Balcones Canyonlands Conservation Plan

Annual Report FY 2025

(October 1, 2024 – Sept. 30, 2025)

Executive Summary

Background

Fiscal Year 2025 marked the twenty-ninth year of implementation for the Balcones Canyonlands Conservation Plan (BCCP), a regional Habitat Conservation Plan jointly administered by the City of Austin and Travis County under U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Permit No. TE-788841-2. Established in 1996, the BCCP was designed to balance the demands of growth and infrastructure development with the long-term protection of endangered species and sensitive habitats in western Travis County. The permit authorizes incidental take of eight federally listed species and provides coverage for additional species of concern, ensuring compliance with the Endangered Species Act while supporting sustainable development.

Balcones Canyonlands Preserve Status

In 29 years since the permit was issued, private landowners and developers have applied to participate through the BCCP, resulting in the issuance of 433 Incidental Take Permits for development. The plan has authorized more than 470 public infrastructure projects. Landowners and infrastructure projects have utilized the BCCP for the streamlined permitting process and regulatory certainty.

The BCCP partners have assembled more than 33,293 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 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, 52 of the 62 karst features have received some level of protection. Seventeen endangered species karst features which were not listed on the BCCP Permit are being protected on BCP lands. Additionally, 26 species of concern karst features not listed on the BCCP Permit are also being protected on 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 Incidental Take Permits to cooperating landowners. Twenty-four Incidental Take Permits were issued in Fiscal Year 2025 (FY25), generating $1,501,725 utilized in BCP land acquisition, preserve management, and operation efforts. At the end of FY25, the permit holders had 21,182 acres of Golden-cheeked warbler habitat remaining of Take Authorization (for future BCCP participation).

Management Expenditures

The permit holders and cooperating entities expended a combined total of $9,415,753.49 for operations and maintenance of Preserve lands in FY25.

Public Use, Habitat Management, and Monitoring

Throughout FY2025, partners advanced habitat restoration and species monitoring while maintaining strong public engagement. More than 2,000 educational programs and stewardship events were delivered, reaching over 40,000 participants and generating more than 10,600 volunteer hours valued at approximately $370,000. Restoration efforts included planting thousands of native trees and shrubs, removing over 25,000 invasive plants, and implementing shaded fuel breaks to reduce wildfire risk. Wildlife management activities addressed feral hog populations and cowbird control, while monitoring programs documented golden-cheeked warbler territories, black-capped vireo nesting success, and rediscovery of Jollyville Plateau salamanders in previously dry habitats. Research partnerships continued to inform adaptive management strategies across the preserve system.

In FY25, golden-cheeked warbler monitoring across the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve continued to provide critical insight into the health of this endangered species and its habitat. City of Austin and Travis County staff documented 151 territories on intensive monitoring plots and 157 territories on enumeration plots, with territory densities ranging from 0.02 to 0.35 per hectare. Return rates of color-banded males reached 50%, above the long-term average, yet overall breeding success declined to 56%, continuing a downward trend. Nest monitoring revealed high rates of failure, likely influenced by drought and food scarcity early in the season. These findings underscore the importance of sustained habitat management and long-term demographic monitoring to ensure the viability of warbler populations within the preserve.

In FY25, Black-capped Vireo monitoring across the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve reflected both progress and persistent challenges for this once-endangered species. Travis County documented a record 77 males and 60 territories, while City of Austin biologists observed 19 territorial males on their tracts. Pairing success remained high, 89% on City lands and 95% on Travis County's core areas, but nest success was mixed. Travis County fledged at least 121 young from 42 successful territories, while City lands produced 24–33 fledglings from 34 monitored nests, with predation driving most failures. Habitat restoration and prescribed fire continued to expand suitable shrubland, and joint banding efforts yielded new insights into dispersal and genetic health. Yet, high nest

failure rates, evidence of inbreeding, and cowbird parasitism in some areas underscore the need for sustained management and connectivity. These findings affirm the importance of active restoration and long-term demographic monitoring to secure the vireo's future on the BCP.

During Fiscal Year 2025, BCP partners continued implementation of karst monitoring and management obligations under the regional permit, focusing on protection and stewardship of endangered karst invertebrates and associated habitats. Activities included annual and quarterly monitoring of select permit caves, targeted excavation and restoration at priority features within the Cuevas, Cuevas East, Grandview Hills, and TSNL tracts, and incidental biological surveys to document species presence. Federally listed species were confirmed at Amber Cave and Two Trunks Cave, while additional evaluations identified future excavation opportunities at Kretschmarr Sink and North Root Cave. Management efforts also addressed habitat restoration, invasive species control, and community engagement through education programs. Priorities for FY2026 include continued excavation at Amber and Encinal Caves, mapping of Two Trunks Cave, and reassessment of lower-priority features to refine long-term conservation strategies.

Research

In FY25, the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve continued to serve as a living laboratory for science and education. Eleven projects led by universities, conservation organizations, and local students advanced our understanding of rare plants, karst ecosystems, juniper health, and long-term climate patterns. These collaborations not only generated data critical for managing endangered species and habitats but also strengthened community connections to the preserve. Highlights include new records of endangered cave invertebrates, expanded seed banking for rare plants, insights into juniper decline under drought stress, and the first steps toward reconstructing centuries of Hill Country climate history. Together, these efforts underscore the preserve's role as a cornerstone for research that informs conservation today and resilience for tomorrow.

BCCP Permit Renewal

FY2025 also marked a pivotal year for permit renewal planning. The original 30-year term concludes on May 2, 2026, and renewal efforts are well underway in coordination with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Federal guidance now requires a full application update rather than a simple extension, including revisions to the Habitat Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement, compliance with current regulatory standards, and evaluation of species listed since 1996. The renewal process offers an opportunity to modernize conservation strategies, incorporate climate resilience measures, and ensure long-term regulatory certainty for both development and habitat protection.

The accomplishments of FY2025 reflect the strength of the BCCP partnership and its commitment to balancing growth with conservation. As the program transitions toward permit renewal, it remains focused on sustaining ecological integrity, advancing science-

based management, and delivering community benefits that will endure for decades to come.