



# BIG THICKET BULLETIN

ISSUE 132





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# PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2013-2016

When I joined the Board of Directors in 2003, nearly 30 years after the establishment of the Big Thicket National Preserve, it was known as “best kept secret in Texas.” When I took office in 2013, Executive Director Bruce Walker and I determined our focus would be on promotion of the Big Thicket National Preserve. We needed a mechanism and found one in acquiring a 45-foot pontoon boat known as the Ivory Bill. It meanders the scenic Neches River offering private charters, on demand, and public eco-history tours, every Saturday morning March through November. Passengers travel upriver from the Port of Beaumont into the Preserve’s Ten Mile Bayou. On weekdays, BTA provides an environmental education program for regional schools underwritten by generous sponsors in the area. This adventure-based floating classroom offers a discovery program to engage students in hands-on learning.

With the encouragement of Ellen Buchanan, my first meeting in 2013 was a weekend of strategic planning. That document determined the course of BTA for the next four years creating a whirlwind of activity and momentum that challenged our imagination. These are some of the highlights:

## 2013

- Developed & implemented a Strategic Plan;
- Acquired the Ivory Bill pontoon boat;
- Established Neches River Adventures Committee, Chair Michael Hoke;
- Hosted Star Party at FRS;
- Implemented tabling events throughout region;
- Expansion of Big Thicket Day;
- Introduced an evening event for BOD and special guests after Big Thicket Day;
- Initiated participation in Shangri La Scarecrow Festivals; and
- TOD intern, Alex Dye, from Chicago Botanical Gardens, documented data collected by scientists, gathered GPS data and developed a map which is on the BTA website during six months at FRS.

## 2014

- Hired environmental educator & launched the adventures program;
- Scheduled monthly meetings between NPS Superintendent & BTA Executive Director;
- Developed financial & audit policies;
- Updated software programs for membership;
- Created logos for programs;
- Established sponsorships from area businesses;
- Organized & launched Neches River Rally paddling fundraiser;
- Technology Committee redesigned website;
- 50<sup>TH</sup> Anniversary Celebration & Annual Meeting at the Visitor’s Center set a 20-year record; and
- Maxine Johnston, Ann Roberts, and Connie Blakely retired as Reporter staff and requested a name change of newsletter.

## 2015

- Launched BTA Bulletin when John Stafford, VP/Editor, found a graphic artist;
- Engaged a result oriented board;
- Restructured membership dues;
- Revised by-laws;
- Established Friends Agreement between NPS & BTA;
- Moved BTA Office to Brammer House;
- Activated Advocacy Committee against the 105 Toll Road proposed to run through the Preserve;
- West Gulf Coastal Plain & Big Thicket Science Conference;
- Neches River Rally Paddling Event; and
- 51<sup>ST</sup> Celebration & Annual Meeting and Big Thicket Day held in Beaumont at Collier’s Ferry Park.

## 2016

- Formed the Coalition Opposing the 105 Toll Road;
- Moved BTA office to SETX Foundation, 700 North Street, Beaumont;
- Transferred accounting from In-house to a Beaumont firm;
- BOD voted to gift the Marysee Prairie Preserve to the Nature Conservancy (in process);
- Held a 105 Toll Road Coalition Workshop;
- 3rd Annual Neches River Rally;
- Participated in Magnolia Club panel discussion following showing of the PBS Film: National Parks of Texas: In Contact with Beauty;
- 52<sup>ND</sup> Celebration & Annual Meeting for the NPS Centennial Celebration and Big Thicket Day; and
- TOD first exhibit at Big Thicket Days brought on-hand researchers to answer questions.



Thank you to the staff and the Board of Directors who have supported and implemented these important actions to make the past four years significant in the endurance of BTA and our work in supporting the Big Thicket National Preserve. It has been an enjoyable journey.





## COALITION OPPOSING THE 105 TOLL ROAD MEETING

*By Mary Bernard*

The Coalition Opposing the 105 Toll Road held an information sharing meeting at the Big Thicket Association offices in Beaumont on Sept. 14. The meeting updated those in attendance (about 30 people) on the status of the proposed Public Werks, Inc. and the Texas Turnpike Corporation plan to build a four-lane, 10-mile-long road from Texas 105 at Eastex in Beaumont to I-10 in Vidor. Since they presented their plans in late 2015, public concern has grown as developers offered only problematic traffic studies and spurious financial projections in support of the project. Additionally, developers say significant environmental impact is likely as the road will have to slice through the Big Thicket National Preserve, which Coalition organizers say is reason enough to reject the plan.

Coalition leaders Suzanne Dixon, National Parks Conservation Association senior regional director, and Janice Bezanson, Executive Director of Texas Conservation Alliance, distributed a fact sheet that outlined the potential effects to the region if the toll road is constructed. Cost estimates cite a whopping \$150 million price tag in construction dollars without identifying the source of the funding. Who pays? According to a traffic study conducted by the developers, the toll road would generate \$9 billion in revenue over a 75-year payback period. However, such a projection would require roughly 90,000 toll paying vehicles every day, according to Coalition organizers.

Hardly a reasonable financial projection said the Coalition's attorney, Leslie Barras, who called the project "a scam." Even if TxDOT built the highway, Barras thinks that the financial responsibility of year-to-year road maintenance and operations would ultimately fall on county residents. Members expressed concern over taxpayer exposure given the recent failure of the Austin-area SH 130 Toll Road whose operators filed for bankruptcy just four years after opening the road. BTA President Jan Ruppel noted that bankruptcy plagues private toll roads throughout the country and the 105 road's failure could stick the local economy with the bill. Environmentally, draft plans further suggest that nearly three miles of the Big Thicket National Preserve property would be needed for the toll road. Not only would this have a disastrous impact on the Preserve; an internationally known World Biosphere Site, it could also affect the \$10 million in income that the local park provides annually.

The Coalition is a citizen-based opposition effort requiring local residents to educate themselves on city and county commission plans to discuss or vote on the 105 Toll Road. Ask questions of local officials, write letters to the local government officers and newspapers, demand more detail from the developers about the project. For more information about the BTA meeting read: <http://theexaminer.com/stories/news/coalition-opposing-105-toll-road-prepares-fight>







## MARK YOUR CALENDAR

### Upcoming Meetings and Events

#### Sunday, December 4, 2016

Turkey Creek Trail and Sandhill Loop Hike  
Big Thicket National Preserve  
Meet at 12:30 pm at the Turkey Creek Trail North  
Cost is free

#### Saturday, December 10, 2016

Paddle the Thicket  
Big Thicket National Preserve  
Meet at 10:00 am at a location to be determined  
Cost is free

#### Friday, December 16, 2016

Night Hike  
Big Thicket National Preserve  
Meet at 5:15 pm at a location to be determined  
Cost is free

#### Saturday, January 14, 2017

Board of Directors Board of Directors meeting will take  
place at 9 am  
BTA Office 700 North Street, Beaumont, TX

#### Monday, January 16, 2017

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day - Longleaf Pine Planting  
Location and time to be determined

# BIG THICKET ASSOCIATION'S 52<sup>ND</sup> ANNUAL MEETING

*By Jan Ruppel*

The 52nd BTA Annual Meeting was held at the Big Thicket National Preserve Visitor's Center on Oct. 1. The 2017 Board of Directors were introduced and our upcoming president, Kathy Smartt, presented our awardees. Our Keynote Speaker was Dr. Ken Evans, president of Lamar University.

#### **R.E. Jackson Conservation 2016 Award – Richard Donovan**

The Big Thicket Association 2016 R.E. Jackson Conservation Award recognizes individuals whose outstanding service affirms environmental protection of the Big Thicket. Named for the famed visionary R. E. Jackson, who's preservation efforts led to the creation of the East Texas Big Thicket Association, which he led from 1936 to his death in 1957. Like Jackson, the 2016 award recipient Richard Donovan has helped to shape conservation efforts in the Big Thicket with his award-winning book *The Wild Neches*. Donovan has worked to conserve the Neches as a Wild and Scenic River along with the forests, wildlife habitat, and water resources of the region. He is recognized as a Conservation Hero by the National Wildlife Federation for his efforts to protect the 200 species of trees, 300 species of birds, 50 species of animals, and countless species of fish, amphibians, and reptiles living in the Neches River and adjacent bottomlands. A staunch supporter of the Big Thicket Association, Donovan supports the work of the Sierra Club, the Texas Conservation Alliance, the Friends of the Neches River, and the Friends of the National Forests in Texas.

#### **Thomas E. Lubbert Superior Achievement 2016 Award – Mary Kay Manning**

Each year the Thomas E. Lubbert Superior Achievement Award recognizes a Big Thicket National Preserve employee with at least three years of service whose performance is outstanding, whose contributions to the Preserve are significant, and whose work exemplifies exceptional dedication over a sustained period. This year's recipient of the Lubbert Award is Mary Kay Manning, a park ranger in the Division of Interpretation and Education at Big Thicket National Preserve. Manning earned a degree in Wildlife Biology from Texas A&M University and has worked for the National Park Service for over 25 years, including 20 years at Big Bend National Park along with a Student Conservation Association internship at Guadalupe Mountains National Park. In addition to leading interpretive and educational programs for the public and for the schools, Manning coordinates outreach programs as Chair of the Education and Outreach Committee at the Thicket of Diversity. She initiated Science Cafes, is a Big Thicket National Preserve permanent web author, and is a member of the East Texas Black Bear Force (ETBBF) committee and the Southeast Area Regional Taskforce (START).

Big Thicket Day, Centennial Celebration, served over 350 people with some good cookin' by Rock'in A, sponsored by ExxonMobil Environmental Awareness Committee, while a variety of activities were provided by authors, exhibitors, musicians, the Alabama Coushatta Indians, and speakers, Dr. J. Hooks, and Maxine Johnston.

**We hope you'll put us on your calendar for 2017.**

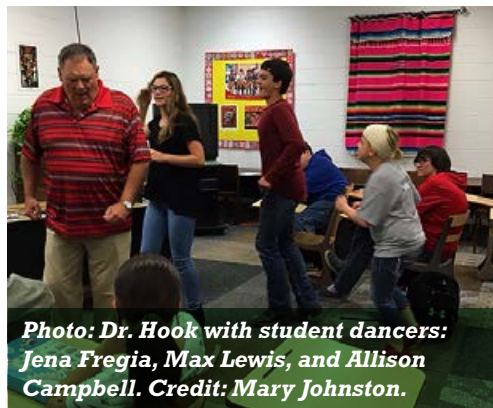


# DR. JONATHAN HOOK, CHEROKEE NATION SPEAKER

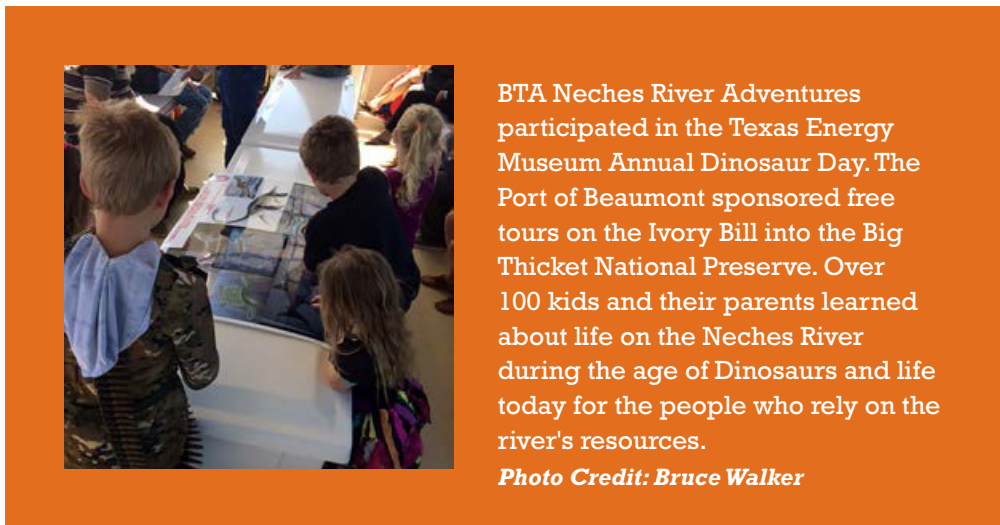
*By Mary Catherine Johnston, Kountze High School Spanish Teacher*

Dr. Jonathan Hook, an official citizen of the Cherokee Nation and author of *The Alabama Coushatta Indians*, was the featured guest speaker at Kountze High School on Sept. 30. Speaking to roughly 250 students in six programs throughout the day, Dr. Hook brought a strong message about the shared importance of community and relationships. His message of a holistic approach to an understanding of the needs of Mother Earth adopted in the Redstone Statement, which says that the environment is at a critical tipping point. Dr. Hook shared slides of his work around the world with native tribes and the challenges impacting their lives. He strives to preserve Indian history, culture, language, and the environment as all are interrelated. When protecting, one cannot separate the land, from the water, from the air, from the people. Dr. Hook encouraged students to develop relationships and to build rather than put up barriers. He shared that they can explore opportunities and internships and that each one could make a difference. To read more about the Redstone Statement, go to <http://indigenousenvirosummit10.unt.edu/html>

Dr. Hook earned a doctorate at the University of Houston and is a past Superintendent of Tribal Education Programs for the Kickapoo Tribe of Texas. He has also been the Director of the Office of Environmental Justice and Tribal Affairs at the US Environmental Protection Agency, Region 6 and the co-founder and President of the American Indian Resource Center. He served as a Keynote Speaker at the Indigenous Session of the 2015 Climate Change UNESO Conference in Paris, France. On Saturday, Oct. 1, Dr. Hook presented a program at Big Thicket Day at the Big Thicket National Preserve as hosted by the local Thicket of Diversity on Climate Change and Indigenous People.



**Photo: Dr. Hook with student dancers: Jena Fregia, Max Lewis, and Allison Campbell. Credit: Mary Johnston.**



BTA Neches River Adventures participated in the Texas Energy Museum Annual Dinosaur Day. The Port of Beaumont sponsored free tours on the Ivory Bill into the Big Thicket National Preserve. Over 100 kids and their parents learned about life on the Neches River during the age of Dinosaurs and life today for the people who rely on the river's resources.

**Photo Credit: Bruce Walker**



**Photo: Students gathered at the Kountze High School Library to hear a talk from Dr. Jonathan Hook about community and relationships.**





## THICKET OF DIVERSITY

Photo: iNaturalists citizen-scientists assembled for the Oct. 14-16 bioblitz research weekend.

### **iNATURALISTS CITIZEN-SCIENTISTS CONVENE AT THE BIG THICKET**

**By Mary Catherine Johnston,  
Executive Council Thicket of Diversity**

They came, naturalists all. Inspired through online communications they trekked to the Thicket's woods to view and count, to share knowledge and to discover. Using the online social network and app iNaturalist approximately 29 citizen scientists snapped pictures, took sound recordings, and uploaded them to the cloud.

Some came as generalists, appreciators of all nature. Others were more specific. One searched for Euphorbia, a plant with milky white sap. A medical scientist with a Swedish and Texas accent is fascinated with birds and moths. A crime scene specialist loves to photograph insects and see their eyes through the lens of her camera. A Texas City chemist prefers to photograph birds and bugs. A father and son spend time outdoors to look for terrestrial snails. Others take pictures of plants because they do not move. Many were fascinated

with odonates – dragonflies. Some used fancy equipment, others just a cell phone. One, a retired teacher is a wow person – good at spotting exciting marvels and never photographs anything, just points.

Herbert Young, Big Thicket National Preserve's Chief of Resource Management, welcomed the travelers. They came from Dallas, Houston, Dripping Springs, Longview, Big Bend, Waxahatchie, Lubbock, Austin, Baton Rouge, and Little Rock. They came excited, ready to explore and soon made discoveries, some by their feet. Sam Kieschnick of Texas Parks and Wildlife and leader of the crew encouraged, "Don't just focus on one organism. The challenge is to observe things you don't know. Observe plants, bugs, expand your iNaturalist observations and have fun exploring."

Chuck Sexton, retired Wildlife Biologist from US Fish and Wildlife Service, shared, "iNaturalist is the avant-garde of Citizen Science, and I am addicted." Excited over the new app, Sexton says it enables amateurs to connect with experts and provides a manageable database for researchers to review in more formal settings.

iNaturalist is available free online at [www.iNaturalist.org](http://www.iNaturalist.org) and as an app. The app is used just for data collection and the website is more for the social network. It is international. It allows every day people to contribute to knowledge of biodiversity in the natural world through their recorded observations and facilitates learning through networking.

The data collected from the registered participants automatically uploaded to the Big Thicket map. On Oct. 14-16 the iNaturalist aficionados observed and identified 846 species with 3314 observations. This number is sure to grow as many participants are still uploading their observations. To view all of the observations from this weekend, go to [www.inaturalist.org/projects/2016-national-parks-bioblitz-big-thicket-mini-bioblitz](http://www.inaturalist.org/projects/2016-national-parks-bioblitz-big-thicket-mini-bioblitz).

This bioblitz is part of a larger effort coordinated by the National Park Service to celebrate the NPS Centennial. Observations will be used to share stories of scientific and personal discovery and inspire even more people to go out and Find Their Park!





## NECHES RIVER RALLY

*Photo: Jan Rupel giving a rally TV interview at the LNVA Saltwater Barrier launch site. Credit: Bruce Walker*



*Photo: Ready for adventure kayakers set out from the Saltwater Barrier.*

### **By Bruce Walker, Executive Director**

The Big Thicket Association 3rd Annual Neches River Rally set out from the LNVA Saltwater Barrier boat launch on Sept. 10. Despite overcast skies (the rain fell on south Jefferson County), paddlers enjoyed a unique paddling trail and participated in the National Park Service's Centennial Year celebration with family and friends along with a delicious grilled burger lunch. Clark Winslow, Eastex Automotive, donated and cooked over 225 hamburgers for the 130 participants and 60 volunteers.

Participants received guided tours of the LNVA's Saltwater Barrier, an opportunity to check-out new

cars provided by J.K. Subaru, and got to shop for National Park Service Centennial Merchandise.

Asked to answer survey questions and to rate the event: 37 out of 37 participants surveyed rated our volunteers at a "five;" five being the highest rating. Asked what they liked best about the event participants said: "Family oriented & friendly," "Ease of check-in & launch," "Scenery & the cut-through," and "The hamburgers".

Rally promotion generated seven television interviews; one radio interview broadcast over five different radio stations and various articles or mentions in local area newspapers and magazines.

The Neches River Rally is BTA's annual fundraiser with an event income of over \$15,000 on average. Entry fees and sponsorships help support the Big Thicket Association's mission to preserve, protect, and promote the Big Thicket Region, its natural resources, and cultural history. The BTA appreciates the generous support of its partners and sponsors: Lower Neches Valley Authority (LNVA), Port of Beaumont, TOTAL, WestRock, JK Subaru, American Valve & Hydrant, Bernsen Law Firm, Beaumont Convention and Visitors Bureau, Big Thicket Outfitters, Eastex Automotive, Neil-Troy Advertising, and members & staff of the Big Thicket Association and Big Thicket National Preserve.





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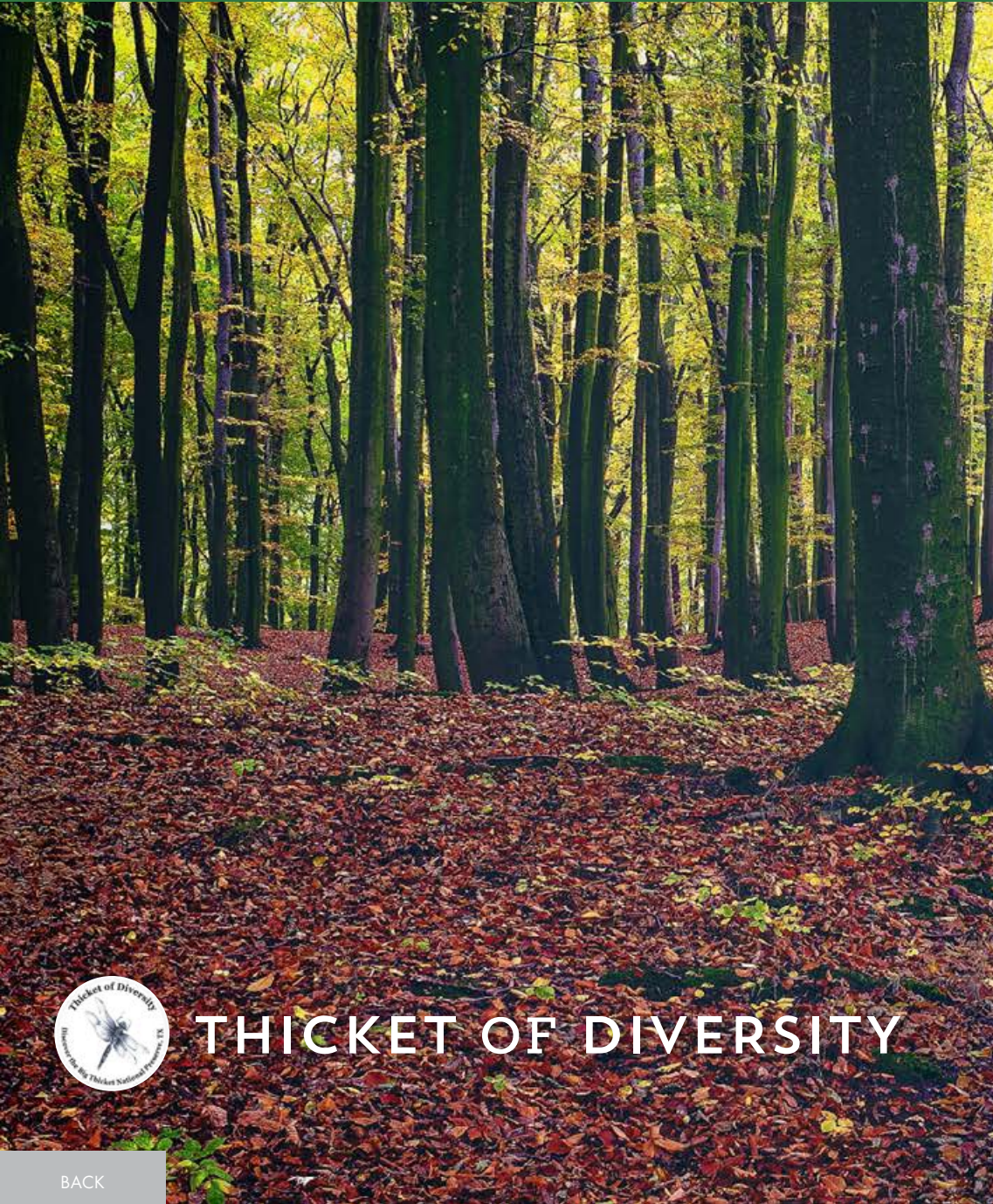
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Big Thicket Day 2016



# FIELD NOTES: IT'S THE JOURNEY

*By Mona Halvorsen*

A researcher's request for nematode core dirt samples sent me to an obscure road north Canyonlands Unit of the Big Thicket National Preserve. I carefully wound my way down a road that wasn't much wider than an ATV path, when I came upon a makeshift bridge constructed of four railroad ties and sandbags. The railroad ties were set apart; two on one side and two on the other with a gap in between. I walked to the bridge to assess its sturdiness and eyeball whether my wheels would fit the width of the bridge. The sandbags were placed in front of the railroad ties to provide a slight incline and fill in the gap between the bridge and road. I climbed back into my truck, took a deep breath and proceeded cautiously. Upon successfully descending the railroad tie bridge, I stopped, let out a thankful breath and continued my journey to take dirt samples of nematodes for the researcher.

As I walked through the upper Canyonlands Unit to the sample collection site, I looked at the beauty surrounding me and felt the deep appreciation of my job helping researchers with their work. Of course, these thoughts led to how we can help researchers to discover new species and a multitude of other things. The Thicket of Diversity project started in 2006, and we are in our 10th year because we are largely funded by grants. The most recent of these grants from the Brown Foundation has funded TOD almost yearly. We also receive money from the Texas Commission of Environmental Quality. Without their funding, I wouldn't be standing in this beautiful place digging for nematodes. I love the journey, rickety bridges and all, that has led me to my most interesting and fulfilling job.



## THICKET OF DIVERSITY





IN LOVING MEMORY

**JUDITH CASHEN ALLEN**  
OCT. 29, 1939 – SEPT. 7, 2016

Judith Allen, niece of Alice Cashen, was a Life Supporter of the Big Thicket Association and served as Director, Officer, and Advisory Board member of the organization. Most importantly, she twice revised the Articles of Incorporation and the Bylaws. She and husband, Fred, worked as partners on the BTA's team and their voices contributed to the establishment of the Big Thicket National Preserve. Currently, over 110,000 acres are protected in our country's first National Preserve, a part of the National Park Service. Big Thicket National Preserve employee, Paula Rivers, noted, "Judy was part of the original group along with Maxine Johnston who fought to preserve the Big Thicket. She volunteered from day one at the Staley Cabin and then at the Visitor Center. Judy played the harp and brought her harp to employee holiday parties and played for the staff."

Judy is remembered for her decades of service for Big Thicket preservation and for her work as a gracious volunteer in its promotion to the public.

**DR. RICHARD THOMAS BOTHEL**  
DEC. 17, 1946 – AUG. 27, 2016

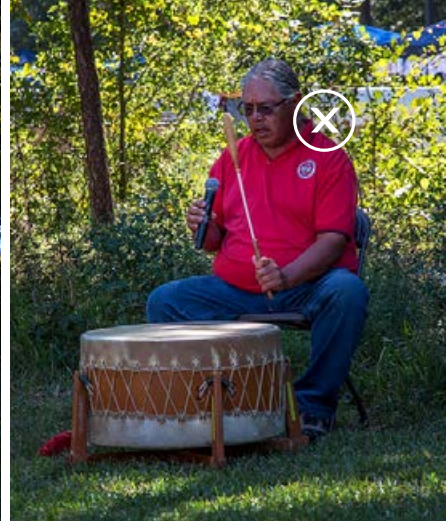
Dr. Richard Bothel enjoyed anything outdoors and appreciated creatures of all kinds. He loved educating people about the importance of always admiring the beauty of nature that surrounds us daily. He is survived by his wife of 33 years, Lillian Bothel, three children and one grandson. Dr. Bothel died at his home in Beaumont on Saturday, Aug. 27, 2016, at the age of 69. He was born on Dec. 17, 1946, in Canton, Ohio.

Dr. Bothel was a Lifetime Member of the Big Thicket Association and Founder of Neches River Adventures. In 2013, he donated the assets of Neches River Adventures to the BTA. This gift included a 45-foot pontoon boat, the Environmental Learning Center program, and a substantial amount of seed money to operate the boat and associated programs. His gift has resulted in major changes within the association that have enhanced our ability to attain our goals and our mission.

Dr. Bothel had a significant record of success as a teacher, education administrator, corporate manager, entrepreneur, writer, speaker, broadcaster, and outdoor sportsman. His area of special interest was the outdoors, although he was nationally recognized in education and business. He was a USCG Captain with a Master's License.







# BIG THICKET DAY 2016



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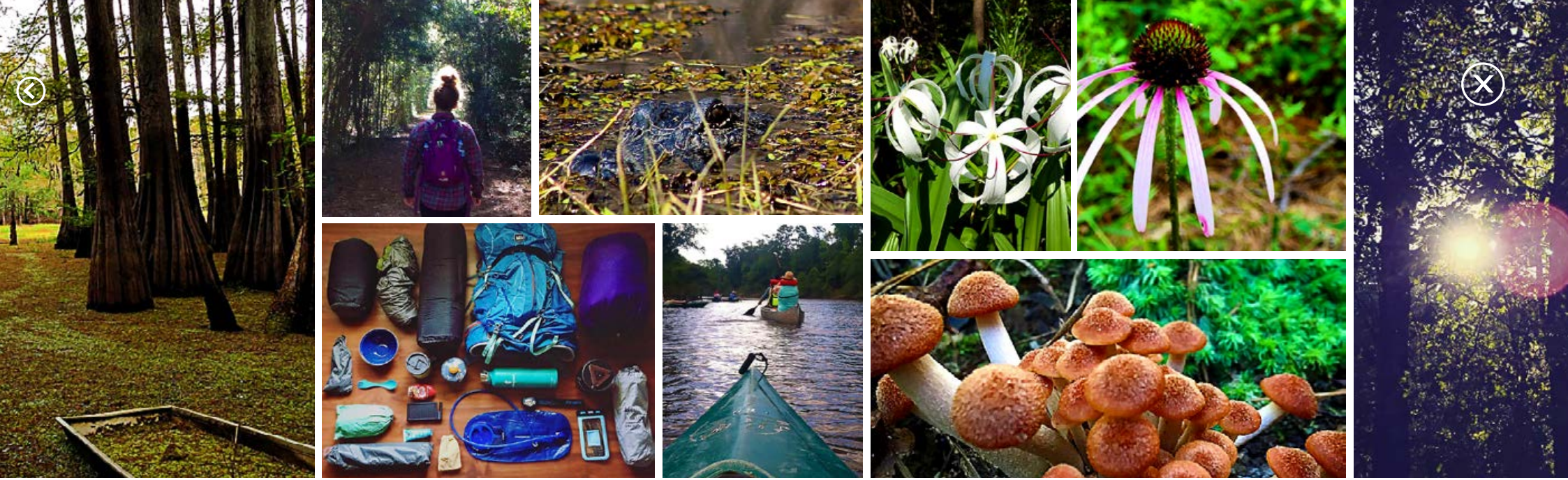
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# BIG THICKET ASSOCIATION

*Partner in Preservation*

#BIGTHICKET







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**Big Thicket Association**  
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Beaumont, TX 77701

# BIG THICKET BULLETIN

*published quarterly by  
Big Thicket Association*

## WEB SITES

Big Thicket Association  
[www.bigthicket.org](http://www.bigthicket.org)

Big Thicket National Preserve  
[www.nps.gov/bthn](http://www.nps.gov/bthn)

East Texas Black Bear Task Force  
[www.bttf.org](http://www.bttf.org)

Conservation Fund  
[www.conservationfund.org](http://www.conservationfund.org)

Gulf States Mycological Society  
[www.gsmso.org](http://www.gsmso.org)

National Audubon Society  
[www.goldentriangleaudubon.org](http://www.goldentriangleaudubon.org)  
[www.houstonaudubon.org](http://www.houstonaudubon.org)

National Parks Conservation Association  
[www.npsca.org](http://www.npsca.org)

Native Plant Society of Texas  
[www.npsot.org](http://www.npsot.org)

Nature Conservancy  
[www.nature.org/texas](http://www.nature.org/texas)

Outdoor Nature Club, Houston  
[www.outdoornatureclub.org](http://www.outdoornatureclub.org)

Sierra Club Golden Triangle Group  
[www.sierraclub.org/goldentriangle](http://www.sierraclub.org/goldentriangle)

Texas Conservation Alliance  
[www.texasca.org](http://www.texasca.org)

Village Creek State Park  
[www.texasstateparks.com](http://www.texasstateparks.com)

## BIG THICKET ASSOCIATION MISSION

The purposes for which the Big Thicket Association is organized are

- » To work for the preservation of the flora, fauna and historical culture of the Big Thicket area
- » To promote the conservation of natural resources and natural history of the Big Thicket area, and education for same
- » To maintain and perpetuate, so far as possible, the many species of trees, plants and animals found in the Big Thicket area, and to do whatever else may be done to preserve for posterity the abundance of flora and fauna and natural beauty with which this area has been endowed
- » To promote and to fund research contributing to knowledge of the Big Thicket area
- » To publish or support publication of cultural and scientific Big Thicket literature
- » To promote the welfare of the Big Thicket National Preserve

For more information about the Big Thicket Association and upcoming events, please **click here** to visit us online.

## FOLLOW US

