



AUSTIN, Texas— A federal judge in Austin yesterday ruled that the golden-cheeked warbler should remain protected under the Endangered Species Act. The Texas songbird is severely threatened by rampant urban sprawl.

In affirming the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's denial of a petition to take the golden-cheeked warbler off the endangered species list, the court found that the warbler continues to be threatened by habitat loss and fragmentation, predation and climate change.

That petition was submitted by several right-wing think tanks and Susan Combs, currently the acting secretary of policy, management and budget in the Trump administration's U.S. Department of the Interior.

Conservation groups participated in the legal proceedings to defend the songbird's protection.

"We're thrilled that this cynical attempt to take protection away from the warbler has been stopped," said Ryan Shannon, a staff attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity. "With the continued protection of the Endangered Species Act, hopefully this Texas native will charm birders from all over the world for a long time to come."

The golden-cheeked warbler is a small songbird endemic to the Hill Country of central Texas and has striking yellow markings on its cheeks. Loss of habitat due to ranching and urban sprawl has long endangered it. The species was protected under the Endangered Species Act in 1990.

Austin and central Texas are home to the mature ashe juniper woodlands that are the only place in the world where the warbler breeds. The areas are also some of the fastest-growing regions in the country. Between 1999 and 2011, 29 percent of the bird's habitat was destroyed.

"It's simply too soon to remove protections for the warbler, which continues to lose habitat to urban sprawl," said Nicole Netherton, executive director of Travis Audubon. "Central Texas is the only place in the world where golden-cheeked warblers are born and raised, and continued protections will help encourage their breeding success for years to come."

Like so many other imperiled animals, the warbler has greatly benefited from Endangered Species Act protection. Although the bird's numbers are difficult to estimate, surveys continue to document more warblers every year, and several habitat areas have been protected.

"The Endangered Species Act has a proven record of success bringing species back from the brink from extinction," said Jason Rylander, senior counsel at Defenders of Wildlife. "The golden-cheeked warbler could be another success story, but as the Fish and Wildlife Service recognized, real threats to the species persist. The court made the right decision for the warbler."

“We believe Judge Sparks’ ruling reflects the true status of the golden-cheeked warbler,” said Shelia Hargis of Texas Ornithological Society. “The science does not support delisting, and much more work is needed to better understand and address the challenges facing this species. Fortunately these efforts are strengthened by the collaboration of nonprofits such as Travis Audubon, the Nature Conservancy and local, county and federal government entities such as city of Austin, Travis County and U.S. Fish and Wildlife.”

*The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 1.4 million members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.*