

BIG THICKET BULLETIN

ISSUE 159

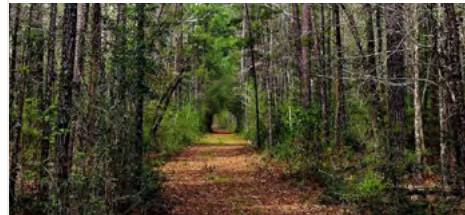
INSIDE THIS ISSUE

2023

JULY
AUGUST
SEPTEMBER

3

A Message from the President »



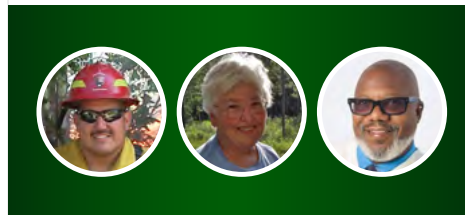
4

Rallying the Membership of BTA »



5

Big Thicket Association 2023 Awards »



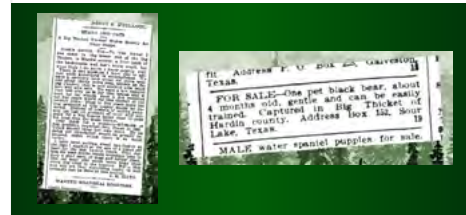
8

There's No Place Like the Big Thicket »



9

Looking Back: When Bears Were Considered Pests, Prey – and Even Pets



10

Big Thicket National Preserve News Release »



11

Podcast Alert: NPR Tik Check »



12

Neches River Adventures: Texas Rivermen: Eco-Art Boat »



13

Science Café – Texas Bats, Heroes of The Night »



14

The Next 50 Years for the Big Thicket »



15

Yellow-billed Cuckoo aka Rain Crow, Storm Crow »



16

Save the Dates »



A Message from the President

John Stafford, BTA director and board president

Greetings to Friends and Members of BTA!

Our annual **Big Thicket Day Celebration and General Membership Meeting** is scheduled for Saturday, October 7th, again at Collier's Ferry Park in Beaumont. The date is one week earlier due to the kickoff of Big Thicket Preserve's anniversary the following weekend at the Visitor's Center in Kountze. We hope everyone can come to both.

The **Big Thicket Day Celebration** committee has been hard at work arranging for new exhibitors, live entertainment, great food and other festivities open to the general public. As of this date, we are planning to have horses (Spirit Stable), alligators (Gator Country), birds of prey (Phillip the Falconer), kayaks (Big Thicket Outfitters), Big Thicket National Preserve, National Parks Conservation Assn., free tours aboard *IVORY BILL* and much more.

Thanks to our many sponsors, our free **Environmental Education** programs continue to be in great demand with hundreds of students and schools (public, charter and home) represented due to efforts of Dir. Jennie Knapp and her volunteers. So far this season, they have served over 1,100 students from 16 schools across our area. **More volunteers are needed.**

Our **Neches River Adventures Committee** has been very busy with the *IVORY BILL* for public tours and private charters. Public tours conclude for the season on November 4; however, [charters are available all year.](#)

BTA's Membership Committee continues to plan events for both members and non-members. The fall photo contest will kick off shortly - see our website for details. Unfortunately, a recent paddling event scheduled for July was cancelled due to low water in Village Creek. The committee is also working on a "Members Handbook" for later this year. We are most excited about our first guided **bus tour of Big Thicket National Preserve (East)**, coming on November 4. Plans are being finalized now. Look for emails and posts on social media for registration and more details.

BTA and our **Thicket of Diversity Committee** sponsored a **Science Cafe** - "Bats, Heroes of the Night", presented by Dr. Amanda Adams, Director of Research Coordination of Bat Conservation International, at the Logon Cafe in Beaumont.

As always, my personal thanks to our many sponsors and supporters, and to BTA board members for their commitment and hours of service to BTA. We appreciate all you do.

Stay cool and hydrated!



Rallying the Membership of BTA

Diane Thompson, BTA Executive Director

Big Thicket Association (BTA) has a long history of hard-working, committed volunteers who have worked to conserve and preserve the Big Thicket region of southeast Texas for current and future generations. These volunteers also promote the Big Thicket region and its biodiversity every chance they get. They are Board Members for BTA, Chairs of Committees, Captains, Deckhands, and Docents on the *Ivory Bill*, Volunteers for school land activities, and Members of Committees. They are much appreciated for their hard work and dedication! Would you like to join us? BTA needs more members to become involved as well as a next generation of new members/volunteers.

Reflect on these questions: Are you a paid member of BTA? (Not sure? Email btaassistant@gmail.com.) Are you supporting your organization? What are you doing to promote BTA? Do you tell your friends about BTA? Do you invite your friends to BTA events? Do you post our events on social media to promote them? Do you post pictures of our events on social media?

I challenge you to become involved today. Think about your next steps. What are your talents? Interests? There are so many opportunities to become involved and help make a difference.

BTA has the following projects and programs that always need more help:

- Neches River Adventures needs volunteers for land education activities, docents, deckhands, and captains.
- BTA needs a photographer at our events (Neches River Rally, Big Thicket Day, Science Café etc.).
- Neches River Rally and Big Thicket Day need all volunteers to help.
- Thicket of Diversity needs assistance with online research, data management, and outreach.
- BTA has many committees available including, Nominating, Audit, Finance, Membership, Neches River Adventures, Neches River Rally, Big Thicket Day, Awards, Publications, Thicket of Diversity, Hospitality, and IT.

Please consider becoming a member/volunteer for BTA today. Donate your time, talent, and energy to a worthy, important cause. And again, THANK YOU to those who already volunteer for BTA!



People helping



BIG THICKET ASSOCIATION 2023 AWARDS

Mary Catherine Johnston and Willie Watkins, BTA directors



2023 AWARD RECIPIENT:

Frank C. Sylestine
Big Thicket Fire Management
Fire Equipment Operator

Thomas E. Lubbert Achievement Award recognizes outstanding service to the Preserve and work that exemplifies exceptional dedication over a sustained period.

Frank began work at Big Thicket in 2008 following 10 years of service with the Texas Forest Service. He serves as Assistant Fire Chief for the Alabama Coushatta VFD and the liaison between the local volunteer fire departments and BITH Fire Management. Frank also fills the collateral duty of chainsaw coordinator for the Preserve and is a regional certifier for the NPS chainsaw program.

As an experienced heavy equipment operator, Frank was instrumental in developing standard operating procedures for use of heavy equipment on BITH lands. Frank's experience with equipment and understanding of forest management have been critical in the BITH longleaf pine restoration efforts. These efforts have made BITH Fire Management a leader of heavy equipment use on NPS lands throughout the region. Grand Canyon NP sought his advice in developing mastication projects as well as establishing a mechanical program. Since 2016, Frank has helped Yellowstone NP integrate heavy equipment into their fire and fuels management program. Frank supervised implementation of the West Yellowstone protection project during the 2016 Maple fire, implemented fuels projects, trained Yellowstone staff, provided technical assistance for equipment purchase, and acted as subject matter expert during that eight-year relationship.



BIG THICKET ASSOCIATION 2023 AWARDS

Mary Catherine Johnston and Willie Watkins, BTA directors



2023 AWARD RECIPIENT:

Pauline Singleton

President of the Watson
Rare Native Plant Preserve

Maxine Johnston Distinguished Service Award recognizes achievement in preservation of resources – nature, culture, and academic.

Pauline, a tireless worker dedicated to the memory of Geraldine Watson, has been active in the management of the Watson Rare Native Plant Preserve since before Geraldine's death. The life-long naturalist has fought to protect this unique Thicket microcosm from the normal biological problems as well as from human attacks.

The preserve, located near Warren in Tyler County, has many rare and endangered species of native plants, including seven species of orchids, four of the five types of carnivorous plants native to North America, and ten species of ferns.

Geraldine discovered a site that exhibited almost all of the plant communities for which the Big Thicket is famous. She purchased it and worked to restore it to its original condition. Today thanks to the efforts of naturalist Pauline Singleton the site with its 1.9 mile trail off Lake Hyatt remains open to the public.

Singleton has been a Texas Master Naturalist since 1999, a member of the Native Plant Society of Texas (Houston Chapter) for over 25 years and a member of the Native Prairies Association. Pauline's lifelong love of the flora and fauna of Texas, her leadership and the successful management of the Watson Rare and Native Plant non-profit continue to sustain a beautiful ecological Big Thicket site for the future.



BIG THICKET ASSOCIATION 2023 AWARDS

Mary Catherine Johnston and Willie Watkins, BTA directors

R.E. Jackson Conservation Award recognizes both leadership and significant accomplishments in the Big Thicket's conservation. This award is named for the Silsbee leader of the East Texas Big Thicket Association that worked to establish a 435,000-acre Big Thicket national park in the 1930s-1940s.

Hilton Kelley is an environmental justice activist determined to make a difference in Port Arthur, a city whose livelihood is intertwined with the petrochemical industry. Port Arthur is noted by the EPA to have some of the highest levels of toxic air releases in the country and the nearby largely African-American West Side neighborhood has suffered as a result.

After serving in the US Navy and working as a stunt man and professional actor in the San Francisco Bay area, Kelley returned home to become a voice for residents and a leader in the local movement to clean up Port Arthur.

Kelley's community outreach campaign and advocacy facilitated the installation of state-of-the-art equipment by Motiva to reduce harmful emissions. The activist negotiated a good neighbor agreement that provided health coverage for the residents of West Side for three years and established a 3.5 million fund to help entrepreneurs launch new businesses in the community. He led a campaign beginning in 2006 that prevented Veolia Corporation from importing more than 20,000 tons of toxic PCBs from Mexico for incineration at its Port Arthur plant. In 2002 Hilton Kelley founded Community In-Power and Development Association Inc. to establish an organization that stands up for vulnerable communities. The non-profit collects scientific data from emission sources and educates residents about the toxic burden they shoulder.

Kelley received the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2011. He continues work as a motivational speaker and community environmental justice advocate with citizens of all ages.

2023 AWARD RECIPIENT:

Hilton Kelley
Environmental Justice Activist

There's No Place Like the Big Thicket

Big Thicket National Preserve

This coming October, Big Thicket National Preserve is turning 49 years young! Park staff are gearing up for a fantastic year of celebrations, culminating in a big 50th anniversary blowout on October 12, 2024. Over the past year, staff have developed new programming for the anniversary year, collaborated on a new logo, and of course, continued offering our signature programs and events all year.

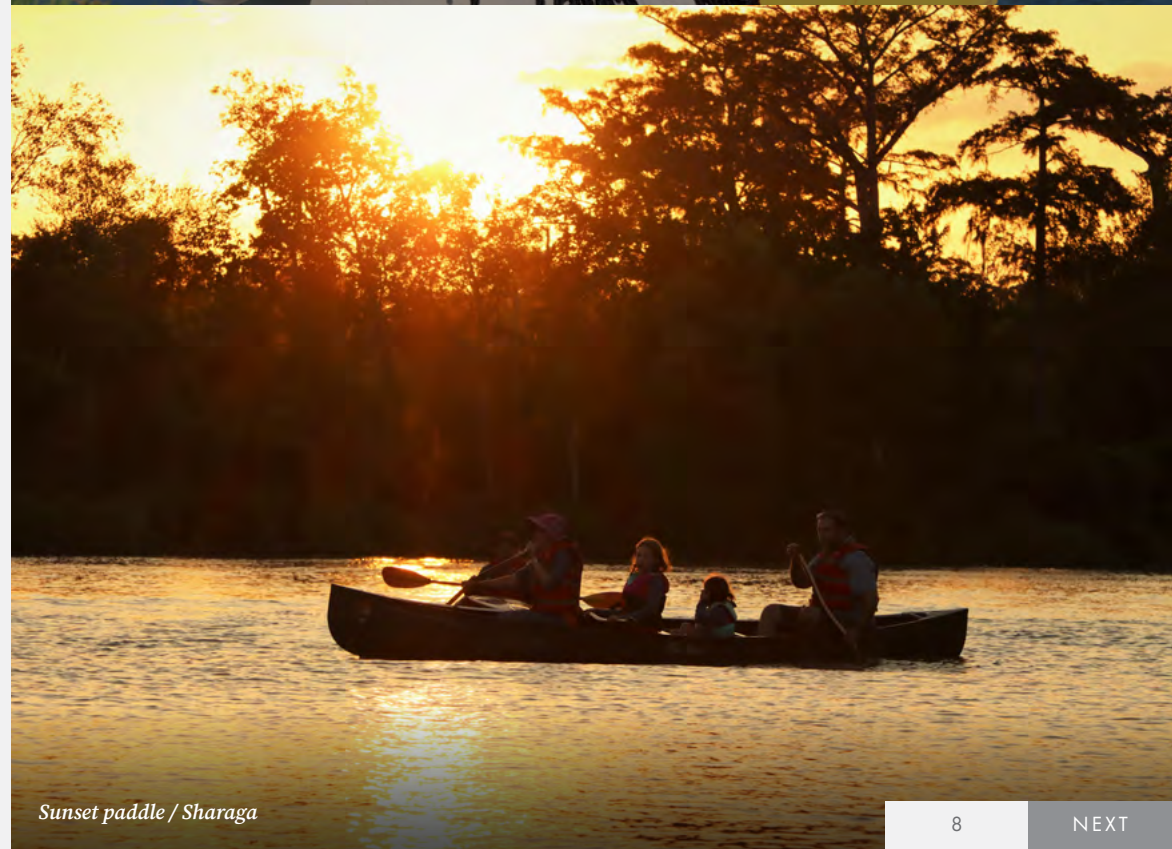
Some of the programming will stay the same, including the winter plantings happening this December, January, and February. These plantings will continue to focus on restoring the longleaf pine savanna ecosystem in the Big Sandy Creek Unit. Alongside partners like Big Thicket Association, rangers and volunteers will plant grasses and native pollinators to assist with the understory re-growth in areas that have been identified by the resources management staff.

A new program that we are putting together will help answer the question, what kinds of scientific research are being conducted in Big Thicket? Find out in May 2024 at our Science Symposium! Researchers who use Big Thicket as their study area will be invited to speak about their research at this public event where everyone can gain an in-depth look into science in the preserve. Stay tuned for more details on this special event.

All our ranger programs will connect back to the overarching theme of the year, "There's no place like Big Thicket." We think that everyone, especially after visiting Big Thicket, will agree with that!



Fishing Day / Sharaga



Sunset paddle / Sharaga

LOOKING BACK

When bears were considered pests, prey – and even pets

Dennis Durkee, BTA member

Big Thicket supporters today would be thrilled to see the return of a population of black bears. Not so back in the early days. Some anecdotes:

On April 26, 1894, the Galveston Daily News printed a letter from J.H. Mayo of Hook's Switch. "I live down in the lower end of the Big Thicket, in Hardin County," Mayo wrote. He proposed a law that would pay \$5 for bear scalps and \$1 for wild cat scalps. "Such a law enforced for five years would rid this thicket of the terrible pests," Mayo wrote.

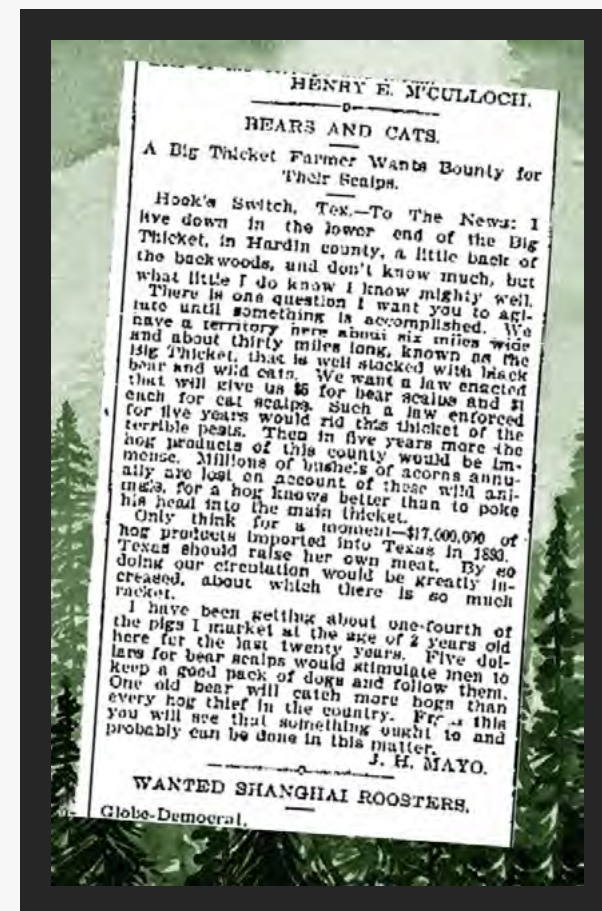
The Liberty Vindicator reported on Jan. 15, 1897, that two years earlier, nearly 200 black bears were killed in the northern portion of Liberty County.

The Galveston Daily News had this note on May 28, 1887: "Captain Gaston Ashe has brought from the Big Thicket a cub bear. It sucks from a bottle, is three months old and very playful."

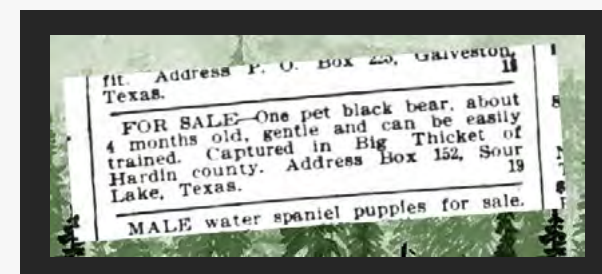
The Liberty Vindicator reported this "man vs. bear" wrestling match on June 16, 1905, and it was widely reprinted across Texas: "Exciting

times prevailed in the Big Thicket in the vicinity of Saratoga yesterday. Mr. George Doty and a party of men were out gathering blackberries. The party separated. Doty, who is a large, powerful man ... heard the brush breaking ahead of him. Thinking it was his party, he paid little or no attention to it, when all at once out jumped a big female bear." The bear rushed him. "Then one of the fiercest battles that was ever witnessed between man and beast was enacted." Finally, Doty struck the bear with his fist on the nose, stunning her and causing the bear to fall down. He tied her up with a vine "until he could get a stout club, which he did, and then beat the brains out." His clothes were torn off, but he received only flesh wounds.

The Houston Post had this report from Kountze on Dec 22, 1906: "John L. Little killed an enormous bear yesterday in the Big Thicket. It measured 6 feet and seven inches from tip to tip, and is the largest bear killed in this section in years. The government's agent has taken charge and will have it mounted and placed in the museum at Washington."



This is the full text of the letter written by J.H. Mayo of Hardin County. It appeared in the Galveston Daily News on April 26, 1894.



This classified ad appeared in the Houston Post on July 18, 1909.

Big Thicket National Preserve News Release

Release Date: August 9, 2023

KOUNTZE, Texas, August 8, 2023 – Big Thicket National Preserve, in partnership with the Railroad Commission of Texas (RRC), announces the removal of four navigation hazards of abandoned oil and gas wells located in the Neches River.

The National Park Service (NPS) worked closely over two and a half months with RRC to oversee the removal of surface casings of four oil wells. These wells were originally plugged by operators in the 1970's and 1980's. Over time due to erosion and migration of the Neches River, the casings became exposed, creating a navigational hazard in the waterway. To ensure these wells were remediated to the appropriate safety standards, well casings were cut and removed below the mudline (riverbed). The river's high-water conditions in combination with the wells being located within the main channel of the river required the use of a barge and cofferdam for worker access and execution.

"Our partnership with the Railroad Commission is vital to the continued work on the preserve to remove abandoned oil and gas wells, which can cause environmental and recreational hazards for our visitors," said Wayne Prokopetz, superintendent of Big Thicket National Preserve.

"The RRC has had more than 40 years of extensive experience working with plugged wells and any issues that may crop up. We're glad to be able to lend our technical expertise for projects like this to help federal and state agencies when they reach out to us," said Clay Woodul, RRC assistant director of the oil and gas division for field operations.

Funding for this project came from the NPS Abandoned Mineral Lands Safety and Resource Protection program. The primary goals of the program are to eliminate public safety hazards; rehabilitate affected natural resources, particular restoration and maintenance of species of management concern's critical wildlife habitat affected by abandoned mineral lands; and stabilize culturally significant abandoned mine sites. Because Big Thicket is one of the NPS's largest "oil and gas" parks by number of wellbores drilled, this project has increased the park's ability to mitigate the effect oil and gas on preserve land.

Big Thicket National Preserve is in Southeast Texas, near the city of Beaumont and 75 miles northeast of Houston. The preserve consists of nine land units and six water corridors encompassing more than 113,000 acres. The Big Thicket, often referred to



Federal funding is being used to plug orphaned oil wells in Big Thicket National Preserve/NPS file

as a "biological crossroads," is a transition zone between four distinct vegetation types – the moist eastern hardwood forest, the southwestern desert, the southeastern swamp, and the central prairies. Species from all these different vegetation types come together in the thicket, exhibiting a variety of vegetation and wildlife that has received global interest.

Find general information about Big Thicket National Preserve at our [website](#) or call the preserve visitor center at 409-951-6700. Visit us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#).

One of our alert board directors came across an NPR podcast you may want to check out.

Here's the intro:

It's with ticks in mind that we head to Big Thicket National Preserve in Texas. Among the trees and trails, researchers like Adela Oliva Chavez search for blacklegged ticks that could carry Lyme disease. She's looking for answers as to why tick-borne illnesses like Lyme disease are spreading in some parts of the country and not others. Today, what Adela's research tells us about ticks and the diseases they carry, and why she's dedicated her career to understanding what makes these little critters ... tick. (encore)



<https://www.npr.org/2023/07/03/1185810313/tick-check-meet-the-tiny-bloodsuckers-in-our-backyards>



James Gathany/AP

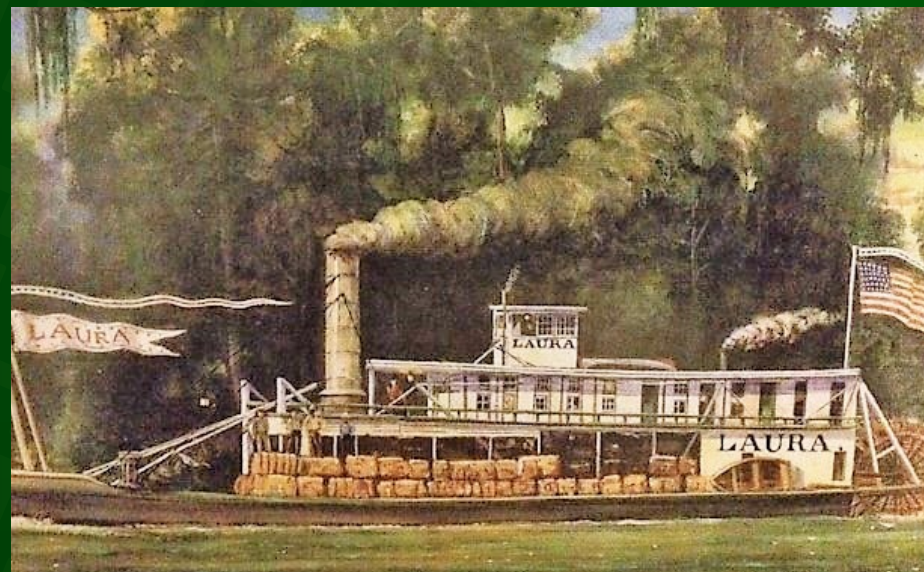
NECHES RIVER ADVENTURES

Texas Rivermen: Eco-Art Boat

The Life and Times of Captains Andrew Smyth & John Bevil

This past July, our guests aboard the *Ivory Bill* were: Captain Andrew Smyth (Keith Stephens), Emily Smyth (Lori Horne), and Captain John Bevil (Ron Carpenter). We traveled back in time, and we heard “first-hand” stories about their families and their experiences as they plied the Neches River’s waters aboard the *Laura*. Thanks to Captain Gerald Langham, Chief Captain Tim Wynkoop, and docent/hostess Micah Leigh for being an excellent crew for this special tour. These Eco-Art Boats are special tour offerings that feature various topics and experiences for our passengers. All Eco-Art Boats are aboard the *Ivory Bill* as we travel the back-water channels of the Big Thicket National Preserve.

Submitted by: Captain Bruce Walker, NRIB Committee Chair



Science Café – Texas Bats, heroes of the night

Mary Catherine Johnston, BTA Director, Thicket of Diversity Chair

On August 7, the LogOn Café featured Dr. Amanda Adams, Director of Research Coordination of Bat Conservation International. Her fascinating presentation shared information on some of the 33 species of bats in Texas and their distribution. Texas has an Official Flying Mammal, the Mexican free tailed bat. 1.5 million of them congregate and cuddle under the famous bridge in Austin. It is a maternity colony. Other bat species prefer to hang solo.

Dr. Adams shared tips on bat gardening. Bats, as heroes of the night, love fat juicy moths and eat insects. They play a valuable role in agriculture both in insect control and as pollinators. The use of native plants and night blooming white flowers was encouraged. Other flowers of benefit to bats are coneflowers, native milkweed, sunflowers and phlox.

If you want to bring bats to your yard, Bat Conservation International offers free blueprints for a Do-it-Yourself design. A bat house was donated by the Sour Lake Lions and shared as a door prize to a lucky attendee.

The program concluded with a video of a Vampire bat running on a treadmill. This unusual species can actually run 2.5 mph.

Dr. Adams and her team are conducting research in the Big Thicket National Preserve and are making use of housing at the Field Research Station in Saratoga. The facility is managed by the Big Thicket Association.

Mary C. Johnston stated, "Species inventory and research are of vital importance in assessing the health of Big Thicket ecosystems. With this knowledge environmental managers are assisted in planning stewardship strategies to conserve and ensure the diversity and biological integrity of the region into the future. We encourage Dr. Adams in her continued Big Thicket research and look forward to furthering a partnership with Bat Conservation International."



Learning about bats



Johnston and Adams

Photos by Diane Thompson



*Sandra Ramos – Keynote Speaker
for Big Thicket Day on the Neches*

Sandra Ramos – Keynote Speaker for Big Thicket Day on the Neches “The Next 50 Years for the Big Thicket”

Bruce Walker, BTA Board Member, Big Thicket Day Committee Member

We are pleased to announce that Sandra Ramos will be our keynote speaker for our 59th Annual Big Thicket Day. Her topic will be “The Next 50 Years for the Big Thicket.”

Sandra Ramos is Texas Coastal Program Manager for the National Parks Conservation Association, working on conservation projects in Big Thicket National Preserve, Padre Island National Seashore and Palo Alto Battlefield National Historical Park. Based in Beaumont, Texas, Sandra is an avid road-tripper, photographer, coffee aficionado, recovering politico, and history nerd, known for her passion of telling the stories of our lesser-known National Park sites.

Before her time at NPCA, Sandra spent 20 years in the political arena working on both political campaigns around the country and for elected officials including state senator Sarah Eckhardt and Austin Mayor Kirk Watson, among others.

She began her national park journey after her first visit to Gettysburg National Military Park in 2015 which set her on a trail to learn the history of our country through our National Parks. Sandra has visited over 245 national park sites, some favorites include Maggie L Walker NHS in Richmond, VA, Chiricahua NM in Arizona, Joshua Tree NP, and the Everglades.

Sandra has been a volunteer in parks for NPS sites since 2017, including Biscayne, Guadalupe Mountains, and San Antonio Missions. She is an ambassador for National Park Geek, an online site for national park photographers and park enthusiasts. She enjoys traveling with her partner Tim Cooper, co-owner of the photography workshop group National Parks at Night and spending time with their cat Cleo at their home in Missoula, MT.

You can follow her work and park musings on Instagram at [@nationalparkpatchlady](https://www.instagram.com/nationalparkpatchlady).

Big Thicket Day on the Neches is a free community event and will be held on Saturday, October 7th at Collier’s Ferry Park in Beaumont.

Yellow-billed Cuckoo aka Rain Crow, Storm Crow

Phoebe H. Dishman, board member, Bulletin editor

She mentioned the matter in Sunday school.

A name laid out, for my consideration:

“Yellow-billed cuckoo.”

That hot afternoon,

we drove to the woods,

where we spent some steamy hours

searching.

Cuckoo spoke and we went into a dream:

At clearing’s edge

stood an unusually tall rabbit, with unreadable stare

and enormous see-through ears.

Trees were bursting with green,

but trunks wore tents,

phantasmal fungi at their feet.

Time passed, but the sun did not move.

Turk’s cap, trumpet vine, poppies...

Okay, there weren’t any poppies.

But something stupefied.

Sweat and Deep Woods Off? Maybe.

But I think it was the cloaking device of the cuckoo,

who eases through thickets,

searching

for tent caterpillars and tasty cicadas.

Again and again we heard his guttural tok tok tok,

luring us to the Great Reveal.

Finally, satisfied with our persistence, he posed.

Stock-still, a slender twelve inches long,

down-curved bill as advertised: yellow.

Adorning his long black tail:

planets on the cheek of the night.



painting by Isabelle Scurry Chapman



photo by Kathy Adams Clark



SAVE THE DATES

Neches River Adventures

Tour the Neches River's backwater channels into the Big Thicket National Preserve and the Port of Beaumont aboard the *Ivory Bill*. Public tours, private charters and school environmental education tours continue. Fees apply. Check online scheduling at www.nechesriveradventures.org for details.

Explore the Big Thicket

For activities in the Preserve, please see nps.gov/bith.

Big Thicket Day Celebration and General Membership Meeting

October 7 at Collier's Ferry Park on the Neches, in Beaumont

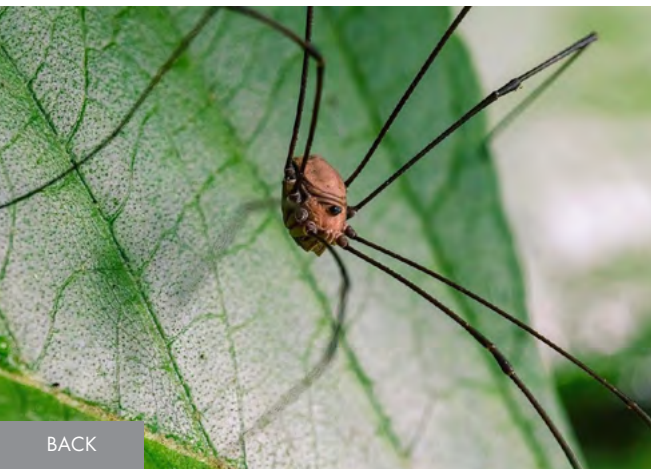




BIG THICKET ASSOCIATION

PARTNER IN PRESERVATION

#BIGTHICKET





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Web Sites

Big Thicket Association
www.bigthicket.org

Big Thicket Natural Heritage Trust
www.bigthickettrust.org

Big Thicket National Preserve
www.nps.gov/bith

Conservation Fund
www.conservationfund.org

Gulf States Mycological Society
www.gsmco.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

Neches River Flood Planning Group
www.nechesfloodplanning.org

Outdoor Nature Club, Houston
www.outdoornatureclub.org

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

Texas Black Bear Alliance
texasblackbear.weebly.com

Texas Conservation Alliance
www.TCAtexas.org

Texas Master Naturalist Association,
Sabine Neches Chapter
www.txmn.org/sabine

Village Creek State Park
tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/village-creek

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

