

## Saving a Texas Native Son

By David Yarnold

A flashy little Texas songbird that weighs one-third of an ounce is in a David-and-Goliath fight for survival in the Lone Star State.

The golden-cheeked warbler is all Texan. It cannot breed and raise its young anywhere else in the world except the magnificent Texas Hill Country. It builds its nests from the bark of mature junipers, and it nests in woodlands containing a mix of junipers and oaks in rocky canyons and washes, and on canyon tops and upland areas.

But the warbler's nesting grounds – those beautiful natural places that make the Hill Country famous all over the world – are being eroded, subdivision by subdivision, and building by building, in the in the 33 counties where it nests. That's why the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decided to provide special protections for the golden-cheeked warbler a quarter of a century ago.

Even with those legal protections in place, an estimated 1.5 million acres (nearly a third of the golden-cheeked warbler's home range) disappeared in just the dozen years between 1999 and 2011. It has been alleged that some landowners have gone so far as to alter the habitat on their property to drive the warblers away in order to avoid being subject to the bird's legal protections.

And now, a coalition of groups and individuals would like to see the warbler stripped of its legal safety net altogether.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service put the warbler on the endangered species list in 1990 because things had gotten out of balance and wildlife was losing badly to urban and suburban sprawl.

As the oldest bird conservation organization in America, Audubon knows that putting a bird on the endangered species list is a weighty decision – a last resort when all else has failed.

We support property rights, and we know that a growing Texas needs new housing and all of the businesses and infrastructure that support growth. We always prefer to protect birds by cooperation rather than mandate. It's how conservation should work: developers, ranchers and farmers, governments and non-profits, communities and businesses working together to protect birds and other wildlife. That's a win for everyone.

There are some extraordinary examples of how those partnerships can work. The most recent is the agreement by landowners across the Rocky Mountain West to protect the places the greater sage-grouse needs. Those unprecedented agreements caused us to support the Fish and Wildlife Service's decision not to put the sage-grouse on the endangered species list.

But when efforts like that don't work, the Endangered Species Act becomes some species' best and – and sometimes last – chance for survival.

That's where Texas' golden-cheeked warbler is today.

The Fish and Wildlife Service reviews the warbler's condition every five years to evaluate whether it should remain on the endangered list. In its most recent report in August 2014, the service concluded the bird "continues to be in danger of extinction throughout its range" due to "the ongoing widespread destruction of its habitat."

This is bad news, particularly given the heroic efforts of many landowners, nonprofits (including Travis Audubon Society and other Hill Country Audubon chapters), and local, state, and federal wildlife agencies and other land managers.

The work that has been done has important benefits. It has increased green space that improves water quality and water conservation, which helps our aquifers. These efforts also beautify and sometimes create recreation areas for Texans in Texas Hill Country communities. As we know, San Antonio is a gateway to many of these areas for hunters, birders and others who enjoy the great outdoors.

But all these efforts haven't been enough to secure the warbler's future, and by extension, the future of all the Hill Country's natural riches.

Once we lose a species we never get it back. There are always those who ask, "So what's the big deal about one bird?" Our ecosystem – the creation all around us – is built on diversity. It's what makes our communities and our planet unique.

The golden-cheeked warbler is part of what makes the Texas Hill Country such a special place. Don't turn your back on a native son. This little Texas songbird deserves the best shot at survival, and that means keeping it protected by the Endangered Species Act.

*David Yarnold [@david\\_yarnold](#) is president and CEO of the National Audubon Society.*