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City of Austin Wildlife Conservation 2006-Present



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As the lead biologist for the Barton Creek Wilderness Park and Greenbelt within the City of Austin, Austin Water Utility, Wildland Conservation Division (WCD), my primary role is to monitor and protect the community of native plants and animals that supports the rare and endangered species of the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve (BCP). To do this, I coordinate with the other BCP biologists, WCD staff, volunteers, and with Austin Parks and Recreation Department staff. Together, we direct intensive surveys of Golden-cheeked Warblers, Bracted Twistflowers, and cave invertebrates; offer guidance on protecting the integrity of the native forest to crews maintaining trails, roads, and utility lines; remove non-native plants, trash, and the remains of abandoned transient camps; implement shaded fuel breaks to reduce the risk of wildfire; attempt to prevent new trails from fragmenting the forest; and monitor and control the spread of the oak wilt epidemic that kills our oaks. I am grateful to have worked on these projects with such dedicated parks staff as the late René Barrera and John Cook, who retired a few years ago, not to mention the current parks and BCP staff.

Every time I visit this ribbon of wild through urban Austin, I am amazed by the biological richness persisting here. The botanical diversity is particularly stunning, including plants at the limits of their range, and some that live only in a few counties of central Texas, such as Zigzag Cliffbrake, Buckley’s Tridens, Two-flower Anemone, Roemer’s Spurge, Golden-eye Phlox, Texas Almond, and, of course, the rare Bracted Twistflower. I am heartened by how much we love the creek, but am also alarmed by what seems to be an ever-increasing number of visitors, some of whom feel entitled to carve new trails in an area already laced with a network of them. I fear the resident plants and animals may succumb over time to the onslaught of speeding mountain-bikers, oblivious headset-wearing joggers, and the huge numbers of dogs which, we often forget, look and act to other animals like predators. Recent monitoring has shown a sharp decline in numbers of Golden-cheeked Warblers here. Is it true here as in other treasured wild places across the country that we are loving Barton Creek to death?

Research done on the BCP, of which the Barton Creek Wilderness and Greenbelt is a part, has shown how essential extensive stands of unbroken forest canopy are. The endangered Golden-cheeked Warbler thrives in such extensive forests, but fails to reproduce and eventually disappears from small or fragmented stands. New research done here has shown how, contrary to common perceptions, juniper (or “cedar”) is especially important to protect seedling oaks from desiccation and deer browse - meaning the best way to restore oaks (and possibly other hardwoods) to our landscape means keeping the junipers in place. Forests are also well-known worldwide for protecting water supplies, by absorbing heavy rains, storing the water, and releasing it slowly into streams such as Barton Creek.