Garrison, a recent Master's Degree graduate from Sul Ross University, accepted the position and began his career with TPWD. While the addition of this new position will provide a more equal distribution of workloads across the district, it did cause a little 'shuffling' of county responsibilities as some biologists gained new counties and others lost some counties. Be sure to look over the new personnel map on page 12 to see the changes within the district. You'll also note that we recently hired a new Urban Biologist, Sam Kieschnick, in Dallas.

As for not-so-welcome news, a little over a year ago (and for the first time), Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) was detected in Texas white-tailed deer breeding facilities. This discovery has brought about increased regulations relative to deer movements and the breeder industry as well as increased surveillance in wild deer to see if the disease exists or has been transmitted into wild populations. Look for these efforts to continue this year and in the future, and many thanks to those of you that contributed last year. All together in Texas, CWD has been detected in 25 captive white-tailed deer and 8 free-ranging mule deer.

Finally, there are a few significant regulation changes regarding white-tailed deer that recently passed relative to this upcoming hunting season. First, 'Doe Days' were initiated or expanded for all counties within District 5, which now also has a late muzzleloader season. In addition, the Managed Lands Deer Permit (MLDP) program will undergo significant changes for the 2017-2018 hunting season (not this season). All of these regulation changes should result in more hunter opportunity as well as an increase in doe hunting opportunity.

I hope you enjoy the newsletter. As always, feel free to distribute to any and all that are interested in reading it.

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WILDLIFE Profile



Photo by Billy Lambert

OPOSSUM

(*Didelphis virginiana*)

Billy C. Lambert, Jr.

There's something strange about the opossum. Although I can't quite put my finger on it, I'm pretty sure it has to do with how they look. As anyone who has ever observed an opossum up close will undoubtedly attest, they are not an attractive animal. But, I guess if your main defense strategy when threatened is simply to play dead, you might as well go all out and look the part. Even "playing possum" is a strange behavior, though, when you consider that most predators really don't have a problem eating things that are already dead, pretending or not. Possums definitely are goofy critters.

While the American opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*), or Virginia opossum, is most frequently referred to simply as possum, the term "possum" actually refers to a separate group of animals, also marsupials, found in Australia and New Guinea, that are more closely-related to kangaroos. All together, there are more than 60 species of opossum, although only 1 is found in the United States and Canada (also the only marsupial).

Interestingly, fossil opossum specimens date back 65 million years. Although North American opossums became extinct 20 million years ago, the emergence of the land bridge connecting North and South America allowed today's opossum an opportunity to expand northward. Today, opossums are widespread and commonly found throughout the US.

Roughly the size of a skunk or cat, opossums display little sexual dimorphism (the ability to discern males from females), with the main difference being that males are slightly larger and heavier. Males also have larger canine teeth. Obvious physical characteristics include a grayish and "grizzled" coat with darker legs, pointed snout, a cream- or white-colored face, and small, rounded ears. The opossum has the most teeth, 50 all together, of all North American land mammals.

Also notable is the long, mostly-hairless tail reminiscent of a rat. As a semi-arboreal animal, the prehensile tail, along with sharp claws and opposable digits on the hind feet, assist with maneuvering in trees and shrubs by grabbing tree limbs. A popular misconception, however, is that opossums

frequently hang from their tails. While occasionally seen in juveniles, adults weigh too much for the tail to effectively grip a branch for hanging.

Opossums are typically solitary animals and tend to roam in relation to available food supplies. Habitats are varied and range from farmland to prairies and savannahs to forested woodlands. Due to a combination of habitat loss and the abundance of food, such as pet food and trash, many opossums can be found in urban areas. Mostly nocturnal, opossums prefer dark dens or burrows during the daytime. Rather than make their own, they usually borrow other unoccupied dens which may include hollow trees, rock crevices, wood piles, and even man-made structures such as sheds, attics, or basements.

Opossums are considered opportunistic omnivores and will eat just about anything they come across. They do tend to have a strong preference for fruits, however. Other food items include grass, nuts, mice, snails, birds, eggs, insects, and snakes. They are also efficient scavengers, oftentimes raiding trash cans and dumpsters, and will consume carrion and roadkill. Due to the wide variety of seeds, fruits, nuts, and berries that they consume, opossums are considered important for seed dispersal.

Opossums have a very unique and interesting reproductive system. To start, males have a bifurcated, or forked penis with females having a divided uterus and a separate marsupium, or pouch. Breeding occurs at the end of a 28-day



Photo by Billy Lambert



Photo by Billy Lambert

estrous cycle. Following successful conception, the embryos develop in the placenta, which is short-lived and mostly dysfunctional (at least compared to other animals). This results in a very short gestation period, with initial parturition occurring at only 12-14 days. The resulting offspring are blind, hairless, very tiny (about the size of a bee), and underdeveloped.

Following the initial birth, the offspring, called joeys, make their way to the fur-lined pouch to complete development. Once in the pouch, the infants attach to a teat and begin to nurse. The teat swells to create a seal with the mouth so that the baby is firmly attached. The joeys remain attached until about 7 weeks of age, although they will not be fully weaned until around 100 days old. Once the offspring are larger and more developed, the pouch can become crowded, and the juveniles are sometimes seen riding on the back of the mother.

Opossums usually have 2 litters per year and can produce large numbers of young. But, the mortality rate of juveniles is very high, with many never reaching the pouch or successfully feeding. Females normally can give birth to 15-20 offspring at a time, but the average litter size of surviving infants is usually only 6-8 individuals.

Adults do not fare much better as the average lifespan is only 1-2 years. Common predators include dogs, cats, coyotes, bobcats, owls, and people. Vehicle mortality is high, and, while maybe not as common today, people have hunted opossums for food for hundreds of years (in addition to once being a significant part of the fur trade). In some areas, eating the tail is thought to improve fertility, and medicinally, opossum oil is high in essential fatty acids and has been used in salves and chest rubs and to treat arthritis.

Due to their efficient immune system, opossums are known to be resistant to several toxins, bacteria, and viruses, including stings from scorpions, bees, wasps, snake venom, and even botulism. They also appear to be less vulnerable than most mammals to rabies, with an infection rate of only

0.001%. Many researchers are hopeful that information obtained from the opossum can prove useful in human medical research.

Another interesting and potentially-useful aspect of the opossum deals with parasite control, especially ticks. Researchers at the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies have found that opossums are much less likely to be infected by Lyme's disease, which in turn decreases the ability of a tick to further transmit the disease to other hosts. Also, due to grooming and consumption, the percentage of surviving ticks that eventually drop from the animal is very low (only 3.5%) compared to mice (50%). The researchers further estimated that, when ticks are most active, opossums can be responsible for killing up to 4,000 ticks a week per animal.

As mentioned previously, there are many interesting facts about the opossum. But by far, the thing they are most noted for is mimicking a dead animal when threatened (playing possum). A typical response includes inactivity, open mouth, rigid body, foamy saliva, defecation, and the excretion of smelly fluids from their anal glands. What is most interesting is that the reaction is involuntary, like sneezing or coughing, and the brain doesn't always respond in the same manner (opossums do not always play dead when threatened). The unconscious act can last anywhere from 30 minutes to several hours, which seems very unfortunate if it happens along a roadway.

LINKS OF INTEREST

Weekly Texas fishing reports:

<http://tpwd.texas.gov/fishboat/fish/recreational/fishreport.phtml>

Information on public hunting in Texas:

<http://tpwd.texas.gov/huntwild/hunt/public/>

State park reservations:

http://tpwd.texas.gov/business/park_reservations/

Texas Big Game Awards program:

<http://www.texasbiggameawards.org/>

Native Prairie Association of Texas:

<http://texasprairie.org/>

BIOLOGIST Bio

Trevor Tanner was born in Gillette, Wyoming but moved to Texas before he knew he had lived anywhere else. Early childhood years were spent in Corpus Christi and McAllen where he learned to fish with his father on area lakes and during visits with his grandfather on Galveston Bay. Growing up in a country subdivision outside of Brenham, TX, he spent his free time roaming the neighborhood woods and fields, hunting, fishing neighborhood ponds, playing soccer and tennis, camping, and learning about the outdoors.

Trevor began his collegiate studies at Baylor University, receiving a Bachelor of Science in Biology with a minor in Business in 1995. He continued his education in wildlife management at Southwest Texas State University (now Texas State University – San Marcos) and received his Master of Science degree in Biology in 1999. While attending SWT, Trevor studied a Mexican free-tailed bat colony roosting in an abandoned train tunnel near Fredericksburg. He also was granted an internship with TPWD at this location during the period he was researching the bat colony. This research led to his Master's thesis: *Differential Emergence in Tadarida brasiliensis*, as he discovered that the female adult and juvenile bats emerged from the tunnel earlier than adult males roosting at this location.

After graduating in 1999, Trevor began his wildlife career as a research associate with SWTSU conducting baseline inventory surveys of plants, mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians on several TPWD wildlife management areas in the Texas Hill Country. At the end of this contract position Trevor headed out west to work as a biological consultant in southern California and Nevada where he monitored threatened and endangered species associated with oil and gas exploration, gas pipeline construction, and endangered Snowy plover monitoring on a dry lake bed restoration project in the high mountain desert region of California. Between consulting jobs he spent a year as a research biologist for the USFWS based out of Hot Springs, Arkansas studying forest bat species.

Trevor came to work for TPWD in February 2003 as a district regulatory biologist based in Sulphur Springs and currently offices out of Greenville, TX. He covers several counties along the I-30 corridor including Collin, Rockwall Hunt, Hopkins, Delta, Rains, Franklin, Titus and formerly Wood Counties. As a district biologist Trevor performs deer, dove and alligator surveys to monitor population levels, issue harvest permits, and help set hunting regulations.

Trevor assists private landowners in managing their land for wildlife under the MLDP program, Wildlife Tax Valuation program and by providing general habitat management

recommendations through the Private Lands Enhancement Program. He is a strong supporter of prescribed burning and native grass restoration. Trevor also works with several government agencies to deliver habitat management programs to landowners through native grass restoration and habitat management programs and landowner seminars. "As district biologists we wear many hats. This allows me to work with many different types of landowners and on many different projects throughout the year."

Trevor is heavily involved with the TPWD public hunting program, serving as coordinator for the dove and small game lease program for our region since 2003. "One of my favorite things to see is a father introducing his child to

hunting in one of our public dove fields. It reminds me of the first time my father took me dove hunting when I was young. This makes all of the days of posting dove fields in the heat worth every drop of sweat!"

Trevor married his wife Sharon in 2008, and together they keep busy raising their three daughters and a son. In his free time (what little there is raising 4 kiddos), Trevor enjoys hunting, fishing, shooting sports, camping, spending time with family and friends outdoors, cooking on the grill, and working on various projects around the house. You can contact Trevor Tanner at 903-455-0528 or by email at trevor.tanner@tpwd.texas.gov.



Photo by Ronnie Byrd

Total Deer Management Workshop

Saturday, July 30, 2016 – Van Zandt County Farm Bureau

\$15 Registration fee (covers cost of lunch and materials)

RSVP by July 16 if planning to attend to 903-567-4149

Agenda

8:30 – 9:00	Registration
9:00 – 9:10	Welcome and Introductions
9:10 – 10:00	Deer Management and Challenges in the Post Oak Savannah
10:00 – 10:45	Supplemental Forage
10:45 – 11:00	Break
11:00 – 11:50	Aging by Tooth Wear, Basic B&C Scoring, Harvest Data
11:50 – 12:30	Lunch
12:30 – 1:15	Aging Deer on the Hoof
1:15 – 2:00	Surveys and Formulating a Harvest Recommendation
2:00 – 2:25	Taking Good Deer Harvest Photos
2:25 – 2:35	Break
2:35 – 4:00	Necropsy / Diseases and Parasites
4:00 -	“Deer Controversies” Pro Panel/Round Table – Potential topics to cover: The Spike Debate, Selective Harvest in Deer Management, Importing Genetics, Supplemental Feeding...



The members of Texas A&M AgriLife will provide equal opportunities in programs and activities, education, and employment to all persons regardless of race, color, sex, religion, national origin, age, disability, genetic information, veteran status, sexual orientation or gender identity and will strive to achieve full and equal employment opportunity throughout Texas A&M AgriLife.

The Texas A&M University System, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the County Commissioners Courts of Texas Cooperating. If you should need auxiliary aids to attend this or any Extension program – please contact the Extension office at 903-567-4149 one week prior to event.

PLANT Profile



Photo by Billy Lambert

Poison Ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*)

Billy C. Lambert, Jr.

During my professional career, including the educational work preceding it, I've spent a great many years training and working in various aspects of biology and ecology. This period has generally been guided by the concepts of holistic management and ecosystem processes, where everything is intertwined and each single component or species has a complex but definite, although sometimes not-completely-understood, place in the ecosystem. But, after considerable thought and deliberation, I have recently come to a fairly significant revelation. Poison ivy sucks. As I write this, part of my arm looks as if I'm in the early stages of a zombie transformation.

Poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*), or eastern poison ivy, is a perennial and toxic plant found in North America and Asia and is a member of the cashew family (not a true ivy). There are actually several sub-species and varieties of the plant, which range from Canada southward to Guatemala. In the United States, poison ivy occurs in all states east of the Rocky Mountains at elevations below 5,000 feet.

Poison ivy is very adaptable and can be found in a variety of habitats, from open fields to wooded areas. Although shade-tolerant, it does require some sunlight, so it is often found along edges of wooded habitats and wooded fencelines. As a general rule, the more sunlight it receives, the smaller the plant tends to be. It is also common in disturbed areas and soil pH ranges from slightly acidic to moderately alkaline. It grows in various soil types and prefers moist to dry conditions.

A native, flowering plant, poison ivy has an inconsistent appearance with many growth forms (making it sometimes difficult to identify). Most commonly, it appears as an understory low-growing shrub usually less than 4 feet tall. But, it can also appear to colonize as groundcover, usually less than 10 inches in height and also grow as a vine, both trailing and climbing, using a variety of host trees for support. Regardless of the growth form, poison ivy can grow very aggressively and can be hard to control once established.

The stems most commonly appear reddish green to reddish brown, turning darker and stem-like as the plant matures. Stems are usually hairy, but can also appear hairless. The

leaves are deciduous, alternate, and compound, with 3 lobed leaflets per leaf ("leaves of three, let it be"). The stalk of the middle leaflet is consistently longer than that of the other two. Leaf edges may be smooth or slightly toothed and may appear either shiny or dull. The entire leaf can be up to 1 foot long with individual leaflets 4 inches long by 2.5 inches wide. Leaf color varies depending on season and age. Initial leaves tend to be yellow-green or red, turning to dark green as the leaves mature. The underside is also green, but more dull. In the fall, leaf color changes to yellow, orange, or red.

Flowering occurs from April to July and lasts for 2-3 weeks. The flowers occur in clusters above the leaves and



Photo by Billy Lambert

are small, 0.25-inches across, and consist of 5 light-colored yellow or green petals. Each flower is replaced by a berry-like fruit called a drupe that is also 0.25-inches in size, hard, and whitish-gray in color. The drupes consist of only 1 seed that matures in the fall and can persist through winter.

Many wildlife species are able to utilize the plant as only primates and hamsters are known to have negative reactions after coming into contact with poison ivy. Many bird and small mammals species eat the drupes and seeds, which is an important source of seed dispersal. The plant itself is also consumed by bear, deer, rabbits, raccoons, muskrat, insects, and others. Several pollinator species use the nectar and pollen contained within the flowers and some birds species also use strands from poison ivy vines as nest material.

Finding potential human benefits of poison ivy is difficult. Due to the persistent and extensive root system, the plant is excellent for erosion control and has been intentionally planted in some areas for that purpose. And, at least a few have planted poison ivy in gardens/scenic areas to enjoy the plant's vibrant fall colors.

Positive benefits aside, poison ivy is most known for the allergic reaction that most people experience when coming in contact with the plant. The reaction is actually caused by urushiol oil, a compound that leaks from any part of the plant where damage has occurred. Typical reactions include redness, inflammation, itching, rash, oozing blisters,

and pain. The reaction usually starts several hours after initial contact, becomes progressively worse for a period, and then lasts up to 3 weeks. Severe reactions may necessitate a visit to the doctor. On the positive side, the allergic reaction is not contagious and the fluid associated with the blisters is a bodily reaction, not urushiol oil or something that can be spread. On the negative side, researchers at the University of Georgia have estimated that poison ivy has benefited from rising carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere and has doubled in growth and potency in the last 50 years (plus, they estimate that it will double again sometime in the future).

Contact with the plant can be direct (touching the plant itself) or indirect (touching pets or clothing contaminated with the oil), and urushiol oil can last several years (even in dead plant material). Up to 30% of people have no negative reaction to poison ivy, but, the allergic reaction seems to be most severe after repeated exposure. In particular, breathing smoke from burned poison ivy can be especially dangerous as respiratory difficulty can occur.

Several remedies exist for treating poison ivy, but most have failed to provide consistent benefits in clinical trials. If you know that you have been in contact with the plant, washing the area with soap and cold water (hot water opens skin pores and makes the situation worse) as soon as possible is the best advice. After that, calamine lotion, baking soda, oatmeal baths, and topical anti-itch creams can provide some relief. The best remedy, though, is simply to learn to identify poison ivy and avoid contact.

TROPHY Corner



Photo by Scott Schultz

For the second year in a row, McKenzie Schultz managed to collect a quality Post Oak deer. The 10-point was harvested in Milam County last November and grossed 128 1/8.



Photo by Ryan Flencher

Amanda Flencher harvested this great buck with a bow from Burleson County last October. The deer has 9 points, including a long split mainbeam, and grossed 133.



Photo by Larry Grigg

Cameron Grigg shot this whopper of a buck from Milam County last season with a bow. The deer has 10 total points and grossed in the 150's.

RESEARCH Summary

Are We Shooting Enough Feral Hogs?

Billy C. Lambert, Jr.

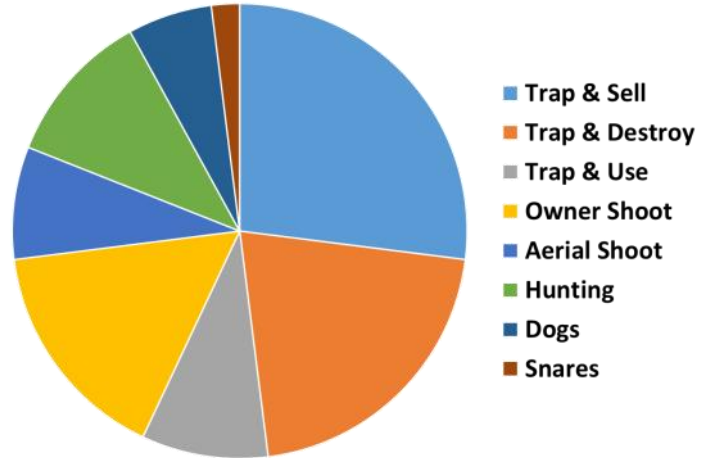
Timmons, J. B., Higginbotham, B., Lopez, R., Cathey, J. C., Mellish, J., Griffin, J., Sumrall, A., and Skow, K. 2012. "Feral Hog Population Growth, Density and Harvest in Texas" Texas Agrilife Extension Service. Publication SP-472, 6pp.

Feral hogs are a problem. I doubt that comes as much of a surprise to anyone, especially to the farmers and ranchers who deal with them every day. The monetary value of agricultural damage caused by feral hogs in Texas exceeds \$50 million annually. Landowners spend an additional \$7 million on control measures. But, are these expensive control efforts effective? Researchers at the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service put some numbers together in an effort to find out.

Using reproductive data obtained throughout the southeastern US on such variables as litter size and survival, the researchers were able to create a model calculating population growth. The data obtained was then compared with other Texas sources (aerial gunning harvest, animals sold for processing, USDA harvest estimates) to compare results, which were pretty consistent (the model estimated 18-21% annual growth compared to 19-25% from the other sources).



Photo by Billy Lambert



Feral hog harvest by method in Texas, based on landowner response from AgriLife surveys conducted in 2010.

Next, the researchers again looked at existing research in Texas to calculate a population estimate. Eight studies from around the state were used, with densities ranging from 8.9-16.4 hogs/square mile (71.9-39.0 acres per hog). A map was created identifying suitable habitat within the state, which returned an estimate of 134 million acres of suitable hog habitat (79% of the state). The resulting population estimates ranged from 1.8-3.4 million pigs in Texas with an average of 2.6 million.

In addition to the above estimates, the authors also used questionnaires, both mailed and at meetings, to determine how many hogs were being killed in Texas and what techniques were being used. Respondents to the survey represented 139 counties and a total of 1.8 million acres. Results are shown in the illustration above. According to respondents, over half (57%) of feral hogs removed in Texas are trapped first. "Conventional" hunting, by sportsman as well as landowners, removed an additional 27%. While popular among some groups in the Post Oak Savannah, as well as around the state, hunting with dogs only resulted in removal of 6% of feral hogs.

From all of this, a statewide harvest estimate was obtained and an estimated 750,000 feral hogs were killed in Texas in 2010. While that sounds like quite a few pigs, it only represented 29% of the estimated statewide population. This means that given the feral hog's current reproductive efforts and population growth rate, the harvest of only 29% of the population results in the population doubling in size in just 5 years.

Using the model generated by the researchers, it would take a harvest of 66% of the population (an estimated 1,716,000 feral hogs) just to keep the population from growing. And this isn't even to reduce the population, just to keep it from increasing. Any harvest level below 66% would result in a subsequent increase in the population. So, why are you still reading this, go out and shoot some pigs.

NATIVE PLANT SEMINAR

Thursday, September 8

6 pm—9pm

Van Zandt County Farm Bureau

RSVP by September 1 if planning to attend to 903-567-4149

\$10 Registration fee

Agenda

- 6:00 – 6:10 Welcome and Introductions
- 6:10 – 7:00 Native Plant Restoration—*“Starting from Scratch”*
- 7:00 – 7:15 Break
- 7:15 – 8:15 Native Plant Selection—*“In the Wild and in the Yard”*
- 8:15 – 9:00 Utilizing Natives in the Landscape



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CUTTING SIGN - Heidi Bailey

As a kid I was always fascinated by the Indian scouts on the old-time Westerns that would squat down, look at some tracks in the dirt, and determine “They went thataway!” The same goes for those trappers in buckskin clothes and coonskin caps that could follow a trail of two-day old mountain lion tracks and ultimately find their way to the cat. I never lost that interest in tracking nor the admiration for those who could do it well. Fortunately for me, I’ve managed to land myself in a job where I regularly get to hone my own wildlife tracking skills as well as teach this disappearing art to others.

To many, wildlife “tracking” implies just following an animal’s footprints. I prefer the more inclusive old-timer references to “cutting sign” or “reading sign” whereby tracks, scat (poop), dens and nests, feeding sign, etc. are all studied to tell an animal’s story. An effective tracker has to have a good imagination and be a pretty good storyteller in addition to just being able to identify what animal made that track. “A squirrel was sitting here chewing on that acorn until a bobcat came along, pounced, and carried him away” makes for a much more interesting tale than “That’s a squirrel track”. Honestly, reading sign is sort of like Wildlife C.S.I.

There’s a couple of keys to putting all of the pieces of the “crime scene” together. Obviously, being able to differentiate one wildlife species’ tracks from another is critical to the storyline. Which animals have five toes? Which have four toes? Which have five, but only four show up consistently in tracks? What is the overall size and shape of the foot? Does the animal leave a tail drag? How does it move—does it walk, hop, bound, or lope? Answering questions like these can help identify the critter. Fortunately, there are some great books and field guides out there that can help teach you what to look for in each species. Most of my favorites are by master tracker and instructor Mark Elbroch, but there are many other good ones out there. There are even some smartphone apps (iTrack is by far my favorite) that can save you from having to lug around a bunch of books when you head out to the field.

After determining what animal’s tracks you are looking at, then you can work on figuring out what the animal was doing when it left the tracks or sign. Was it in a hurry or just walking along? What was it eating? Where was it going?

Is that a regular den or just a one-time resting spot? How long ago did the animal pass through here?

Then comes the fun part—time to ask the question “Why?”. This is where the imagination kicks in and the tracker gets to think like the animal. This is also the point where having some knowledge of the biology and behavior of an animal species can help answer some questions and weave the storyline. I’m not talking about booklearnin’ biology, either. Most of the best trackers I’ve ever known are just folks who have spent a lot of time out in the woods and/or in the deer blind watching animals do what they do.

As with many skills, practice is one of the main things that will make you a good tracker. In many cases, once you’ve seen a particularly unusual track or sign, you will never forget it.



Photo by Billy Lambert

I remember a question during a tracking field test in California that had the entire group stumped—except for one tracker. Evaluators had drawn a large circle in the dirt around a jumble of bobcat tracks, deer tracks, and regularly occurring “swoosh” marks. Our question was, “What happened here?” Long story short, we all offered up our theories on what the strange marks were caused by, but all but one of us was wrong. The “enlightened” tracker ultimately told us that the swoosh marks were caused by a wing dragging in the sand from a large bird that was being carried by a bobcat. Sure enough, when you knew what you were looking at all the marks made perfect sense. How did the tracker know what it was? He had seen it before in the snow in New Hampshire and never forgot.

Practice is key, but being a good observer is important too. Look for patterns and anything out of the ordinary. Look hard at the details, as sometimes it’s the littlest things that tell you the most important things. Look not only at what’s there (the print itself), but also at what’s not there (the negative space between the toes and in between the toes and pad of the foot). Don’t just look at one track, but instead follow the trail as far forward and backward as you can. Not only will this help you identify the animal, but it will also give you a look into the animal’s behavior. Try to get out in the woods with folks you consider to be good trackers. As with many skills, you can learn some things from a book, but a good outdoorsman and teacher can help you to grow exponentially as a tracker.

Part of the beauty of tracking is that it can be done nearly anywhere and anytime. Of course, checking out a mud flat after a good rain is a great place to start. Mud is good because it picks up and holds a lot of detail that you might not otherwise see in loose soil. I love to see what's been coming into our stock tank for a drink when the dry summer evaporates some of the water and leaves exposed mud on the sides of the pond.

Deep sandy areas are another place to go track hunting, although wind tends to erase the slate pretty quickly in sand. My absolute favorite place to go track hunting, though, is underneath bridges and overpasses. There's always mud there, the tracks are typically protected from rain and wind, and it serves as a natural choke point for wildlife. Tons of wildlife species will head under bridges for shelter from the elements, and many more species can be found "just passin' through". I've seen otter tracks, beaver sign, plenty of feral hog tracks (always!), alligator and turtle tracks, and plenty of coyote, bobcat, deer, and rodent tracks just to name a select few.

One final recommendation is to take a camera with you when you go. Not only can you use the photos to document your finds, but if you are stumped on identifying something, you can always take another look when you get home and are surrounded with books and the internet. Folks regularly send us "biologist types" photos of tracks or sign that they have found for a little help with identification. A couple of tips for taking track photos are: 1.) Put something in the photo next to the track to give a sense of size. If you don't have a tape measure, coins work great. 2.) If possible, take photos both in the sun and with the track shaded. You would be amazed at how different light conditions can really make the details of a track stand out. 3.) Take a couple of pictures of the same track from different angles. Once again, this can help you see things that you might otherwise miss.

No matter whether you have a camera or field guides or a teacher, just be sure to get outside and enjoy the wild outdoors. Whether or not you see the actual critters, I promise you they are out there.

WILDLIFE TRACKS



Photo by Heidi Bailey

BOBCAT



Photo by Heidi Bailey

COYOTE



Photo by Heidi Bailey

OPOSSUM



Photo by Heidi Bailey

RACCOON



Photo by Heidi Bailey

TURKEY

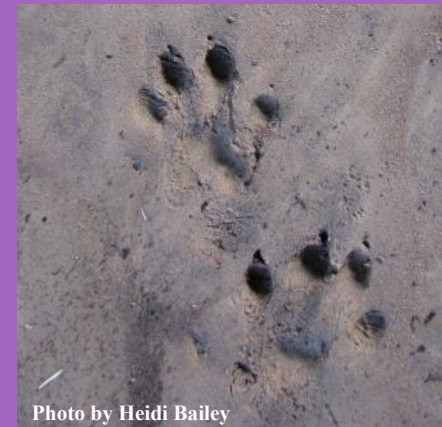


Photo by Heidi Bailey

RIVER OTTER

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GUS ENGELING WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA

1st Friday Wildlife Habitat Management Workshop

The Gus Engeling Wildlife Management Area will host habitat workshops monthly from May thru August on the first Friday of each month. The workshops will begin at 1:00 p.m. at the Gus Engeling Wildlife Conservation Center. Attendees will receive a brief overview and history of the property and then will be taken on a guided tour of the WMA with a wildlife biologist. The tour will show attendees proper habitat management practices for the Post Oak Savannah Ecoregion. Attendees will see areas that show the progression of prescribed fire in various habitat types ranging from historically burned to entry level burns. Hardwood timber management techniques, strip disking and other mechanical treatments, harvest management, grazing management, and herbicide application will also be discussed. The workshops will be informal and open to discuss any further topics of interest by attendees. For more information, contact the Gus Engeling WMA at 903-928-2251.



Wildlife Habitat Management Calendar

January

Prescribed Fire (Cool)
Native Grass Planting
Hardwood Tree Planting
Light Disking and High Mowing
Feral Hog Removal
Brush Control (Grazing)

February

Prescribed Fire (Cool)
Native Grass Planting
Hardwood Tree Planting
Light Disking and High Mowing
Feral Hog Removal
Brush Control (Grazing)

March

Prescribed Fire (Cool)
Native Grass Planting
Hardwood Tree Planting
Overseed Legumes (Warm)
Feral Hog Removal
Brush Control (Grazing)

April

Native Grass Planting
Overseed Legumes (Warm)
Avoid Grass Cutting (Fawns, Turkeys)
Feral Hog Removal
Remove Livestock from Wildlife Area

Resource Links:

Texas Parks and Wildlife:
www.tpwd.texas.gov

Texas A&M Forest Service:
www.texasforestservice.tamu.edu/main/default.aspx

NRCS Texas:
www.tx.nrcs.usda.gov/

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension:
www.agrilifeextension.tamu.edu/

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service:
www.fws.gov

Ragan White

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May

Avoid Grass Cutting (Fawns, Turkeys)
Feral Hog Removal
Remove Livestock from Wildlife Area

June

Prescribed Fire (Warm)
Tame Grass Herbicide Work (Warm)
Avoid Grass Cutting (Fawns, Turkeys)
Feral Hog Removal
Waterfowl Planting
Remove Livestock from

July

Prescribed Fire (Warm)
Tame Grass Herbicide Work (Warm)
Brush Control
Feral Hog Removal
Waterfowl Planting
Deer Surveys

August

Prescribed Fire (Warm)
Tame Grass Herbicide Work (Warm)
Feral Hog Removal
Waterfowl Planting
Deer Surveys

September

Reserve Hardwood Trees
Overseed Legumes (Cool)
Feral Hog Removal
Deer Surveys & Stand Maintenance
Mow around Ponds (Dove)

October

Reserve Hardwood Trees
Overseed Legumes (Cool)
Feral Hog Removal
Tame Grass Herbicide Work (Cool)
Harvest Management Deer
Plant Wildflowers

November

Prescribed Fire
Prepare Fire Guards
Feral Hog Removal
Deer Harvest

December

Prescribed Fire
Prepare Fire Guards
Feral Hog Removal
Deer Harvest



Executive Director
Carter P. Smith

Editor, *Post Oak Savannah Wildlifer*
Billy C. Lambert, Jr.



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