



November 22, 2019

Dear neighbor,

It's been a busy year on the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve (BCP), and as 2019 comes to a close, we wanted to share some of the big stories of the past year. For those of you not already familiar with it, the BCP is a 32,282-acre system of preserves in western Travis County that protects endangered and threatened species, some of which are found nowhere else on earth. By protecting the most vulnerable species, we also protect the entire ecosystem of native plants and animals. These natural lands also contribute to cleaner air and water, and a lower risk of flooding and erosion.

About 3,500 acres of the BCP are regularly open to the public, including popular destinations like Hamilton Pool Preserve, Barton Creek Greenbelt, and Wild Basin Wilderness Preserve. This year saw the continued expansion of outreach and education programs throughout the preserve. Thousands of people got to enjoy the BCP through guided hikes, educational events, and volunteer opportunities. Check out our new BCP-wide calendar at <https://www.traviscountytexas.gov/bcpevents>. It includes events from BCP partners including Travis County, City of Austin, Westcave Preserve, Wild Basin Wilderness Preserve, and Travis Audubon's Baker Sanctuary.

New Acquisitions

Travis County added 30 acres of woodlands and two caves to the BCP this year. As you may know, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service permit for the Balcones Canyonlands Conservation Plan requires a minimum preserve size of 30,428 acres. Although this goal has been met, the BCP managing partners continue to acquire land to meet additional requirements. For example, the preserve must have a configuration that is well-suited to species recovery, having as little "edge" habitat as possible. The protected species do best in habitat that is removed from the invasive species, predators, and pollution that generally come with surrounding development. The permit also requires the protection of 62 specific caves, which are home to karst invertebrates that are either endangered or considered to be species of concern. Efforts to preserve these important features continue.

Honoring William H. Russell

William H. (Bill) Russell was a cave explorer most known for his discovery of a large number of caves, many of which are now protected on the BCP. His efforts have had a tremendous impact on the preservation of Austin's heritage caves and cave life. Following his passing on March 21, 2019, Austin City Council passed a proclamation to rename one of his major cave discoveries in his name, as well as other steps to restore and preserve caves on this preserve and city-wide. The William H. Russell Karst Preserve, which includes Blowing Sink Cave, was named in his honor.

Austin Cave Festival 2020

Join us on Saturday, February 22nd at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center for the annual Austin Cave Festival! The whole family can explore two caves on site, check out a high-tech cave exhibit brought in from Colorado, practice vertical caving skills, and enjoy habitat scavenger hunts, artwork, live music, and scientific talks and exhibits. More than 100 City of Austin staff, community partners, and volunteers work to make this

conservation-focused event a success. For information about attending the festival, visit www.wildflower.org/event/austin-cave-fest.

Wildfire Mitigation

BCP land managers take wildfire very seriously, and each year they complete fuel mitigation projects to minimize risk. The most effective fuel mitigation method for oak-juniper woodlands in Central Texas is a shaded fuel break, which is different from the fire breaks used in many other areas of the country. Unlike a traditional “firebreak,” shaded fuel breaks leave the tree canopy intact to shade out grasses and other fine fuels, which are more likely to ignite than trees.

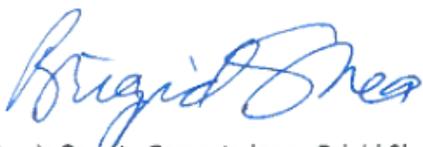
Shaded fuel breaks are created by pruning and thinning the lower limbs of Ashe juniper (cedar) and live oak trees within a zone that can extend up to 100 feet from the property boundary. Removing these “ladder fuels” reduces the risk of surface fires reaching tree canopies, lowering the risk to homes and businesses. Together, BCP partners including Travis County, the City of Austin, and Travis Audubon have created more than 12.6 miles of shaded fuel breaks where the BCP borders development, including roads and houses. It’s important to note that these woodlands are not susceptible to frequent fires and under most conditions do not burn readily. However, under extreme circumstances, fire is possible, and the BCP is actively managed with wildfire prevention in mind.

When fires do occur, the greatest risk to homes is from embers, which can travel more than a mile from the fire. The best way to protect your home from embers is to create defensible space, including “hardening” your home by sealing openings, screening vents, and cleaning gutters. Learn more about creating defensible space from the Central Texas-specific **Ready, Set, Go!**: <https://www.traviscountytexas.gov/fire-marshall/prevention/wildfire-preparedness> The Travis County Fire Marshal’s site will also tell you if a burn ban is in effect and provide tips for safe outdoor cooking and work such as welding, cutting, and grinding. More than 95% of wildfires are started by people or man-made infrastructure like power lines, so practicing fire-safe behavior can go a long way towards preventing wildfire.

Also, please be aware that some common “fuel reduction” strategies can actually increase fire risk. For example, clear-cut woodlands often become grasslands, which are more likely to ignite than live trees. When removing vegetation, also consider proper disposal – piles of dead branches and dry leaves can themselves become fuel. When trimming, please also respect property boundaries. It’s illegal to cut vegetation on someone else’s property without permission. Fortunately, there are a lot of resources to help; consider working with your local Firewise committee or fire department to learn the most effective ways to reduce risk.

Through the collaborative efforts of homeowners, preserve managers, and local fire departments, both private property and the BCP can be protected from the devastation of wildfire. Here’s to a safe and healthy 2020!

Best regards,



Travis County Commissioner Brigid Shea
BCCP Coordinating Committee Member



Austin City Council Member Leslie Pool
BCCP Coordinating Committee Member