

Barton Creek Habitat Preserve

AN OASIS FOR FOR ENDANGERED SPECIES AMID AUSTIN SUBURBS



Barton Creek Habitat Preserve © Lynn McBride.

Barton Creek Habitat Preserve is a unique place hidden in the midst of suburban Austin. A landscape of rolling hills and steep canyons nestled along four miles of Barton Creek, the nearly 4,100-acre preserve protects the habitat of two species of endangered songbirds and, with the assistance of neighboring landowners, preserves the quality of water in the Barton Creek watershed.

Each spring, endangered golden-cheeked warblers return to nest in the preserve's old-growth juniper-oak-cedar woodland, flitting along canyons and cliffs. Endangered black-capped vireos also arrive each spring to nest in habitat maintained by Nature Conservancy staff with prescribed fire.

Rare woodland wildflowers, such as Heller's marbleseed, spot the canyons, and the healthy grasslands of the uplands are resplendent with flowers in spring, summer and fall.

Through the preserve flows peaceful Barton Creek, a crystal-clear stream beloved by Austinites and home to a diverse fish population, including the threatened Guadalupe bass, and gravelbar brickellbush, a rare plant.

Guarded on both sides by canyon walls, alternatively fast and

rocky or deep and contemplative, Barton Creek is Austin's lifeblood. It helps supply drinking water to the city and recharges the Edwards Aquifer. The aquifer keeps two of Austin's natural treasures alive: Barton Springs and the endangered Barton Springs salamander. The salamander is found only in springs located in the heart of downtown Austin and depends on those pure waters to survive.

Bordered by rapidly expanding suburban development, the Conservancy's Barton Creek Habitat Preserve acts as a critical buffer for water quality in Barton Creek and Barton Springs. The preserve is a place where many rare and endemic species persist in a landscape of great beauty, all within sight of downtown Austin, a world away.

A DELICATE BALANCING ACT

One might stumble across the occasional fire hydrant hiding behind the junipers at Barton Creek Habitat Preserve. The coyotes, quail and other abundant wildlife don't seem to mind. The delicate dance between wildlife and people is part of the charm that makes this area unique.

When the preserve was purchased in 1994, it was slated for



Above: Kayakers in Barton Creek © Lynn McBride. Below (top to bottom): Compositae © Rich Kostecke, Golden-cheeked warbler © Rich Kostecke.

development and platted for 4,000 home sites—hence the fire hydrants. Today, Barton Creek Habitat Preserve makes up just one part of the Balcones Canyonlands Conservation Plan, one of the first multi-species regional habitat conservation plans in the country.

Suburban development is replacing wildlife habitat in west Austin. What habitat remains often isn't in the best condition. Harmful, nonnative species, the suppression of wildfire, excessive juniper and too many deer all conspire to make remaining habitat less suitable for native plants and animals. In addition, development is putting a strain on the region's water quality.

Together, these threats spell trouble for the area. The Conservancy is focusing its work on two species, the golden-cheeked warbler and the black-capped vireo, whose decline is tied to habitat loss. Scientists will be able to test and monitor conservation success and guide future actions by studying populations of these birds. The vitality of these species is an indicator of the overall ecological health of the habitat and the watershed.

To stop the decline of these species, restoring and protecting critical habitat in this region is essential. The Conservancy plans to add to golden-cheeked warbler habitat by restoring streamside woodlands that were logged in the 1930s. Also, with the strong support of neighbors and local fire departments, there is a plan to expand vireo habitat by 400 acres during the next 10 years through a prescribed-burning program.

Already, land stewards on the preserve have restored 100 acres of vireo habitat on arid hilltops; removed harmful, non-native trees from warbler habitat along the creek; and worked with nearby residents to better manage their lands for wildlife.

Working with the community, especially as more people move into the area, is important to conservation success, which is why the preserve supports a thriving outreach program involving more than 1,000 volunteers, researchers and visitors a year.

Fast Facts

Ecoregion: Edwards Plateau

Conservation Elements: Golden-cheeked warbler and black-capped vireo.

Stresses: Fire suppression, cowbird parasitism and urban development.

Strategies: Habitat maintenance and restoration, public education.

Partners: City of Austin, Travis County, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, neighbors and private landowners.

