

# Balcones habitat plan gets its permit today

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American-Statesman Staff

The first major urban habitat plan under the Endangered Species Act will receive a federal permit today at a ceremony amid oak and cedar trees that the plan is designed to protect.

Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt is scheduled to speak to an invitation-only audience during the event at the Reicher Ranch, a former Catholic bishop's residence and retreat 20 miles west of downtown Austin.

The ranch, which was acquired by the City of Austin in a transaction brokered by the nonprofit



**Babbitt**

Nature Conservancy, is nesting territory for the golden-cheeked warbler, an endangered songbird and the only avian species that breeds exclu-

sively in Texas.

The Balcones Canyonlands Conservation Plan — named for the balcony-like slopes on the southern and eastern edges of the Hill Country — seeks to preserve a

**See Balcones, A13**



# Balcones plan gets its U.S. permit

**Continued from A1**

total of 30,428 acres in western Travis County for the warbler, the endangered black-capped vireo, six endangered cave bugs and 27 other rare species. The plan has been eight years in the making.

"It's pretty remarkable," said Mayor Bruce Todd, a perennial supporter of the Balcones plan. "It's gone through more twists and turns and changes than anyone thought possible."

Even the name of the preserve system has changed. It will be called the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve.

"We thought BCCP sounded like a Russian organization," said Valarie Bristol, a county commissioner who has been instrumental in nudging the plan along. Her reference was to CCCP, the Russian initials for the former Soviet Union.

The plan is supported by mainstream environmental and business groups, but it also has plenty of critics.

Some environmentalists contend that too little land is being acquired too late. They are disturbed at the trade-off that makes the plan attractive to business interests: Development will be allowed

in habitat outside the designated preserves, even if it causes some loss of the species.

Some landowners, especially those whose tracts would be acquired for preservation, regard the plan as an intrusion on private property rights.

Roughly two-thirds of the 30,428-acre preserve already has been set aside through public and private expenditures. The permit to be issued today by the Interior Department's Fish and Wildlife Service will authorize the permit holders — the City of Austin and Travis County — to stitch together about 9,000 additional acres by offering the owners of habitat outside the preserve boundary a potentially attractive option.

Such owners will be able to secure development rights by paying fees of as much as \$5,500 an acre. In return, they will not be subject to federal enforcement action for destroying species habitat. The city and county will use the fees to buy preserve lands.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has approved about 130 habitat conservation plans under the species act. Besides being the first major urban plan, the Balcones plan is noteworthy for the diversi-

ty of species involved, said Michael Bean, chairman of the wildlife program at the Environmental Defense Fund, a conservation group.

In a parallel effort, the Fish and Wildlife Service is acquiring land

for the 46,000-acre Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge, situated mostly in northwest Travis County. Together, the refuge and the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve will safeguard more than 76,000 acres for rare species.

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