BALCONES CANYONLANDS CONSERVATION PLAN

Annual Report
FY 2008

Executive Summary

Background

On May 2, 1996 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) issued a regional permit referred to as the Balcones Canyonlands Conservation Plan (BCCP) to the City of Austin and Travis County. The thirty-year permit covers most of western Travis County for "incidental take" of eight endangered species and 27 species of concern. The plan also mitigates the Co-Permit Holders for capital improvement and infrastructure development needs and provides landowners and agencies a streamlined alternative process for compliance with the Endangered Species Act.

Balcones Canyonlands Preserve Status

Under the terms of the permit, the City of Austin and Travis County established the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve (BCP) to set aside and manage 30,428 acres of habitat for two endangered bird species (the golden-cheeked warbler and the black-capped vireo). The Permit Holders also agreed to manage populations of two rare plants (Texabama croton and canyon mock-orange), and protect a total of 62 karst features known to contain populations of unique invertebrates. In the twelve years since the permit's inception, 28,369 of the required 30,428 acres of habitat have been protected. Populations of covered plant species are being managed to the terms of the permit, and 45 of 62 karst features have received some level of protection.

Plan Administration

The City and the County administer the BCCP mitigation process that links habitat protection with development. The City of Austin manages the BCCP capital improvement and infrastructure development process and maintains a mitigation credit accounting system for participating agencies. Travis County administers the Public Participation Process that relays information related to development activity to USFWS and issues Participation Certificates to cooperating landowners. Twenty four Participation Certificates were issued in FY2008, generating $3,100,550.00 utilized in Preserve land acquisition and preserve management and operation efforts. In addition, 29 acres of land

was donated in lieu of mitigation fees for golden-cheeked warbler habitat adjacent to existing BCP in the South Lake Austin Macrosite.

Preserve Acquisition and Management Expenditures

Travis County acquired or negotiated management agreements to protect 29 acres contained within one parcel in FY2008, and continued negotiations to acquire remaining key tracts within the Preserve system. The City of Austin also completed one transaction that acquired 45 acres of preserve land in the Bull Creek Macrosite. The Permit Holders and cooperating entities expended a combined total of greater than $1,927,000 for operations and maintenance of Preserve lands in FY2008.

Public Use and Habitat Management

Public uses permitted on selected tracts prior to the establishment of the BCP continued through FY2008. Other Preserve tracts were available to the public through a number of education and outreach programs presented by the Permit Holders and co-operating entities. Habitat management activities on the Preserve included boundary delineation and fence construction, patrols by law enforcement staff, habitat restoration and monitoring, control of non-native and invasive plant and animal species, and continuing scientific data collection.

Research

As a component of sound management, research concerning species covered by the BCCP as well as threat assessments to guide management practices continues. Ongoing studies on the Preserve include: monitoring of golden-cheeked warblers on a series of 100-acre study plots throughout the Preserve; black-capped vireo distribution, abundance, and productivity monitoring; faunal surveys of protected karst features; research into the habitat effects and management of native and non-native wildlife populations; impacts of exotic and invasive plants and their control; and ecosystem monitoring to ensure appropriate management for all of the region's unique native wildlife. Additional research completed or underway on the BCP in 2008 included genetic analysis of salamander species of concern, water quality and stream habitat surveys, determination of habitat requirements for the rare bracted twistflower, evaluations of proposed changes to standardized survey techniques for endangered songbirds, delineation of habitat and management zones for the Jollyville Plateau Salamander, evidence of speciation in an invertebrate herbivore, an assessment of population estimation methods for small populations of spring-associated salamanders, and a new synonymy of three previously

distinct species of karst invertebrates with a discussion of the implications of this taxonomic change for conservation of the species.