



BIG THICKET BULLETIN

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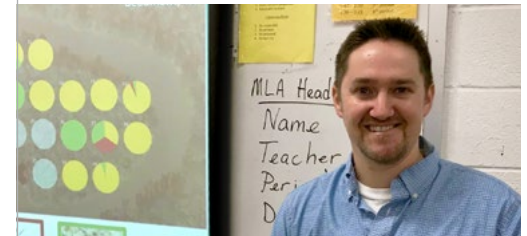
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THE NATURE CONSERVANCY NEWS

FIRST QUARTER OF TWO THOUSAND NINETEEN

By Wendy Jo Ledbetter

Forest Program Manager at the Nature Conservancy



Photo Credit: Randy Tate

The Nature Conservancy was chosen as the recipient of the Non-Profit Conservation Partner Award at the 2018 Longleaf Alliance conference.

The ceremony occurred in Alexandria, La., at a conference of more than 300 natural resource professionals, landowners, and fans of this iconic southern forest system. Pictured are The Nature Conservancy employees in attendance at the conference, accepting in behalf of the organization was Allison McGee of the Georgia chapter.

Robert Abernethy, President of the Longleaf Alliance, offered these words: "The Non-Profit Conservation Partner Award: recognizes an organization that has significantly improved, protected and conserved the longleaf ecosystem," he said.

The Nature Conservancy is a leader in longleaf pine conservation and restoration across the range of longleaf pine from the Abita Creek Flatwoods Preserve, in La., to the Piney Grove Preserve, in Va., and many places in between.

The Nature Conservancy is a leader in conservation of longleaf pine and an advocate for professional prescribed fire management.

Restoration research and efforts at places like Moody Forest Natural Area, the Apalachicola Bluffs, the Ravines Preserve, and the Bibb County Glades help in longleaf restoration.

As a leader in cultivating partnerships and coordination, The Nature Conservancy is proud to team up with local longleaf conservation and restoration groups. The Nature Conservancy is a deserving organization to be the first recipient of our Non-profit Conservation Partner Award.

MEET CAPTAIN DEBBIE LOFTUS

by Bryce Walker

The Neches River Adventures program is very lucky to have Captain Debbie Loftus as one of our most experienced Ivory Bill captains. Loftus' association with our 45-foot "floating classroom" began long before the boat was even delivered to the Beaumont Yacht Club in 2007.

At that time, she was working with Dr. Richard Bothel, a Lamar University communications professor and founder of the original Neches River Adventures Environmental Learning Center non-profit organization. They named the boat the Cardinal because of his association with Lamar University.

Loftus was in charge of promoting the program to local businesses, industries, organizations, and schools. She also wrote grants and taught as a certified Texas Parks and Wildlife Project Wild instructor. Shortly after acquiring the Cardinal, she applied for and became a U.S. Coast Guard certified captain.

Loftus joined the Ivory Bill crew in the spring of 2014 and has been invaluable to the program. As one of only a few female captains in the area, and the only one on the Ivory Bill, she serves as a safety officer. She also assists with our Environmental Education Classes and as a docent on the public tours and private charters.

"When I retired from Aflac Insurance Company, I tried not to do anything", Loftus said. "I went stir crazy and started looking for part-time jobs and volunteer opportunities. I started working at Nickolina's Interior Shop on Lucas Drive and volunteering at Beaumont Community Players. When Bruce asked me to come back as a Captain, I accepted because the environmental education program was always important to me and I love working with the kids."

Loftus splits her time between the Ivory Bill, Nickolina's, helping the Elk's Lodge book events and volunteer opportunities, and works on her art. She works her magic as a pencil color artist, enjoys reading and crocheting along with visiting family in Louisiana and Florida.

Finally, Loftus will serve on our NRIB Committee.



Captain Debbie Loftus



Loftus' artwork



THICKET OF DIVERSITY NEWS

FRESHWATER MUSSEL RESEARCH IN THE BIG THICKET

by Mary Catherine Johnston

The Big Thicket National Preserve, known for its biological diversity, is one of the most at-risk of the “Crown Jewel” parks in the national park system, according to J.B. Callicott’s 2006 article on conserving threatened places.

Some bio-indicators like benthic macroinvertebrates, or tiny aquatic creatures, indicate the overall health of an ecosystem and habitat quality. Many species have a long lifespan, are sedentary nature, ecological role as filter feeders, and sensitivity to environmental change, freshwater mussels are model organisms for such studies.

Such species were used by Robert G. Howells who recorded that the highest number of regional mussels in Texas occur in the waters of East and Southeast Texas where five of the 15 state-threatened species have been documented.

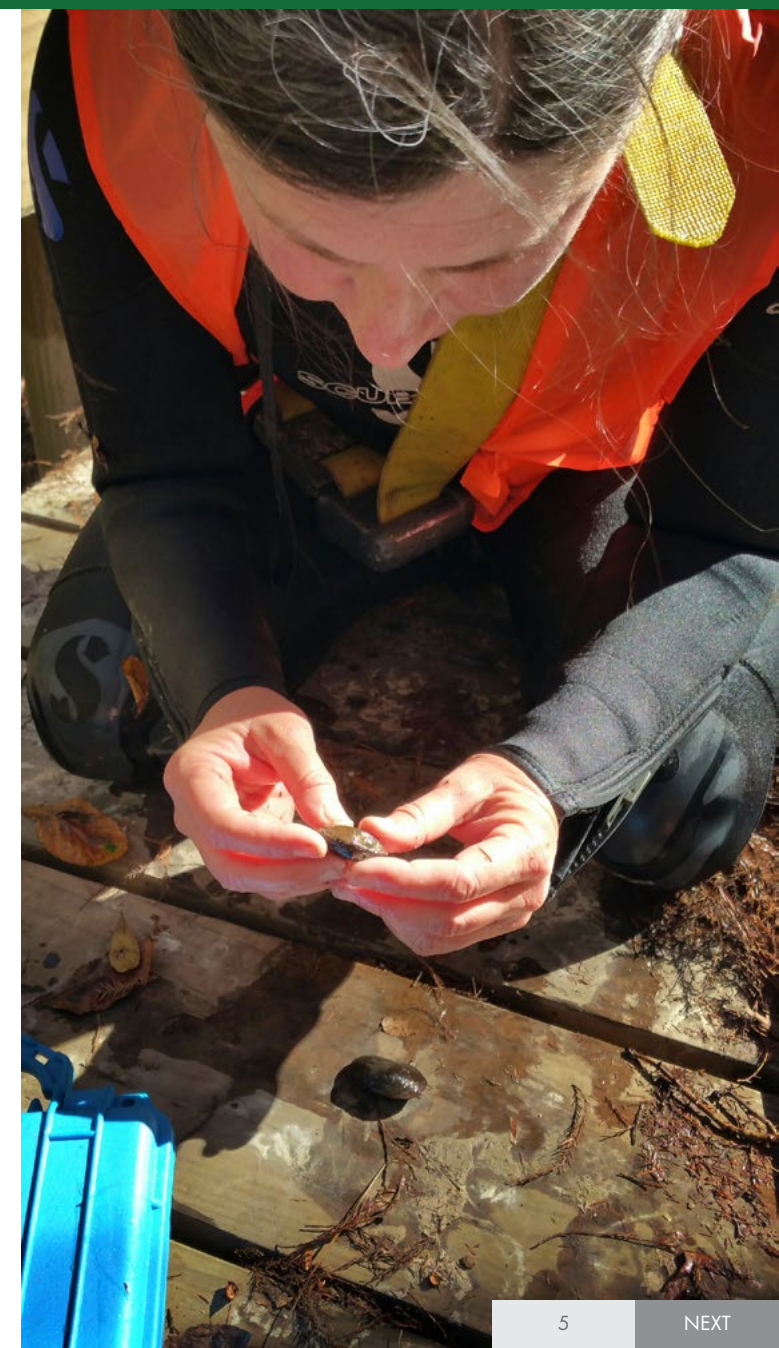
Alison Tarter, a graduate student of Texas State University, Department of Aquatic Biology, conducted research on freshwater mussel biodiversity status as part of her Master study program. She reviewed historical mussel population data from previous studies and conducted new inventories. Tarter compared older collections with 47 new sites in seven units of the preserve. She analyzed results

to determine whether mussel species had been impacted by catastrophic flooding after Hurricane Harvey. Tarter reasoned that major flooding had a severe impact on freshwater mussels, particularly on the regionally endemic State Threatened Species, *Fusconaia askewi* (The Texas Pigtoe).

At one site, for example, near the Village Creek boat ramp north of Lumberton, Tarter snorkeled for mussels. An earlier study in 2014, by Dr. Ford found 86 living individual Texas Pigtoes, but no evidence of living or dead mussels were found by Tarter.

Included in Tarter’s inventory project of the 2902 live mussels representing approximate 30 species were samples of four state threatened species. These included *Potamilus amphichaenus* (Texas Heelsplitter), *Obovaria arkansasensis* (Southern Hickorynut), *Lampsilis satura* (Sandbank Pocketbook), and *F. askewi* (Texas Pigtoe).

Her research is guided by Astrid Schwalb, Ph.D., and Thon Hardy, Ph.D., of Texas State University and is support financially by the Big Thicket Association’s Thicket of Diversity. The project was performed with penalty monies from a Texas Commission on Environmental Quality enforcement action.





2019 STANDING COMMITTEES

As Revised January 1, 2019

Please contact director@bigthicket.org, if you have and additions or revisions.

Nominating Committee:

James Westgate, Chair, Will Watkins, and Randy Yoder

Membership Committee:

Kathy Smartt, Chair, Dale Parish, Rachel Iglesias, Charles Smith, and Bruce Walker

Audit Committee:

Mary Catherine Johnston, Chair, Fred Allen, Randy Beehn, and James Westgate

Conservation/ Legislation:

Maxine Johnston, Chair, Charles Smith, Jim Westgate, Matt Pyne, and Bruce Walker

Education/ Neches River Adventures Ivory Bill (NRIB):

Jan Ruppel, Chair, Randy Beehn, Kathy Smartt, Bruce Walker, Dale Parish, Bill Klein, Terrie Looney, Penny Clark, Tracy Benson, and Kevin Dodson

Neches River Rally (NRR):

Aimee Lieby, Chair, Randy Beehn, Dale Parish, Will Watkins, Jim Westgate, and Ryan Smith

Big Thicket Day Committee:

Will Watkins, Chair, Randy Beehn, Maxine Johnston, Aimee Lieby, Dale Parish, Charles Smith, Phoebe Dishman, Bruce Walker, James Westgate, and Kathy Smartt

The BTA Bulletin:

Mary Bernard, Chair, Mary Catherine Johnston, Aimee Lieby, Kathy Smartt, John Stafford, Bruce Walker, and Penny Clark

Field Research Station (FRS):

Rachel Iglesias, Chair, Mary Catherine Johnston, Kathy Smartt, Jim Westgate, Randy Yoder, and Bruce Walker

Hospitality Committee:

Rachel Iglesias, Chair and Phoebe Dishman

Awards Committee:

Maxine Johnston, Chair, Fred Allen, Rachel Iglesias, and Ellen Buchanan

Thicket of Diversity

Committee: Matt Pyne and Randy Yoder, Co-Chairs, Mary Catherine Johnston, Kathy Smartt, Bruce Walker, Ellen Buchanan, Carl Knight, Kathy Smith, Jan Ruppel, Leitha Gunter, Dale Parish, James Westgate, and Kevin Dodson

Duncan Property / Pyramid Magnolia Property:

Dale Parish, Chair, Maxine Johnston, Randy Beehn, Charles Smith, and Bruce Walker





MARK YOUR CALENDAR

MARCH 15, 2019

Walk in the Woods in the Big Thicket National Preserve. A free two-hour hike at Kirby Trailhead on FM 420.5, at 9 a.m., a 1.7-mile walk. Bring water and insect repellent.

MARCH 16, 2019

Canoe Trip, 10 am, with park rangers on the waters of the preserve, casual and novice paddlers: canoes, PFDs, and paddles will be provided. Free. Space is limited, call visitor center 409-951-6700 to register.

MARCH 20, 2019

Full Moon Night Hike at 7:30 p.m. Free hike in the nighttime world of the Big Thicket under a full moon. Locations vary and space is limited, call our visitor center at 409-951-6700 to register.

MARCH 30, 2019

Canoe Trip, 10 am, with park rangers on the waters of the preserve, casual and novice paddlers: canoes, PFDs, and paddles will be provided. Free. Space is limited, call visitor center at 409-951-6700 to register.

No specific April events yet. Contact the preserve 409-951-6700 for information.



Photo Credit: NPS

WILDERNESS FIRST AID TRAINING

'Hey, Hey, Are You OKAY?'

By Jason Ginder

Circulation, Breathing and Airway, do you know the CBAs for accessing someone in physical distress?

In mid-November eleven NPS staff members gathered at the Field Research Station for a valuable 16-hour Wilderness First Aid training. Each year most park staff complete a Basic First Aid and CPR/AED course.

Recently we've seen an increase in ranger-led hikes and paddle trips into undeveloped, and remote back-country sections of the preserve. We've also had a few visitor distress calls where limited assistance was available, according to Jason Ginder, Chief of Interpretation and Education.

To ensure that the park staff has the skills to respond to the unique kinds of emergency that can occur in the park, we've decided to offer this more advance-training to all of those interested.

Ginder offers a special thanks to the Big Thicket Association, who on the park's behalf paid the registration fee for this course. Each year, 10 percent of the proceeds from the Neches River Rally are donated to the park. This year those funds are being used to support this important training opportunity.



Community Volunteer Ambassador cleans up

STEWARDSHIP IN THE BIG THICKET

Nate Zantzing, Community Volunteer Ambassador with the National Park Service, Big Thicket National Preserve led a Girl Scout trash cleanup day, on Nov. 10, 2018, in the preserve. The majority of the day was spent cleaning the Edgewater Day Use Area before taking away trash at Hester Bridge in the Turkey Creek Unit. The troop drove from Harris County, the San Jacinto Girl Scout Chapter, for a day of service. The Big Thicket National Preserve greatly appreciated their efforts and hopes to see many more such cleanups in the future. The Community Volunteer Ambassador Program with the national park service draws from the ranks of recent college graduates, harnessing their talent and enthusiasm to coordinate community volunteer opportunities in the parks. Zantzing, a native of Penn., graduated from Prescott College, in Ariz., and has been a valued volunteer coordinator for the preserve for the last year.



ANT MAN: DR. SCOTT SOLOMON LECTURES AT KOUNTZE HIGH SCHOOL

by Mary Catherine Johnston

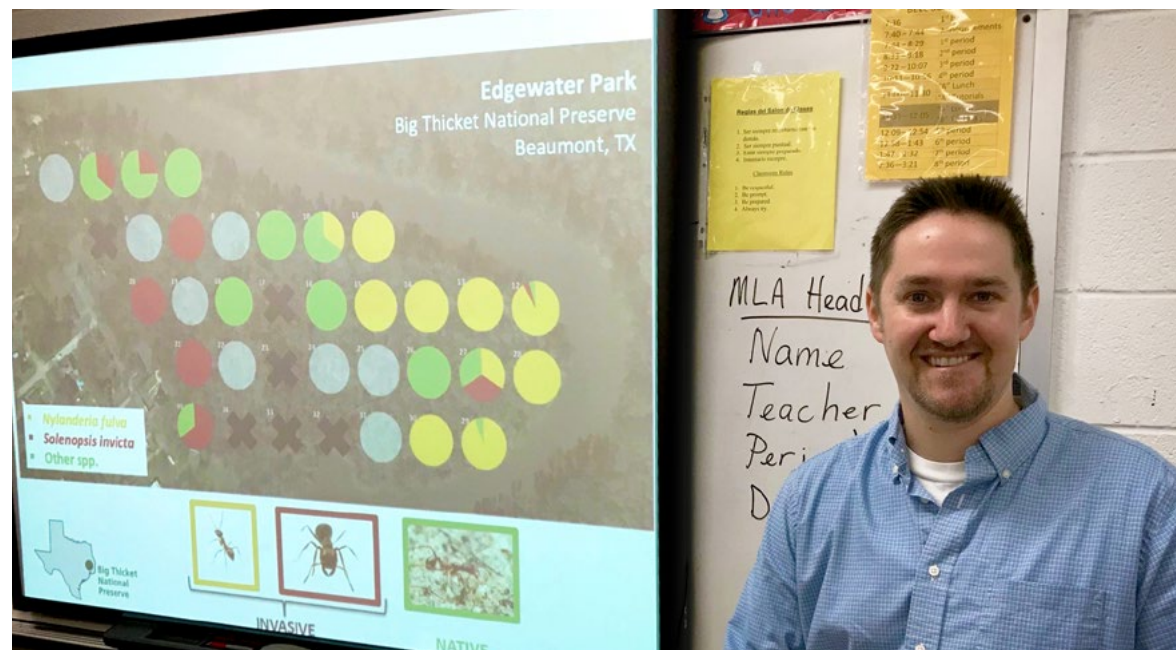
Rice University's Dr. Scott Solomon spoke to Kountze High School students about his biological research on ants in the Big Thicket, although his work extends throughout Latin America.

Solomon talked about how ants harvest fungus in underground farms, how they cultivate antibiotics for medicine, use tools, manage traffic, and participate in warfare.

Specific to the region, Solomon compared native and invasive ant species before and after Hurricane Harvey, including tracking fire ants and crazy ants into Texas bringing their devastating impacts.

Solomon's educational lecture was funded by the Big Thicket Natural Heritage Trust under a grant from the National Environmental Education Foundation for recovery and resiliency after natural disasters.

As a BTA Thicket of Diversity researcher, Solomon research is partly funded with TCEQ penalty monies and a National Science Foundation grant. He encourages citizen science and the involvement of volunteers in support of research.



BTA Jason Project SCIENCE NEWS

"World of Waves" Study, The JASON Project

by Bruce Walker and Terrie Looney, Ph.D.

Dr. Terrie Looney led the Big Thicket Association's scientific interactive sessions. The JASON Project is hosted annually by Lamar University in the Seltzer Center.

Over five days of sessions, school buses from all over the region carried students to participate and learn about this year's topic "World of Waves."

Nancy Angell; Texas Master Naturalist volunteer, assisted Looney along with Tera Adler; BTA staffer, Floyd Broussard; NRIB volunteer, and Victoria Looney; NRIB volunteer. They presented information on water quality using benthic observations.

This year, the JASON Project hosted approximately 9,000 students from area schools at Lamar University. Our team presented 45 sessions to more than 1,700 students over five days. Looney was also featured in the JASON main session video explaining water waves. Filming for the video was done in November.

We give a special thanks to Nancy, Floyd, and Victoria for their volunteer efforts. Each individual gave more than 20 hours of service to this project as dedicated supporters of the NRIB program. BTA could not be successful without them.

Note: BTA's own Dr. James Westgate, University Professor of Earth & Space Sciences, and Jan Ruppel, BTA Past President, have been involved in Lamar's JASON Project since its inception in 2001. Westgate serves as Associate Director & Science Adviser, and Ruppel serves as Peer Trainer and Master of Ceremonies.



Top left: Victoria Looney
Top right: Nancy Angell and Dr. Looney
Lower left: Floyd Broussard
Lower right: Dr. Looney

Photo Credit: Bruce Walker



Longleaf Pine Seedlings Reforestation Planting

by Mary Bernard

The National Park Service, Big Thicket National Preserve, and the National Parks Conservation Association together with 50 volunteers planted nearly 15,000 longleaf pine seedlings on Feb. 9.

Never have so few foresters planted so many trees in the Big Thicket Preserve in such a short span of time. Maybe it was the cool weather, or perhaps, the free pizza provided by the Big Thicket Natural Heritage Trust, but the volunteers planted their hearts out.

A phenomenal number of seedlings were planted by volunteers (with some 8,000 remaining for the next groups) who came from as far west as Houston and as far east as the border of Louisiana.

Participation of all guests was deeply appreciated, according to Preserve Superintendent Wayne Prokopetz. So many thank yous to all, say the Preserve staff and the National Parks Conservation Association.

Together, these groups have worked on the longleaf pine reforestation project in the Big Thicket for the past nine years. Next year is a decade of effort, so stay tuned.

Saturday's planting took place on the eastern edge of the Big Thicket National Preserve Visitor Center, in Kountze. The reforestation program was scheduled as a service project for Martin Luther King Day but had to be rescheduled due to the federal closure.

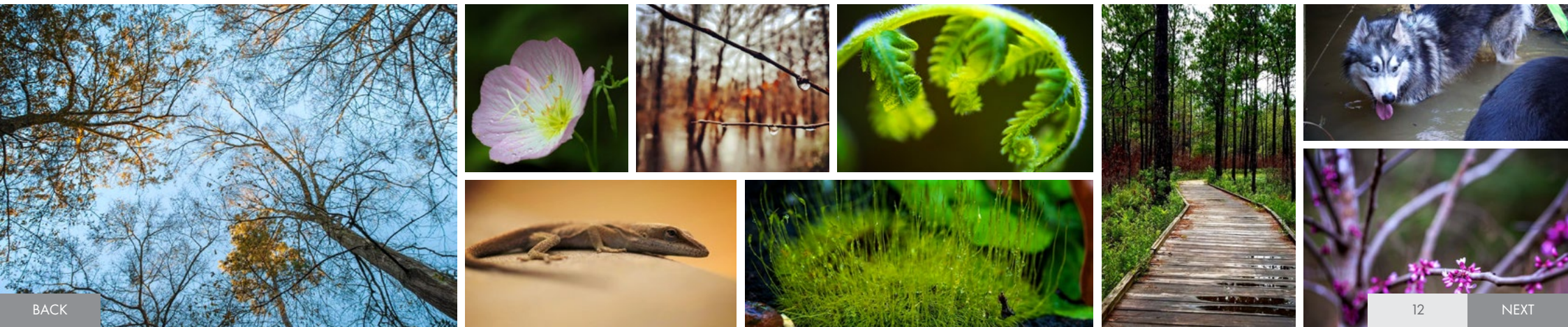




BIG THICKET ASSOCIATION

PARTNER IN PRESERVATION

#BIGTHICKET





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Big Thicket National Preserve
www.nps.gov/bith

East Texas Black Bear Task Force
www.bbctf.org

Conservation Fund
www.conservationfund.org

Gulf States Mycological Society
www.gsmysoc.org

National Audubon Society
www.goldentriangleaudubon.org
www.houstonaudubon.org

National Parks Conservation Association
www.npca.org

Native Plant Society of Texas
www.npsot.org

Nature Conservancy
www.nature.org/texas

Outdoor Nature Club, Houston
www.outdoornatureclub.org

Sierra Club Golden Triangle Group
www.texas.sierraclub.org/triangle

Texas Conservation Alliance
www.TCA.texas.org

Village Creek State Park
www.tpwd.state.tx.us/park

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.

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