Balcones Canyonlands Conservation Plan

Annual Report FY 2020

(October 1, 2019 – Sept. 30, 2020)

Executive Summary

Background

Planning for endangered species conservation in Travis County began with the listings of the black-capped vireo and several karst invertebrates in 1988, followed by the golden-cheeked warbler listing in 1990. Protection of these species and 27 species of concern in a rapidly urbanizing area became the focus of community efforts to develop a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP). The plan would mitigate for take under the Endangered Species Act and protect large blocks of habitat on a regional scale.

Issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to the City of Austin and Travis County on May 2, 1996, the Balcones Canyonlands Conservation Plan (BCCP) was one of the first local, multi-species regional habitat conservation plans permitted in the country. The 30-year permit covers most of western Travis County for incidental take of eight endangered species and 27 species of concern. The plan provides mitigation to the permit holders for capital improvement and infrastructure development needs and gives landowners and agencies a streamlined alternative process for compliance with the Endangered Species Act.

Balcones Canyonlands Preserve Status

In 24 years since the permit was issued, more than 920 private landowners and developers have applied to participate through the BCCP, resulting in the issuance of 406 permits, called “Participation Certificates” or “PC’s” for development of over 16,000 acres. The plan has authorized more than 350 public infrastructure projects. Land owners and infrastructure projects have utilized the BCCP for the streamlined permitting process and regulatory certainty.

The BCCP partners have assembled more than 32,406 acres of golden-cheeked warbler and black-capped vireo habitat since 1996, exceeding the minimum size of the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve (BCP) required by the permit. While this large and once very daunting goal has been met, the BCCP partners still have substantial work before them to meet the requirements of the permit. This work includes strategic acquisitions to address the minimum acreage requirements for each of seven macrosites, acquisitions of key tracts to provide a Preserve configuration essential to species recovery, and the protection of 62 named caves. To date, 53 of the 62 karst features have received some level of protection. Eleven karst features, which were not included on the permit, contain endangered species that are protected by the BCP. Under the plan, the permit holders are also managing populations of two rare plants, Texabama croton and canyon mock-orange.

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 issues permits, called Participation Certificates, to cooperating landowners. Twenty-two Participation Certificates were issued in Fiscal Year 2020 (FY20), generating $329,475.00 utilized in BCP land acquisition, preserve management, and operation efforts. At the end of FY20, the permit holders had 20,141 acres of Golden-cheeked warbler habitat remaining of Take Authorization (for future BCCP participation).

Preserve Acquisition and Management Expenditures

Travis County acquired two tracts totaling 98.518 acres. The City of Austin acquired two tracts totaling 38.8 acres. The permit holders and cooperating entities expended a combined total of $5,048,894 for operations and maintenance of Preserve lands in FY20.

Public Use and Habitat Management

The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and related government mandated shutdowns caused significant disruptions to species monitoring, education, outreach, and volunteer programs. On March 26, 2020, the BCCP Secretary issued a memo to the Service, BCCP committees, BCP staff, and BCP partners (Appendix T) announcing that surveys and monitoring were not determined to be considered essential government functions or services and were temporarily suspended. Patrols of BCP lands for security, health, and safety did continue as essential government functions.

Public uses permitted on selected tracts prior to the establishment of the BCP continued through FY20. Other BCP tracts were available to the public through education and outreach programs presented by the permit holders and cooperating entities. Habitat management activities on the BCP 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

Research and monitoring efforts for species covered by the BCCP continued in FY20. Ongoing studies on the BCP include: monitoring of golden-cheeked warblers on a series of study plots throughout the BCP; black-capped vireo distribution, abundance, and productivity monitoring; faunal surveys of protected karst features; and Jollyville Plateau salamander population monitoring. In addition to ongoing research and monitoring activities conducted by the permit holders, several universities, agencies and

individuals conducted research on the BCP through the issuance of scientific research permits. Some of the subjects covered include tawny crazy ants, spring monitoring, history of wildfire on the BCP, and drip rate monitoring in caves.