COMPATIBILITY DETERMINATION

USE: Wildlife Photography

REFUGE NAME: Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge (refuge)

ESTABLISHING AND ACQUISITION AUTHORITIES:

Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge was established under the authority of the
742a-742j Stat. 1119), as amended; and the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965 (16

In order to meet specific refuge and other broader U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service)
directives, the following purpose established the refuge:

“... to conserve (A) fish or wildlife which are listed as endangered species or threatened species
.... or (B) plants ...” 16 U.S.C. § 1534 (Endangered Species Act of 1973) ”... for the
development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife
resources ... ” 16 U.S.C. § 742f(a)(4) ”... for the benefit of the United States Fish and Wildlife
Service, in performing its activities and services. Such acceptance may be subject to the terms of
any restrictive or affirmative covenant, or condition of servitude ...” 16 U.S.C. § 742f(b)(1) (Fish

REFUGE PURPOSES:

The refuge was established to conserve fish, wildlife or plants which are listed as endangered
species or threatened species. Upon establishment, the Service stated four criteria for the
location of refuge boundaries. These are: “to ensure that

1. A sufficient representation of golden-cheeked warbler and black-capped vireo habitat is
   included;
2. Watersheds and water quality will be protected;
3. Destroyed or fragmented nesting habitats acquired have high potential for ecological
   restoration;
4. A protective buffer zone for nesting habitat and nesting populations is in place within the
   refuge boundary.”

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM MISSION:

The mission of the Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the
conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant
resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future
generations of Americans.
DESCRIPTION OF USE:

*What is the use?*

Wildlife photography is an existing wildlife-dependent recreational use on the refuge. Excellent opportunities are available on the refuge to photograph the varied migratory and resident songbirds, including two endangered bird species (Golden-cheeked Warbler and Black-capped Vireo) with limited ranges that both occur on the refuge. Other plants and animals endemic to the Texas Hill Country are present and provide abundant opportunities for visitors to capture images of this unique ecosystem.

*Where is the use conducted?*

Wildlife photography is allowed and encouraged in all areas of the refuge that are normally open to the public, including Warbler Vista, Doeskin Ranch, Shinoak Deck, and the Headquarters area.

The Warbler Vista Public Use Area is located just west of Lago Vista, Texas, and includes 3 interconnected paths (Cactus Rocks, Vista Knoll, and Ridgeline Trails) encompassing approximately 2.5 miles. A covered observation deck is located at the western end of the Ridgeline trail and provides scenic views of the refuge and adjacent Colorado River.

The Doeskin Ranch Public Use Area is located on FM 1174 south of Bertram, Texas, and includes 5 interconnected trails (Creek, Pond & Prairie, Rimrock, Shinoak, and Indiangrass Trails) totaling approximately 5 miles in length.

The Shinoak Deck is located adjacent to FM 1869 south of Bertram, and includes a covered observation deck adjacent to habitat for Black-capped Vireos.

A small trail is situated along Post Oak Creek adjacent to the Refuge Headquarters, and features an enclosed observation/photo blind overlooking a small pond. Butterfly gardens adjacent to the buildings at this location attract a variety of hummingbirds and butterflies, and provide opportunities for photographers.

*When is the use conducted?*

Refuge visitors are allowed year-round access to the Doeskin Ranch, Warbler Vista, and Shinoak areas listed above during daylight hours. The trails adjacent to the Headquarters are available Monday – Friday from 7:30 am – 4:30 pm with the exception of Federal holidays. The Shinoak Deck is closed for a period of 3 weeks each year during late March and early April to allow Black-capped Vireos to establish nesting territories in the absence of human disturbance. Bicycles and pets are not allowed in the areas.

*How is the use conducted?*

Wildlife photography on this refuge is often conducted in association with other forms of wildlife-oriented recreation including hiking, hunting, interpretation, environmental education, and wildlife observation. Visitors may also elect to take advantage of one of the 3 observation decks or blinds established to facilitate observation and photography.
Individuals or organizations that bring clients to the refuge for the purpose of wildlife photography and charge a fee or tuition for their service are required to have a Special Use Permit issued by the refuge. These commercial activities are conducted in accordance with Service and regional policy.

The refuge staff and volunteers provide information to visitors about wildlife photography opportunities at various locations.

**Why is this use being proposed?**

Wildlife photography is a priority public use on National Wildlife Refuge System (System) lands as identified in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. Allowing access to the refuge for wildlife photography is consistent with goals of the refuge and the System. The activity provides opportunities for visitors to grasp a deeper understanding of nature and wildlife – and the ability to share their experiences and images with others.

**AVAILABILITY OF RESOURCES:**

Current refuge staff oversees and manages existing compatible recreational uses, including wildlife photography. The refuge management and visitor services staff maintain and update electronic and printed information media. Our maintenance staff and volunteers address routine and periodic needs regarding deteriorating signage, drainage issues, vegetation encroachment, trail rehabilitation and vandalism. Our refuge law enforcement officer monitors the observation/photography sites to insure visitor safety and to enforce regulations designed to protect resources and enhance the visitor experience. All these tasks are performed by current refuge staff and volunteers.

**ANTICIPATED IMPACTS OF THE USE:**

**Short- and Long-term Impacts:**

Wildlife photography can cause minor short-term disturbance. Most animals become accustomed to the presence of people standing on decks or traversing hiking trails. Those animals that do not become accustomed to the disturbance move to the areas of the refuge that are closed to the public and free from disturbance.

The use of refuge trails to facilitate wildlife photography may result in some environmental impacts to the refuge, its habitat, and wildlife species. Allowing visitors to hike trails may result in some soil compaction, erosion, trampling of vegetation, littering and disturbance to wildlife. The trails were constructed in part to restrict visitor use to manageable areas and prevent these impacts from occurring across larger areas of habitat, thus protecting the majority of refuge habitat from degradation and providing wildlife areas free from disturbance.

The refuge consulted with the Austin and Arlington Ecological Services offices regarding potential impacts to black-capped vireos and golden-cheeked warblers prior to establishment of the trail network to minimize the potential impacts to those species.
Over the life of the Compatibility Determination, the refuge management and staff will continually assess the wildlife photography program and determine the optimal management that will provide a balance between wildlife disturbance and an outstanding visitor experience.

Future construction of additional trails or facilities to support wildlife photography would increase the area where resource impacts occur while simultaneously decreasing the density of those impacts overall. Therefore, if properly sited, destruction or negative impacts to habitat and associated vegetation would be minor.

Wildlife photography may result in long-term beneficial impacts to the refuge. This activity will increase understanding and appreciation of wildlife and their habitat as well as the role of the System in resource conservation. The refuge’s visitor facilities provide opportunities for the public to observe wildlife in a variety of habitats throughout the refuge while enhancing the overall mission of the System.

Cumulative Impacts:
There are no anticipated adverse cumulative impacts resulting from wildlife photography. Ultimately, this activity will add to public use opportunities on the refuge, which, in combination, will result in beneficial cumulative impacts on the human environment. The wide variety of public use opportunities available on the refuge will increase public awareness about conservation issues and the System. This will benefit the Service’s overall mission and the Refuge purpose.

PUBLIC REVIEW AND COMMENT:
This Compatibility Determination was published and available for public review and comment from _______, 2017 and closing ________, 2017. Public notification included a notice in the Federal Register, media announcements, public notices posted throughout the surrounding local communities, and public meetings. No comments specific to this determination were received.

DETERMINATION (check one below):
___ Use is Not Compatible
___ Use is Compatible with Following Stipulations

STIPULATIONS NECESSARY TO ENSURE COMPATIBILITY:
The refuge will implement the following stipulations to ensure that wildlife photography remains a compatible use:

1. Night access is not allowed on the entire refuge.

2. The refuge will limit and control access through enforcement of refuge regulations, signage, and education of the public as to the purpose of the refuge and responsibilities of visitors. We may regulate times, areas, and conditions for wildlife photography. This can also include short-term or long-term closure of areas due to unusual or critical conditions affecting land, water, habitat, wildlife populations, visitor safety, and the quality of the visitor experience.
3. We will continually assess the carrying capacity of the wildlife photography program and determine the optimal management that will provide visitors with high quality wildlife photography opportunities while maintaining a balance between wildlife disturbance and an outstanding visitor experience.

4. Pets are not allowed on the refuge.

5. Individuals or organizations that bring clients to the refuge for the purpose of wildlife photography and charge a fee or tuition for their service are required to have a Special Use Permit issued by the refuge. This requirement ensures that private businesses are not unfairly profiting from public lands and provides a mechanism for the refuge to regulate where and when commercial activities occur.

6. We do not allow spotlighting of wildlife, which includes the use of external lighting or flash devices (i.e. external tripod light stands, external flash not readily attached to the camera), for photography other than standard external flash attachment to the top of the camera.

JUSTIFICATION:

As defined by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, wildlife-dependent recreational uses may be authorized on a refuge when they are compatible and not inconsistent with public safety. Wildlife photography is included as one of these six activities, which are to receive enhanced and priority consideration in refuge planning and management. Regulated wildlife photography as described here and consistent with the management direction will provide the visitor with a chance to experience wildlife firsthand and develop knowledge about species’ behaviors, adaptations, and habitat requirements while also developing an understanding of the refuge’s role in wildlife and habitat conservation through the System. This activity will not conflict with any of the other priority public uses or adversely impact biological resources. Therefore, through the Compatibility Determination process, the refuge has determined that wildlife photography, in accordance with the stipulations provided here, will not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the System mission or the purposes of the refuge.

Signature: Refuge Manager __________________________

(Signature and Date)

Concurrence: Regional Chief __________________________

(Signature and Date)

Mandatory 15-year Re-Evaluation Date: 2032