



Special Section

Introduction to the Special Section on Golden-Cheeked Warbler Conservation

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There are currently about 600 animals listed under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). Few of these species have been well-studied; in fact, intensive studies for most threatened or endangered species mostly occur after the ESA listing decision is made. For some species, a reliable status assessment is simply not available until the constraints of ESA regulation stimulate the demand for research and monitoring. This tends to especially be the case for those species that depend primarily on habitats across private lands. The determined threats to listed species are varied, but many are characterized as the species having a small geographic range, being isolated across a broader range, and experiencing various forms of negative impacts to their habitat. As researchers begin to more intensively study any species, regardless of legal status, our knowledge base expands and we tend to find them in more locations that previously known (i.e., seek and you shall find). Few are pleased when we find an exotic species expanding in range; most are pleased when a rare species is found to be expanding in abundance and range. What many might find surprising, however, is the apparent lack of enthusiasm when a legally listed species is found to be not as rare as generally believed.

This Special Section tells the story of the federal listing of the golden-cheeked warbler (*Setophaga chrysoparia*). What makes this species of interest to a broad audience is the impact that its legal listing had on a large part of a very large state: Texas, USA. When the species was listed under an emergency provision, many welcomed the decision, while

others protested because of real and perceived changes in how they could manage private property. The behavior of state and federal personnel in making decisions regarding private lands and the warbler were, of course, the subject of much debate by supporters and opponents of the listing.

In regards to science, substantial data have accumulated for informing a more reliable status assessment. As would be expected, we now know substantially more about the species than we did 20 years ago. In our opinion, a major factor inhibiting a broader acceptance of the value of the ESA is the reluctance of many—including private citizens, agency personnel, and scientists alike—to acknowledge the limitation of knowledge at the time of listing, and an inability to adjust their conclusions on the status of a species based on more “informative” and reliable sets of data. As you read the papers in this Special Section we hope you will gain an appreciation for the personalities and perspectives responsible for the legal listing of this species, and then draw your own conclusions on the message that this case study has for the other 600 or so listed animals in the United States; we are confident this is not a unique case. We will bias you slightly by offering that, as scientists, we should always be willing to acknowledge that we will learn as we study, and we should all be willing to re-evaluate our preconceived notions as we become more knowledgeable. Scientists frequently consider the lay public as holding uninformed and largely biased opinions; but we are not sure there is much distinction between a lay bias and a scientific paradigm.

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