



Tandy Hills Natural Area: Land of Controversy / Wildflower Wonderland

Don Young

Tandy Hills Natural Area is a wildly bio-diverse slice of prairie heaven in the heart of a major metropolitan city, Fort Worth, Texas. To fully appreciate its charms and treasures, indeed its very existence, it helps to have a bit of historical overview.

The modern history of Tandy Hills began on April 22, 1960, when beatnik-loving Fort Worth Mayor, Tom McCann and City Council voted to purchase the land from a group of businessmen. (The land was originally acquired by the pioneering Tandy family in 1854.) Bounded by I-30 on the north and low-income neighborhoods elsewhere, the roughly 160-acres just east of downtown Fort Worth

(including adjacent Stratford Park) is among the largest and most ecologically diverse urban native prairies anywhere.

The decision to purchase the land was not without controversy. The land was considered unsuitable for a park due to the hilly terrain. More than a year after the purchase, some council members still unhappy about the \$173,000 price demanded an investigation saying the sellers may have colluded with Park Advisory Board members. Others pursued a plan to sell the land to land developers hoping to recoup some of the money.



The aptly named "Iconic Meadow" on the east end of View St. at Tandy Hills. (Photo by Don Young)



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Eventually, the land purchase controversy died down but civic neglect into the late 70s made the land susceptible to trash dumping. In the 1980s dirt bikers and other off-road vehicle users discovered the prairie hills and caused extensive damage. Various neighborhood and environmental groups started making noise. In 1987, at the direction of the Fort Worth Park & Recreation Dept., L. Wayne Clark, of the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge, authored the Environmental Assessment of Tandy Hills Park (Clark, 1989). His paper was a sign of paradigm shift within the parks department.

The biggest threat to Tandy Hills occurred in 2004. The City of Fort Worth was about to become the nationwide ground zero for the urban fracking industry, thanks to the confluence of the controversial method of natural gas extraction and the Barnett Shale which lay under Fort Worth. Open spaces such as Tandy Hills were considered "low hanging fruit" by the industry.

However, an equal and opposite reaction occurred in 2004 when a few concerned neighbors founded Friends of Tandy Hills Natural Area. After learning about industry interest in the natural area, they mounted a public education campaign, including sending hundreds of letters to Mayor Mike Moncrief and industry officials and a few public protests. As it turned out, Tandy Hills became the birthplace of the anti-fracking movement that evolved into a global movement.

Dovetailing with Earth Day, the group inaugurated Prairie Fest in 2006 in an effort to raise public awareness of Tandy



The central meadow along View St. in its Prairie Larkspur phase. (Photo by Don Young)

Hills in general and to help insure its preservation. The effort paid off. The city took notice and in 2008 created the Tandy Hills Master Plan (City of Fort Worth, 2008) and in 2010 entered into a support organization agreement with Friends of Tandy Hills. The April 2016 Tandy Hills BioBlitz was a resounding success, reinforcing to city officials the immense ecological value of Tandy Hills.

The one thing about Tandy Hills that inspires so much passion and controversy is wildflowers. The amazing diversity of wildflower species found here attracts scientists, citizen scientists, naturalists, photographers, hikers, poets, children and nature mystics by the droves.

In his 1989 assessment (see above), L. Wayne Clark noted:

"Wildflowers are what really make Tandy Hills a special area. Although many areas have the climax grasses for our region, few have many wildflowers...Tandy Hills wildflowers are in the right place and the right amounts (almost all pioneer accounts mention the beauty and numbers of wildflowers)



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and it is from my observations the best place in Fort Worth for native wildflowers.”

Every April, this amazing phenomenon is plainly visible to any springtime visitor. The three meadows along View Street, with their very shallow limestone soil, are arguably

western University and Chicago Botanic Garden, who conducted studies of Purple Paintbrush in 2018 and 2019, Tandy Hills has the densest population they have observed in all the north Texas and Oklahoma prairies they have visited.



Purple Paintbrush, Engelmann Sage and White Winecup decorate this spring meadow. (Photo by Don Young)

A few weeks later starting about mid-April, Engelmann's Sage (*Salvia engelmannii*) begins blooming, filling in most of the gaps between the Paintbrush. In his 2016 Tandy Hills BioBlitz Handbook, Dr. Bruce Benz notes that Tandy Hills' biological diversity inventory includes at least eight species that are endemic to Texas, one of which is Engelmann's Sage (Benz, 2016). Its blue-purple blooms are a pleasing contrast with the red-purple

among the most eye-catching and bio-diverse in the region. The eastern-most meadow has been dubbed, "The Iconic Meadow" due to its size, floristic diversity and wide open view.

On a typical day in April you can expect to see dozens of species blooming, all at once, in a tangle of arresting color. There are two showy species that dominate this spring carpet, the first being Purple Indian Paintbrush (*Castilleja purpurea*), which begins blooming in mid-March and usually peaks in late April. According to researchers from North-

paintbrush. In some years, clouds of Greenthread (*Thelesperma filifolium*) and/or Engelmann's Daisy (*Engelmannia peristenia*) are equally dominant.

The paint-by-number spring prairie additionally includes less dominant but equally showy species including:

- Sensitive Briar (*Mimosa quadrivalvis*)
- Yellow Puff (*Neptunia lutea*)
- Winecup (*Callirhoe pedata*)
- Two-leaf Senna (*Senna roemeriana*)
- Blue-eyed Grass (*Sisyrinchium chilense*)



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Prairie Bishop's Weed (*Bifora americana*)
 Indian Blanket *Gaillardia pulchella*
 Drummond's Skullcap (*Scutellaria wrightii*)
 Prairie Larkspur (*Delphinium carolinianum*)
 Wild Hyacinth (*Camassia scilloides*)
 Blue Flax (*Linum pratense*)
 Yellow Flax (*Linum rigidum*)
 Fringed Blue Star (*Amsonia ciliata*)

Lesser numbers of larger species like Antelopehorns Milkweed (*Asclepias asperula*), White Compassplant (*Silphium albiflorum*), False Foxglove (*Penstemon cobaea*). They make clear that the sobriquet "iconic meadow" is no exaggeration.

Wildflowers in these numbers attract a wide diversity of pollinators in massive numbers including more than 450 insect species. This naturally leads to robust bird diversity (Stevens, 2007). At least 119 species have been recorded on the Tandy Hills iNaturalist Project Page.

Like all urban natural areas, Tandy Hills is plagued by Privet (*Ligustrum spp.*) and other woody species. But, scattered between these woody areas are hidden meadows that when found, offer up characteristics unique to their location. Some have been named, such as Barbara's Button Hill. This exposed hillock with a nearby seep has, by far, the largest population of Barbara's Button (*Marshallia caespitosa*) wildflowers in the park, so many individuals that it's difficult for anything else to grow.

Another hidden gem is located in the central flats where an enormous patch of Wild Hyacinth takes over for a few weeks every spring. Scattered individuals are found elsewhere but this spot is the motherlode.

Similar micro-meadow systems exist for species including

American Basketflower (*Centaurea americana*), Prairie Celestial (*Nemastylis geminiflora*), Texas Bluebell (*Eustoma grandiflorum*), and Purple Coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*). In most cases, the number of individuals is so large that color variations are common.

Other seasons have their charms. Tandy Hills is blessed with thriving populations of iconic species such as Trout Lilies (*Erythronium albidum*) and Great Plains Ladies Tresses Orchids (*Spiranthes magnicamporum*). But it's the overwhelming magnificence of spring wildflowers that gets the

most attention, and rightly so. Most of the controversies since 1960 have occurred because of a passion to preserve and protect this uncommonly rare urban prairie paradise. So far, so good.

References:

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Tandy Hills Natural Area

3400 View Street
 Fort Worth, TX 76103
 Hours: Sunrise – Sunset
 Free admission

Lone Star Legacy Park – 2017
 Great Texas Wildlife Trail - 2016



Friends of Tandy Hills Natural Area
www.tandyhills.org