2010 Survey Report

Wheless Preserve
Travis County

Lower Colorado River Authority

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Table of Contents

Introduction……..3

Methods……3

Results and Discussion……...4

Maps……5

Introduction

Wheless Preserve is an LCRA property, part of the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve system. It is protected habitat for the endangered Golden-cheeked Warbler (*Dendroica chrysoparia*, GCW, warbler) and other species of concern in western Travis County. The 2,316 acre tract is located on the east side of Lake Travis off Lime Creek Road, six miles south of RM 1431 and west of Volente. Travis County, City of Austin, Travis Audubon and The Nature Conservancy own preserves that border Wheless as well as privately owned land.

The Wheless tract consists mainly of steep canyons and hillsides. Thick wooded areas cover a majority of the preserve, with scrubbier vegetation on the less fertile and open hillsides. One hilltop has been cleared to encourage scrub re-growth for possible Black-capped Vireo (*Vireo atricapilla*) influx. A few springs form water holes in some of the canyons and a seasonal stream flows south on its eastern side, providing habitat for the candidate species Jollyville Plateau salamander (*Eurycea tonkawae*). A cleared right-of-way runs east-west for a water pipeline with a water tower. A few jeep trails provide vehicle access.

Climax vegetation consists mostly of ashe juniper (*Juniperus ashei*), live oak (*Quercus fusiformis*), Texas oak (*Quercus texana*), limestone durand oak (*Quercus sinuate* var. *breviloba*), cedar elm (*Ulmus crassifolia*), and Texas ash (*Fraxinus texensis*). Other less numerous trees include escarpment cherry (*Prunus serotina* var. *eximia*), walnuts (*Uglans* sp.), coma (*Bumelia lanuginosa*), hackberry (*Celtis* sp.), and sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*).

Mid-story plants are mountain laurel (*Sophora secundiflora*), silk-tassel (*Garrya ovata*), Texas persimmon (*Diospyros texana*), Texas redbud (*Cercis Canadensis* var. *texensis*), Carolina buckthorn (*Rhamnus caroliniana*), blackhaw (*Viburnum rufidulum*), Texas madrone (*Arbutus texana*), Mexican buckeye (*Ungnadia speciosa*), and holly (*Ilex vomitoria* and *I. deciduas*). A variety of cacti, grasses and forbs grow at ground level.

Methods

LCRA personnel previously set up two-100 acre plots for surveys and these were the plots surveyed in 2010, following BCCP and FWS territory mapping protocol. One plot contains prime habitat and the other plot contains transitional habitat. Plots are surveyed for up to six hours each visit, at least 5 times between March 15 and May 30.

Surveys were conducted by walking slowly through the plot while looking and listening for the target species. The routes walked and areas covered varied from survey to survey. When a target species was encountered the surveyor plotted the bird's location in the field on an aerial photograph and a waypoint was recorded on a hand-held GPS unit, either an exact location or point of reference for an estimated location. These waypoints would later be plotted and analyzed using computer software to delineate territories. Reproductive data was recorded when observed.

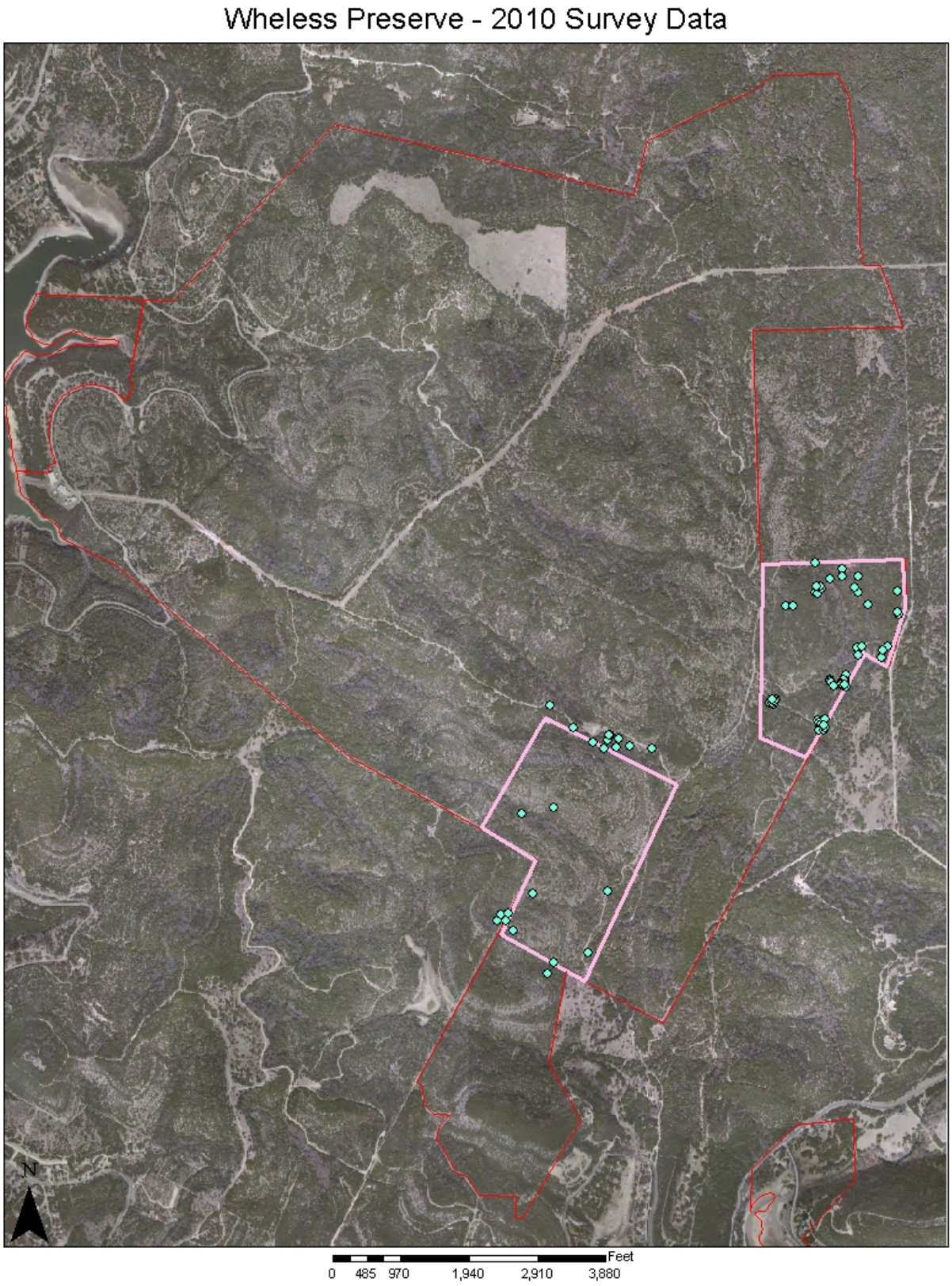
Weather conditions were recorded at the start and end of every survey day (see attribute tables in GIS data). All bird species observed or heard were listed in field notes.

Results and Discussion

Wheless Preserve has been surveyed in the past to track GCWA population status. Study plot surveys are typically conducted every other year and the entire preserve is surveyed approximately every five years, as budget allows. In 2002 Loomis Austin Inc. found 70 entire and 22 partial territories. This was an increase from the 60 territories found in 1993 and 1994 by LCRA, TxDOT and DLS. LCRA personnel also surveyed the Wheless Preserve in 2006. The entire preserve was surveyed and 93-105 males were observed. Between 1999 and 2004, surveys on the plots resulted in approximately 9-13 males combined.

This year, the prime plot produced ten territories while the transitional plot produced five. These results are a slight increase in the territories found in previous surveys on these plots. A female was observed between 2 singing (B song) males on the prime plot April 6 around 10:45 a.m. A nest was observed in the prime plot and was being defended (A song) on March 25. On the transitional plot, a female was observed between two countersinging males (A songs) on March 31. A significant amount of territories observed had incidences of countersinging between nearby males.

Aerials with Results



Wheless Preserve - 2010 Survey Data - Prime Plot



Wheless Preserve - 2010 Survey Data - Transitional Plot

