Travis County FY2020
Jollyville Plateau Salamander (*Eurycea tonkawae*)
Monitoring Report

Photo: Jollyville Plateau salamander by Piers Hendrie

Travis County
Department of Transportation and Natural Resources
Natural Resources and Environmental Quality Division

October 1, 2019 – September 30, 2020

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Background

On May 2, 1996, the City of Austin and Travis County were jointly issued a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) regional permit referred to as the Balcones Canyonlands Conservation Plan (BCCP). This permit allows “incidental take” of eight locally occurring endangered species in compliance with Section 10(a)1(b) of the Endangered Species Act (USFWS 1996a). The thirty-year permit covers approximately 561,000 acres in western Travis County, Texas identified in the Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) and Final Environmental Impact Statement (USFWS 1996b). The permit also covers incidental take of 27 species of concern should any become listed as threatened or endangered during the life of the permit.

The Jollyville Plateau salamander (*Eurycea tonkawae*; hereafter JPS) occurs within the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve (BCP) and the overall management of Travis County preserve lands benefits the conservation of this species. Although the BCCP 10(a) permit does not cover “take” of this species or require mitigation, the BCCP partners have pledged to protect the species wherever it is located within the BCP.

On September 19, 2013, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the JPS as threatened (USFWS 2012 and 2013) under the Endangered Species Act and designated 32 units of critical habitat (totaling 4,331 acres) in portions of Travis and Williamson Counties (Figure 1). The most significant threat is degradation of aquatic habitats, primarily in the form of reduced water quality and alteration of natural flow regimes due to extremely rapid human population growth and urbanization within this small range (USFWS 2013). About half of the total stream catchment area for the range of the JPS has been developed and studies show urbanization has a strong negative effect on density and relative abundance of JPS throughout its range (Bendik *et al.* 2014).

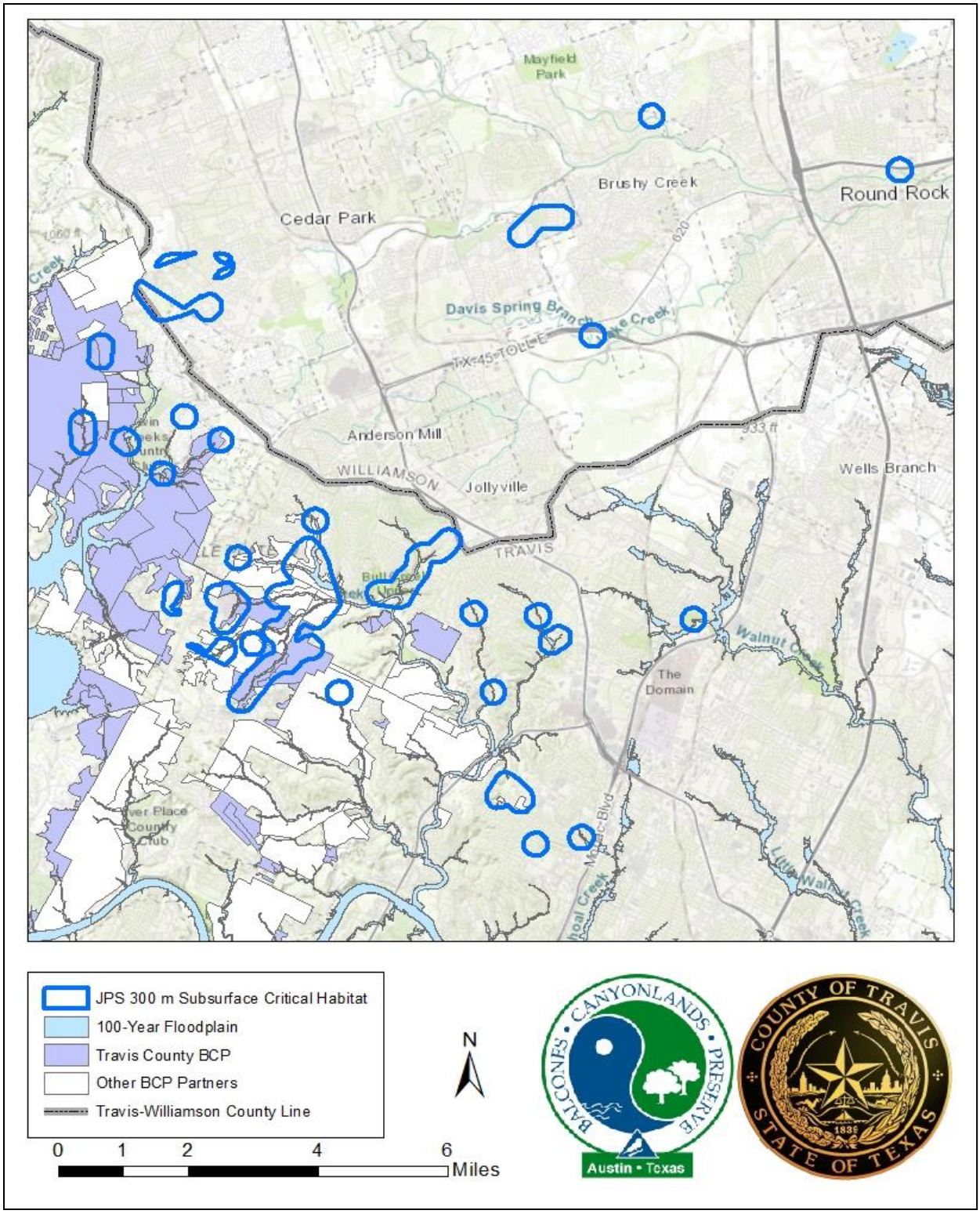

Figure 1. Critical Habitat Units designated for the Jollyville Plateau salamander in northwestern Travis and southern Williamson Counties. Surface critical habitat includes the locality buffered by 80 m of stream habitat upstream and downstream. Subsurface critical habitat includes a 984-foot (300 m) radius surrounding each spring.

Life History

The Jollyville Plateau Salamander is an aquatic, neotenic salamander that is endemic to the highly urbanized area of northwestern Travis and southern Williamson counties. As a perennibrachiate, these salamanders are restricted to karst-associated habitats such as surface springs, corresponding streams, and subsurface groundwater habitats. It is a member of the Plethodontidae, a large family in the order Caudata that is characterized by the absence of lungs.

JPS found in surface springs and streams have well developed eyes, a wide head, and dark greenish-brown body. Some cave-dwelling JPS exhibit reduced eyes, a flattened head, and loss of color (Chippendale *et al.* 2000). This study suggests a possibility of two lineages with a taxonomic split corresponding to major geologic and topographic features. The “plateau” clade occupies Bull, Walnut, Shoal, Brushy, South Brushy, and southeast Lake Travis watersheds. The “peripheral” clade is found in the Buttercup and northern Lake Travis watersheds. This finding was later confirmed (Devitt *et al.* 2019) with an “*E. tonkawae* (east)” group occupying Bull, Walnut, Shoal, and Brushy watersheds while an “*E. tonkawae* (west)” group occupies the Buttercup watershed as well as the Cypress and Long Hollow subwatersheds of the larger Lake Travis watershed. This taxonomic research also shows evidence of admixture contact of these eastern and western groups at SAS Canyon and Kretschmarr Cave. These sites occur along the divide separating Cypress and Bull drainages.

The eggs of JPS are rarely found on the surface, so it is possible that they are deposited underground (O’Donnell *et al.* 2005). The skin on the ventral side of the body is translucent so that eggs are visible in gravid female individuals which are often found on the surface.

It appears from the presence of juveniles on the surface in all seasons that they reproduce year-round (Bendik 2011a, Hillis *et al*. 2001). However, juvenile abundance often increases in the spring and summer suggesting higher reproduction in the winter and early spring (Bowles *et al*. 2006). At hatching, JPS measure about 15 mm total length and reach reproductive maturity at 45-70 mm total length within six months to a year.

Their diet consists of small invertebrates, including fly larvae, amphipods, ostracods, copepods, water mites, snails, aquatic beetles, and damselfly, caddisfly, mayfly, and

stonefly larvae. (COA 2001, Bendik 2011b). If flatworms are present in JPS habitat, they may be part of the diet as flatworms are a primary food source of the Barton Springs salamander (Gillespie 2013). Their underground diet is likely more restricted to stygobitic invertebrates such as amphipods and isopods.

Predators of JPS may include centrarchid fish (sunfish and bass), crayfish, and large insects such as dragonfly nymphs and giant waterbugs (Bowles *et al.* 2006, Cole 1995). Adult cannibalism on juveniles has also been observed in the field and in captivity but is not thought to be a significant source of predation (B. Sissel, personal observation).

Surface habitat of the JPS consists of spring outlets, associated stream reaches, and in small hillside seeps. They can generally be found in the interstitial spaces underneath or between rocks, in vegetation or in leaf litter where they are hidden from predators. Like other Central Texas Eurycea, JPS also inhabit underground refugia including, subterranean streams and wet caves. Northwestern Travis and southern Williamson Counties encompass the nine watersheds containing known JPS localities: Brushy, Bull, Buttercup, Lake Creek, Lake Travis, Shoal, South Brushy, Walnut, and West Bull (Figure 2).

The narrow distribution of JPS has been explained by certain habitat requirements such as reliability of flow, minimal substrate siltation and calcium carbonate deposition, and availability of subsurface refugia (Dowling 1956, Rudolph 1978, Sweet 1982, Chippendale *et al.* 1993, Tumilson and Cline 1997, Bendik *et al.* 2016). Another requirement for survival and reproduction is well oxygenated groundwater with a narrow temperature range (Davis *et al.* 2001, Bowles *et al.* 2006, Bendik *et al.* 2016). Groundwater at JPS sites flow from the Northern Segment of the Edwards Aquifer and the Trinity Aquifer to local alluvial springs (Cole 1995). Groundwater in the Jollyville Plateau was characterized using water level monitoring, groundwater tracing, water chemistry and tritium dating. Results imply that the Jollyville Plateau Edwards Aquifer contains vadose zone conduits that transmit recharge water to springs and creeks with limited connection to the water table (Johns 2013).

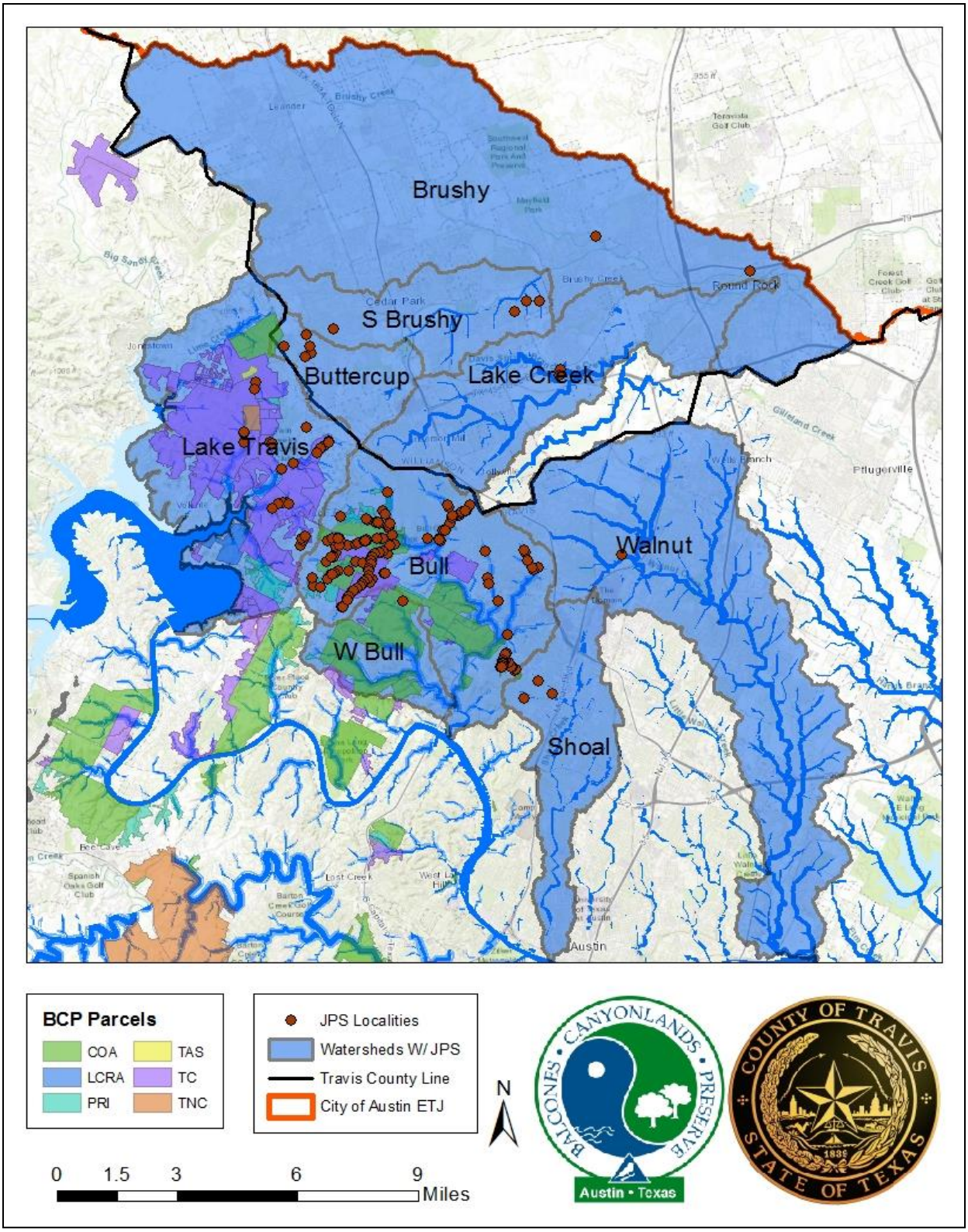

Figure 2. Nine watersheds containing JPS localities in Williamson and Travis Counties, Texas. Lake Travis Watershed is shown as subdivided to a smaller catchment area that incorporates all known JPS localities.

In Travis County, most known JPS localities are found within the Bull Creek and Cypress Creek catchments. Most ecological research (Bowles *et al.* 2006, Bendik and Glusenkamp 2013a, Bendik *et al.* 2013b, Bendik *et al.* 2014, Gabor *et al.* 2016, Bendik 2017) focuses on abundant populations at obvious springs, lending to conservation decisions based on those specific sites. After federal listing, a geographic study (Bendik *et al.* 2016) implicated occupancy and movement of JPS in the Bull Creek drainage differed from previous assumptions therefore challenging the notion of conservation planning for the species. For this reason, in 2016, a working group comprised of biologists from the City of Austin, Travis County and TPWD decided to focus conservation research on creek and tributary segments in terms of occupancy to further understand broader spatial distribution and habitat requirements. The working group did, however, decide to continue monitoring two specific populations with capture-recapture methods; Upper Ribelin and Lower Ribelin.

Survey Methods

Occupancy surveys were not conducted in FY20 due to the temporal overlap with the encroachment of Covid-19 and subsequent stay-at-home orders.

Capture-recapture surveys also had to be reduced to count surveys due to Covid-19 and the practice of social distancing. These were conducted by exhaustively searching all cover objects on the surface of the stream (e.g., rock cover, leaf litter, and woody debris), and counting each salamander. Only two surveyors, spaced gradiently rather than side-by-side, conducted counts so it is important to note that this was not a true “drive survey” as is typical. Due to these circumstances, it is vital that these numbers are not compared with data from previous or future years. Salamanders were counted if they traveled behind the observer and size (< 1 inch, 1-2 inches, ≥ 2 inches) was visually estimated. It was not possible to search the subsurface habitat for salamanders.

FY20 Results

Count surveys were conducted at two sites, Lower Ribelin and Upper Ribelin, during July of 2020. McDonald Well, Blizzard Spring, and Wheless Spring were visited but were not surveyed because they were dry. A total of 349 JPS at Lower Ribelin and 81 JPS at Upper Ribelin were counted. Counts were higher than typical at Lower Ribelin and lower at Upper Ribelin than most previous years. This variation in counts is likely

due to the manner in which the surveys were conducted, with fewer surveyors due to Covid-19. Feral hogs presumably influence a deep pool in the upstream portion of Upper Ribelin causing increased sedimentation and turbidity. The increased rotation flow of sediment allows JPS to exhibit more vertical navigation in the water column and limits surveyor visibility. This is typically mitigated with a drive survey method but was impossible to achieve this year with dramatically fewer surveyors. Alternatively, in the case of Lower Ribelin, one surveyor cannot examine the entire width of the creek to minimize the likelihood of JPS moving upstream and obtaining multiple tallies.

Threats

Amphibians are sensitive indicators of environmental degradation (Barinaga 1990, Blaustein *et al.* 1994, Hartwell and Ollivier 1998). Amphibians with restricted ranges, in or near expanding metro areas, face great risk of extinction. Of the thirteen *Eurycea* salamanders in central Texas, seven are threatened by or entirely surrounded by development (Diaz *et al.* 2020). Most known localities are at risk from urbanization due to their localized recharge areas (Chippendale *et al.* 2000, Chippendale and Price 2005, USFWS 2012). Prior research has shown that salamander densities are reduced in urbanized stream catchments (Orser and Shure 1972, Willson and Dorcas 2003). Urbanization correlates with changes to natural flow regime and degradation of surface and groundwater (Diaz *et al.* 2020). These manipulations to habitat quality may be the largest threat facing JPS and must be considered in conservation efforts (Bowles *et al.* 2006, Diaz *et al.* 2020).

The City of Austin's human population grew 277% from 1970 to 2017 (COA 2017). Bowles *et al.* (2006) found lower JPS density in developed tributaries compared to springs in undeveloped watersheds. Developed tributaries had higher concentrations of chloride, magnesium, nitrate-nitrogen, potassium, sodium, and sulfate (Bowles *et al.* 2006). Four of nine JPS sites monitored by the City of Austin from 1996 to 2007 showed statistically significant declines in salamander abundance over ten years (O'Donnell *et al.* 2006). Analysis of count data from 1996 to 2011 reveal that JPS populations declined in areas with the largest increases in residential development over a 15-year period and furthermore, densities of JPS are negatively correlated with residential development across its range (Bendik *et al*. 2014, Bendik *et al.* 2016).

Future Conservation Efforts

To address the conservation of JPS, Travis County will continue to manage and acquire land to protect endangered species, which will benefit JPS and general water quality. All streams within Travis County BCP tracts will be protected and if found to host JPS, will be managed to protect the species. Travis County will also collaborate in research efforts to elucidate many of the unknowns regarding JPS life history, habitat preferences, potential threats, and the mechanics of the northern segment of the Edwards Aquifer. New occupancy studies or surveys of prior sites from dry years will be conducted in FY2021 to better understand occupancy and distribution in drainages where knowledge is lacking. After discovery of additional populations, staff will return on a systematic basis to verify JPS presence at these sites.

A Note on Eurycea Sp. From the Pedernales Basin

In 2019, Devitt et al. identified three undescribed species of Central Texas Eurycea. On January 31, 2020, staff took Dr. Devitt, a researcher with the University of Texas, to the Martin tract to collect a salamander for his research of the taxonomy of Central Texas salamanders. Devitt is working on describing the Eurycea species found in the Pedernales basin. A video crew for a YouTube channel called Rugged Research filmed the event. Their episode on salamander research can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCp0Z5qtNXGdRhsPx6o3m2Eg/about.

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