

Earth First! protesters hold cave-ins

By Joe Vargo

American-Statesman Staff

Four environmentalists from the group Earth First! holed up in caves Monday to protect several species of tiny and rare animals they said are threatened with "irreversible harm and extinction" by development in Northwest Travis County.

"What does a serious environmentalist do when a developer says he is going to pave over a cave to protect his interest? You put your body on the ground and say no," said Barbara Dugelby, coordinator of Earth First! "You say this is more important. The caves are part of our heritage."

Dugelby said five endangered species live in the caves on a 19-acre tract near RR 620 and RR 2222, which is owned by Austin investor Fred Purcell. Earth First! charged Purcell with "deliberately locating roads, sewer lines and detention ponds within a matter of few feet from at least three caves of biological significance."

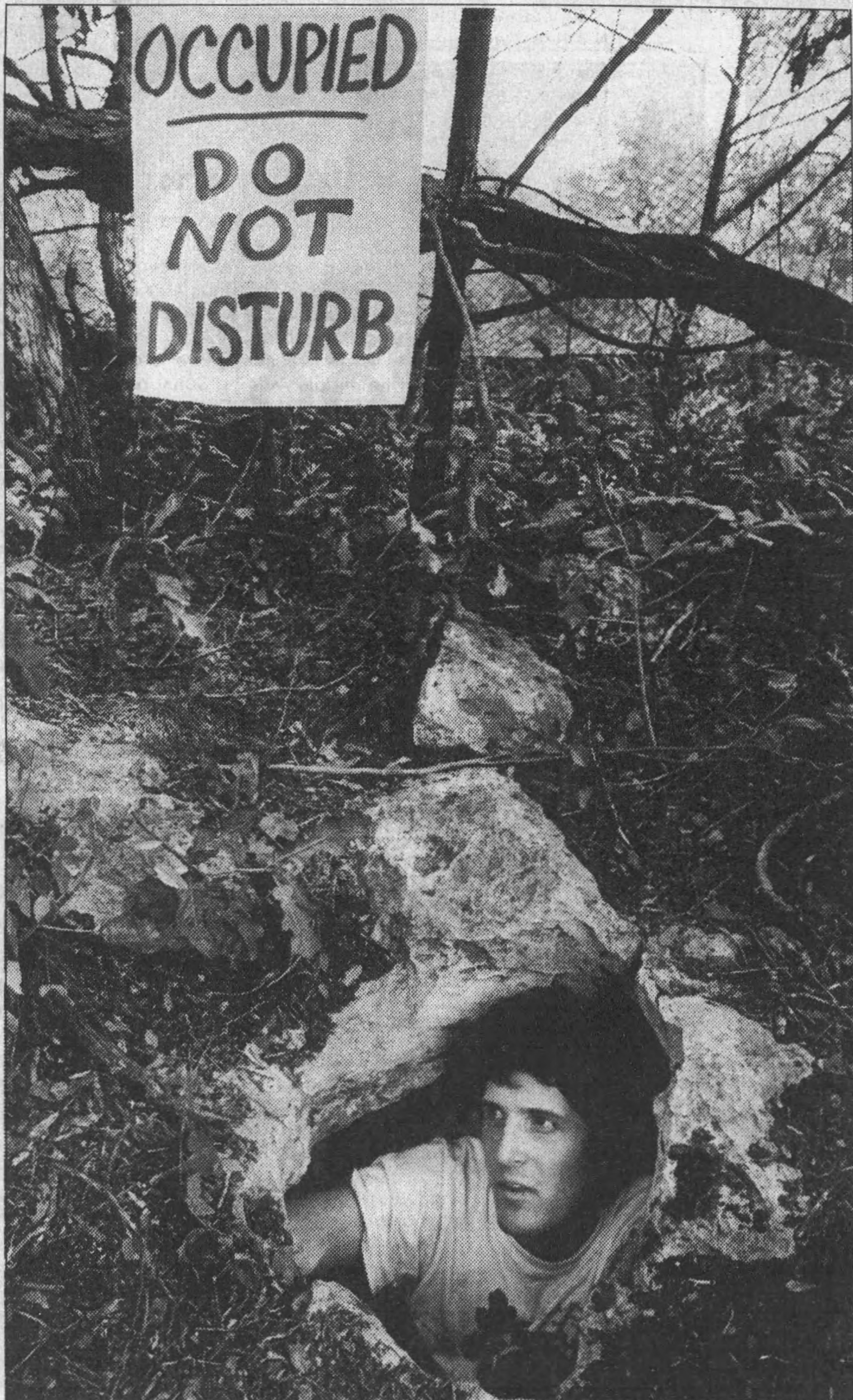
The property is scheduled to be developed as a shopping center, Purcell said.

"I believe they are trespassing on my land, and I think they probably have killed more spiders in the two days they've been tramping around there than I have in five years of owning the land," he said. "The issue is that they want to stop growth. We want to bring in some jobs to the city of Austin, and they want to kill it."

Purcell said he has "literally millions of dollars" tied up in the investment, although he declined to be more specific. He said he has worked with city officials, and is willing to set aside the caves so they can be studied to determine "the effects of urbanization" on them.

"There's no question I feel I have been made out to be the bad guy," Purcell said.

Late Monday, sheriff's deputies were called to one of the caves, and tried unsuccessfully to remove Earth First! activist Christi Stevens. Authorities said two people affiliated with the group did leave when asked to by law officers, but Dugelby said



Staff photo by Larry Kolvoord

See Caves, B5

Mark Sanders, a member of Earth First! peers out from Amber Cave.

Caves

From B1

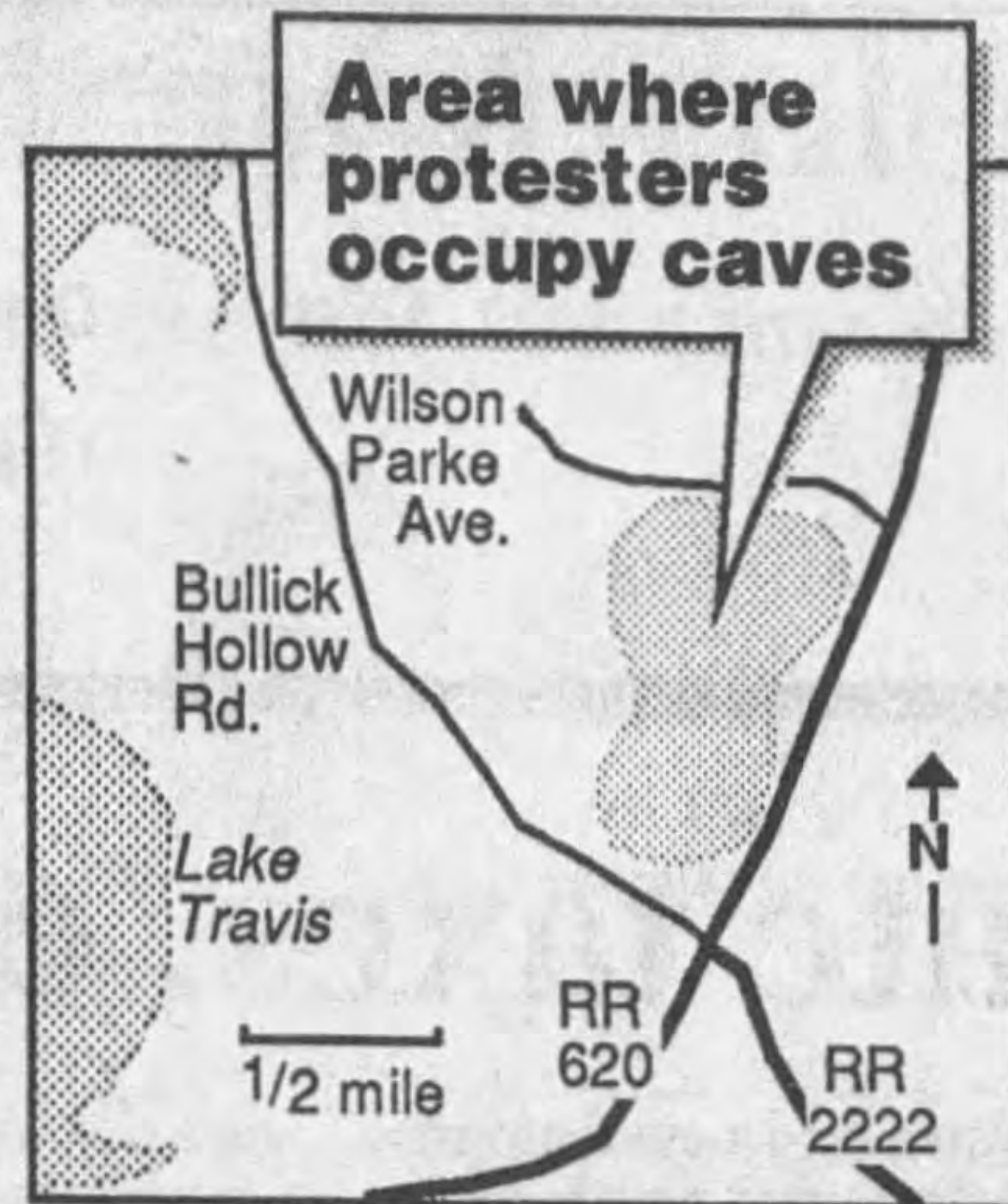
those people were above-ground observers.

The officers said they would pursue trespassing charges if pressed by the owner.

Dugelby said Stevens, Mark Sanders and Forrest Jackson were occupying caves known as Tooth, Amber and Kretschmarr caves. Each person has enough provisions to stay underground for at least three days, she said.

Earth First! did not reveal the name or location of the fourth cave, or provide any information on the person who occupied it.

The group is concerned about the future of two species of beetles,



one spider, one "pseudo" scorpion and one "cave-adapted daddy long-legs." The tiny invertebrates are

found nowhere else, said officials of the City of Austin's Department of Environmental Protection. They said the caves are known by scientists throughout the world.

Dugelby said the group hopes to prompt the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to issue an "emergency listing" that would immediately place the five species on its list of endangered animals, thus protecting them from extinction due to development. However, Austin officials in contact with their federal counterparts said the fish and wildlife service is not inclined to issue an emergency listing.

The Fish and Wildlife Service may place the five species on its endangered list within 60 to 90 days, said Chuck Sexton, a city ecologist.

The activists came to the entrances of the caves to talk with re-

porters Monday afternoon.

"These animals have a right in and of themselves to exist," said Stevens, 25, a horticulturist who works at the University of Texas. "They have an enormous amount of value. They are relics from an earlier time, a time a sea covered Texas. There are countless scien-

tific questions that can be investigated because of them."

Sanders, 24, who works part time at a grocery store, said he is occupying a cave because "these are other living creatures, and I think all life is sacred."

"These are the only ones of their

species," Sanders said. "If they're gone, they're extinct — it's the final chapter."

Jackson, 30, a chemistry research assistant, said the occupation of the caves is designed to "show people these areas are worth protecting."

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