



Next Year's Smoke

Article by Bill Browning

Our ranch crew was in on eleven fires this spring, including one apparently due to arson. Altogether, cooperatively with multiple neighbors, we have burned about 8,000 acres. Except for the arson, which was miles west of our ranch, we burned all the acres we aimed to and no more. The biggest burn involved a 4 ½ mile backfire. Our first fire was March 10th as we were trying to get as much smoke gone as possible before the EPA ozone monitors were activated on the first of April. One of our fires was extinguished prematurely by three inches of wet snow.

Our last fire was yesterday – April 15 – not a big one, less than 200 acres, but big enough to draw “fire hawks.” At some point each spring the prolonged torching of the Flint Hills intersects with the Swainson’s Hawk migration. These birds are drawn by the smoke and are often circling the fire even before it is completely lit. Other species of hawks do not seem to respond similarly. I have never seen a Prairie Falcon at a burn, or a Northern Harrier or any accipiters and only occasionally a Red-tailed Hawk or two. Some primordial synapse in the

Swainson’s brain must equate smoke to “fire food” – seared vole and blackened snake. Others reappear from the safety of their burrows.

Later in the day my five year old grandson returned with me to the burn to survey for fire hawks. We found twelve. One soared down from a perch to nab a tiny, probably well-done, rodent with one talon. Half of the dozen birds were perched on the ground out in the burned area.

We watched one after another in flight. Surely there is no bird that appears more at home in the sky. Their effortless drifting seems to be in slow motion relative to many other hawks. The side to side rocking in the wind of the other raptors is smoothed out with the Swainson’s. If there is a joyousness to flying, the Swainson’s must feel it the most. Wing beat is not the right term for this bird whose wings seem to caress the air. No bird glides down to earth more gently.

The presence of migrating Swainson’s is brief. In a few days most will be gone. We seldom see them here in fall migration but our fire hawks will be back in the next spring’s smoke.