



# BIG THICKET BULLETIN

ISSUE 161



# INSIDE THIS ISSUE

2024  
JANUARY  
FEBRUARY  
MARCH

5

Happenings in the Preserve »



9

Black Bears Capture Public Interest »



13

Big Sandy Creek Unit, Presidents Day 2024 »



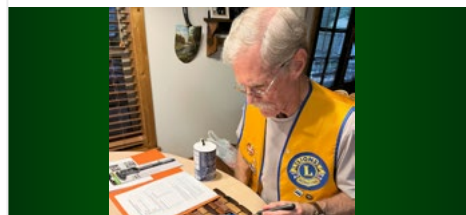
6

Order today! BTA 60th Anniversary Shirts »



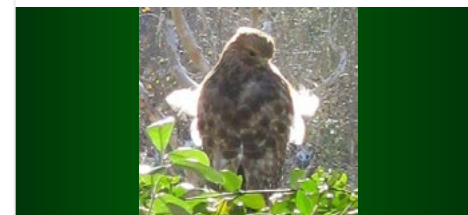
10

Thicket of Diversity 2023 Accomplishments »



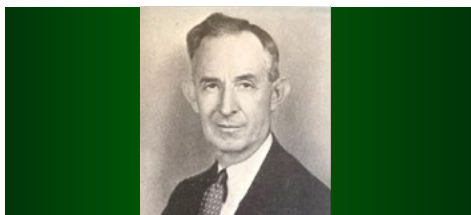
14

Red-shouldered Hawk »



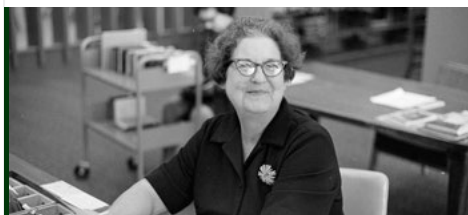
3

BTA Milestone! Happy 60th Anniversary! »



7

Looking Back »



11

Robert Laroche and Big Thicket Tiger Beetle Research »



15

Remembering Richard M. Donovan »



4

BTA Offers Plethora of Activities »



8

BTA Outreach to All Ages »



12

Neches River Adventures 2024! »



16

Save the Date »



# Neches River Rally 2024

## Saturday, May 4

You may register up to six (6) participants on one registration form. Registration fees do not include a boat rental. If you need a rental, contact Big Thicket Outfitters at 409-786-1884. The number of rental vessels is limited. Reserve Early!

Entry fees include one (1) T-shirt and one (1) meal ticket per participant. T-shirts are distributed as per registration date and are not guaranteed. After April 26th, T-shirts and sizes are based on available inventory.

Along with your registration, each adult participant will receive a complimentary membership for the year 2024. We thank you again for supporting Big Thicket Association and the Big Thicket National Preserve. *This is a Rain or Shine Event.*

**[Click here to make your reservation!](#)**

*In addition to enjoying this Texas Paddling Trail, there will be live entertainment and free rides aboard the Ivory Bill. This is a family friendly event. No public consumption of alcohol is permitted.*

*Registration forms must be completed and signed by all participants and/or legal guardians at the time of registration.*



NECHES  
RIVER RALLY  
2024

EST

2014

BIG THICKET ASSOCIATION



## BTA Milestone! Happy 60th Anniversary!

CAPTAIN BRUCE WALKER, BTA PRESIDENT

Before there was a Big Thicket National Preserve, a Village Creek State Park, or the Roy E. Larson Sandyland Sanctuary, there was the Big Thicket Association.

This year marks the Big Thicket Association's 60th Anniversary. Our story is actually a history of preservation that started with our predecessor, the East Texas Big Thicket Association. The ETBTA was led by R.E. Jackson, a railroad conductor from Silsbee. Before ETBTA, Jackson organized a hunting club, Hardin County Corporative Game and Pasture Preserve. From the 1930's to the 1950's, Jackson's organizations laid the groundwork, promoting the preservation of the flora and fauna of the Big Thicket.

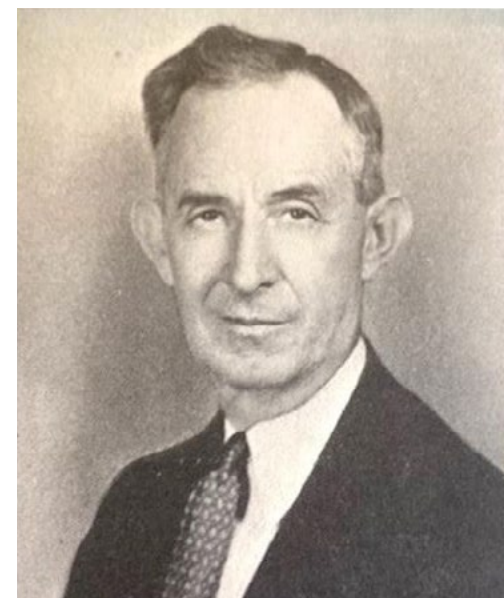
In 1964, the Big Thicket Association was formed to promote the Big Thicket's unique eco-system with the goal of introducing legislation before Congress to establish a National Park. By 1968, the Big Thicket Coordinating Committee was formed. Over 39 conservation and civic groups were represented by this consortium, including many Texas based conservation groups and Texas chapters of national organizations, as well as scientific groups. It should be noted that one of the most active groups, and most determined to pass the legislation, was the Texas Federation of Women's Clubs.

The historic Big Thicket originally encompassed over 3,000,000 acres. The ETBTA had a goal to preserve 435,000 acres. In 1967, the National Park Service recommended that 35,000 acres be set aside for the Big Thicket National Monument. Over the years other proposals and compromises of 300,000 acres, 150,000 acres, 191,000 acres, 100,00 acres, and 75,000 acres were introduced.

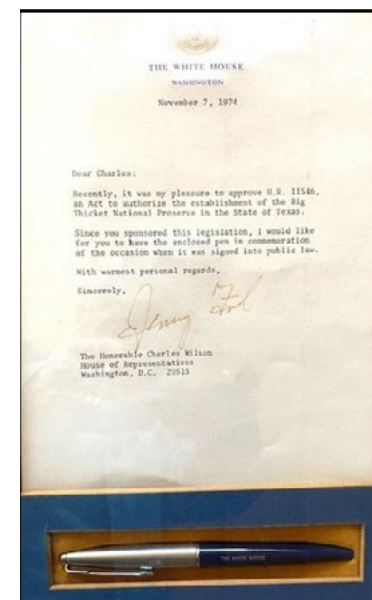
In 1974, when Congress passed the legislation, the preserve included 84,550 acres. The final acreage agreement, introduced by Congressman Charles Wilson of Lufkin, is often referred to as the "String of Pearls" compromise. The Preserve now encompasses 113,114 acres which includes 9 land units and 6 water corridors. At the time the bill was passed, BTA had over 800 members throughout Texas and beyond.

As the newly elected President of the Big Thicket Association, I believe it's important for our members and the public to learn more about our organization's history and the history of the Preserve. It is a fascinating story, and I hope to share more in future Big Thicket Bulletins during our 60th Anniversary year.

*References: Saving the Big Thicket by James J. Cozine, Jr and History of Preservation Efforts by Maxine Johnston*



*R.E. Jackson (1880-1957) Recognized as the "Father of the Big Thicket." Source: New Encyclopedia of Texas*



*Signed letter from President Gerald Ford to Congressman Charles Wilson of Lufkin.*

# BTA Offers Plethora of Activities

Diane Thompson, BTA Executive Director

Part of Big Thicket Association’s mission is to help people learn about the unique and abundant treasures of the Big Thicket region. To accomplish that, BTA has been very busy planning enjoyable educational activities for our members and guests.

On August 7, 2023, BTA hosted a Science Café at the Logon Café. Offering a multitude of photos and fascinating facts, guest speaker Dr. Amanda Adams of Bat Conservation International introduced the crowd to the bats of the Big Thicket and Texas in general--their ranges, diet, migration, and current research being conducted on them.

On December 13, 2023, BTA hosted another Science Café. Executive director of Bears Etc. Katie Krouse shared information about the return of bears to Texas and specifically to the Big Thicket region. Assuring us that black bears are shy and really don’t want to be around people, she described their habits, range, why they have been absent from Texas and why they are migrating back. It’s good news for Texas!

Hosting still another Science Café on February 7, 2024, BTA presented Greg Jackson, avid birder and wildlife

photographer, member of the Golden Triangle Audubon Society and Sabine Neches Chapter, Texas Master Naturalist. Greg focused his presentation on migratory warblers. With the help of gorgeous pictures, he taught guests about the varieties of warblers they might see in our area, their breeding range and winter range, what they eat, and where you can see them. Bring on spring migration!

BTA’s next Science Café will be April 1, 2024, 7:00 p.m., at the Logon Café. We can’t wait to learn about butterflies, and planting native pollinator gardens!

On November 2, 2023, BTA hosted its first Big Thicket Bus Tour. Many experiencing the Thicket for the first time, 52 passengers sampled four trails on the east side of the Preserve. Everyone claimed they wanted to be on the next tour!

Now’s their chance! The West Side Big Thicket Bus Tour is scheduled for April 27, 2024. Partnering with BTA for this event, Master Naturalists from Sabine Neches Chapter, Texas Master Naturalist will give interpretation at each trail. Watch for sign-up information, coming soon.



Mary Catherine Johnston with Dr. Amanda Adams - Diane Thompson



Greg Jackson - Diane Thompson

## Happenings in the Preserve

Megan Urban, Chief of Interpretation and Education,  
Big Thicket National Preserve

Wintertime in the Big Thicket includes a variety of activities in the preserve, including the annual art show in the visitor center, and the annual planting days in Big Sandy. During a very successful planting on a beautiful day in December, volunteers and staff planted 7,000 grass plugs. The annual Martin Luther King Day of Service planting event was cancelled due to extremely cold weather, but we were able to get more plants in the ground, thanks to some small pop-up volunteer plantings, and our President's Day planting event in February, when just over 100 volunteers planted 7,000 grass plugs, ending the season with 21,000 grass plugs planted in Big Sandy. Each year we see a great combination of regular volunteers and new volunteers at these events.

Our next event during the Preserve's 50th anniversary celebration is the annual Junior Ranger Day. This is a great family friendly event that gives kids and adults a chance to learn more about the different types of ranger jobs in the Preserve. Participants can look through the telescope, learn about what a wildland firefighter does, and learn more about the cultural history of the area. At 1 pm, participants can join a ranger for a hike on the Kirby Trail. Kids who complete all the activities will receive the Big Thicket Junior Ranger badge.

Keep an eye on our social media pages and our website ([www.nps.gov/bith](http://www.nps.gov/bith)) to see what's happening during the summer. And of course, keep October 12th open for the official 50th anniversary celebration at Big Thicket visitor center; more details to come!



*Volunteers plant grasses in Big Sandy Creek Unit – NPS photo/Pattee*

## ORDER TODAY!

### BTA 60th Anniversary Shirts

Order today! We have a limited number of BTA 60th Anniversary T-shirts. The price is \$20 plus tax & a shipping/handling fee. Adult sizes from X-Small to 2X-Large. Avoid shipping cost by picking up your order, by appointment, at our office in Beaumont. You can place an order via QR code or by clicking this link:

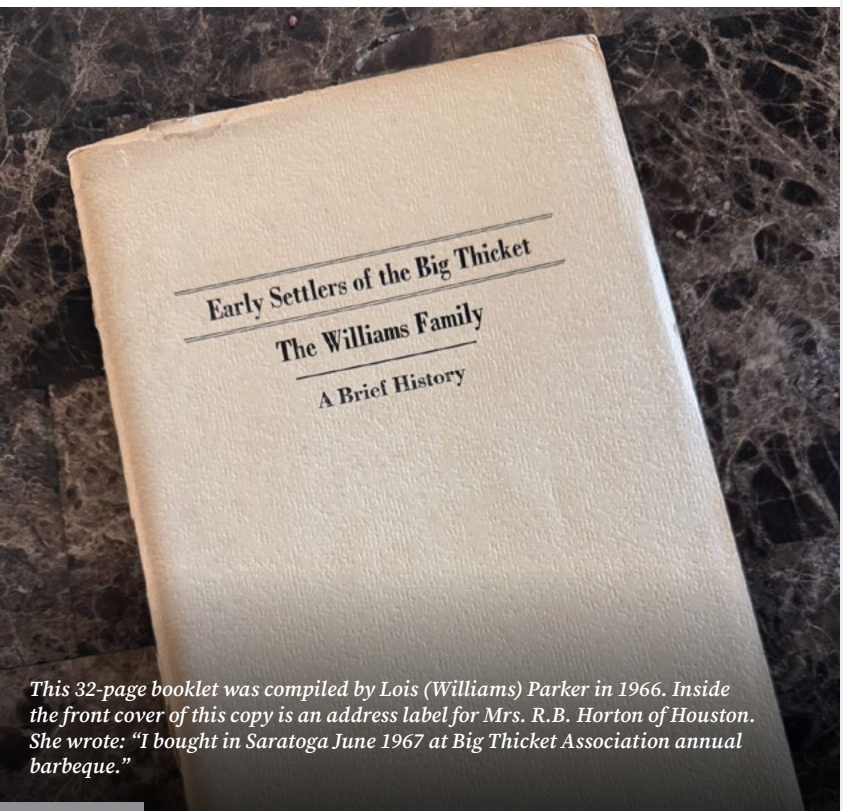
<https://form.jotform.com/240544364212145>



*Order your BTA 60th Anniversary T-shirt today!*



A 1971 photo of Lois (Williams) Parker at work at the Lamar University library. Parker authored a landmark bibliography of the Big Thicket which was over 200 pages in length. She and fellow librarian Maxine Johnston worked to create the genesis of Lamar's Special Collections. Parker is buried in the family plot at Daniels Cemetery in Kountze, and her headstone calls her a "Big Thicketeer."



This 32-page booklet was compiled by Lois (Williams) Parker in 1966. Inside the front cover of this copy is an address label for Mrs. R.B. Horton of Houston. She wrote: "I bought in Saratoga June 1967 at Big Thicket Association annual barbeque."

## Looking Back

Dennis Durkee, BTA board member

Like her friend and co-worker Maxine Johnston, Lois (Williams) Parker (1912-1980) was an early Big Thicket hero. She was a founding member of the BTA and helped to organize and operate the former Big Thicket Museum in Saratoga. A librarian at Lamar University, she was a prolific folklorist and writer best known for her landmark 1977 Big Thicket bibliography.

But earlier, in 1966, she compiled a small booklet on the history of her family. The Williams clan came to the Big Thicket from Alabama and eventually her grandfather Dave operated sawmills and other businesses. Much of the family history revolves around their sawmill at Thicket, west of Bragg in Hardin County.

### Excerpts from her family booklet:

--- "Thicket mill was first known as Williams Station and the post office was called Williams, but after some mail had gone to another place in Texas known as Williams, the name was changed to Thicket."

--- "Artise Loftin lost an eye when a (wood) chip hit him. This was before the days of Worker's Compensation Law, but the company paid his doctor bill and bought him a glass eye. Shortly after this he got his glass eye broken in the same way and gave up woods work for good."

--- "Play parties were the chief entertainment after work hours but occasional dances were given. When a family moved and left a temporarily vacant house, it was usually an occasion for a dance ... Such games as "Cross Questions and Crooked Answers" or "Slap-in and Slap-out" frequently started the party off ... Occasionally, a medicine show came by and once in a great while a small part of one of the big circuses founds its way into the Thicket."

--- "The only automobile at Thicket mill belonged to (mill owner) Dave Williams. This was not until 1915. Dave usually rode a bay horse, but his children learned to drive the contraption. He allowed them to drive up to 15 or 20 miles an hour at times but on the road from Thicket to Honey Island or wherever there were houses by the roadside, he insisted that they slow to around five miles because he thought it rude to fly by in such a hurry."



## BTA Outreach to All Ages

Phoebe H. Dishman, BTA director, Bulletin editor

On January 20, approximately 60 members of Lions Club International District 2S-1 attended the District's Midwinter Conference at Hardin Jefferson High School. The keynote speaker was BTA director and Lions Club Environmental Chair Mary C. Johnston, who presented Big Thicket history, its path to preservation, and service strategies to ensure its future. She concluded with an appeal to preserve, protect, get involved, and tell the story of the Thicket and its unique treasures.

On February 7, little folks flocked to Kountze Public Library to enjoy a birding program for preschoolers. Children examined bird nests, heard bird calls, viewed a lovely collection of bird resources, and listened to bird lore. As a guest of the Friends of Kountze Public Library, author, poet and BTA Bulletin Editor Phoebe Dishman shared her love of birds and helped the children write a poem. Little ones received a free book and binoculars, and were introduced to a birding activity backpack now available for checkout.



*Birding Backpack – MC Johnston*



*Ma Thicket – Rick Johnston*



*Phoebe and her flock – MC Johnston*

# Black Bears Capture Public Interest

Mary Catherine Johnston, BTA board of directors, Thicket of Diversity chair

The subject was Black Bears. At the December 13th Science Café at the LogOn in Beaumont, hosted by BTA and its Thicket of Diversity committee, guest speaker Katie Krouse, Executive Director of Bears, Etc. and Vice-President of the Texas Black Bear Alliance, shared information on *Ursus americanus*, including protocol when encountering one, how to document and report sightings, and information on the disturbing atrocities of the exotic animal trade. Historically, bears thrived in the Big Thicket region, until their eventual extermination by hunters. Today, bears have been sighted as they migrate from Louisiana to the Big Thicket in search of food. Unfortunately, last year's drought resulted in no official sightings.

If bears are to thrive, it's important to protect and restore wildlife habitat. Teen Zoey Gonzalez asked, "What can young people do to help?" Mrs. Krouse responded, "Help us old folks promote bears on social media, and, by the way, see me after the program."



Zoey Gonzalez - MC Johnston



Katie Krouse being interviewed by Channel 12 - MC Johnston

## Thicket of Diversity 2023 Accomplishments

Mary Catherine Johnston, BTA board of directors, Thicket of Diversity chair

As the research arm of the Big Thicket Association, the Thicket of Diversity continued its collection of inventory data on Big Thicket species and its educational outreach.

With a National Park Service (NPS) permit to collect specimens, Robert Laroche of Rice University spearheaded exploration of the hidden and under-explored saline habitats across the Big Thicket to find locally adapted populations of salt-associated tiger beetles – a good indicator species for ecological studies on diversity - and study their molecular DNA. Laroche and Daniel P. Duran of Rowan University published in the *Journal of Molecular Phylogenetics and Evolution*.

Macro Fungi researcher David Lewis, et. al, published various papers including “Cortinarius Watsonae, a New Species of Agaricomycetes (Cortinariaceae) from the Gulf States,” printed in the *Journal of the Botanical Research Institute of Texas*. The referenced new mushroom species was named after the beloved Geraldine Watson.

In June approximately 125 children experienced summer fun with reading and nature through Kountze Public Library’s Summer Reading Program. The final event was a Big Thicket Art, History and Literacy Social at the Kirby Hill House.

Working with the BTA’s Executive Director, Diane Thompson, the Thicket of Diversity supported Science Cafés at the LogOn Café. Presenter in August was Dr. Amanda Adams, Director of Research Coordination of Bat Conservation International. In December, information on black bears and their migration trends into Southeast Texas was presented by Katie Krouse, Executive Director of Bears, Etc. and Vice-President of the Texas Black Bear Alliance.

In the fall, Chair Mary Catherine Johnston and BTA Environmental Educator Jennie Knapp coordinated local participation in Fear to Hope, a hands-on research opportunity for students through Christopher Newport University (CNU) and Dr. Rob Atkinson, which in 2023 expanded to include five teams of Texas students. The project is of significance as coastal flooding concerns are reaching most coastal forests, with salt water encroachment impacting native ecosystems, trees in particular.

The ToD sponsored several exhibits, participating in Champions for Nature at Ford Park and Big Thicket Day on the Neches.

A virtual field trip was presented to approximately 200 high school students. An educational online training video was created for Lions Clubs and archived for future sharing.

In 2023 the Field Research Station Learning Center offered comfortable housing and classroom space, providing 543 overnight stays to such groups as researchers affiliated with the National Park Service’s Intermountain Archeology group, the Nature Conservancy’s fire crew, and Conservation International, whose student workers participated in various NPS service projects.

ToD receives its funding for research primarily from penalty monies from Texas Commission on Environmental Quality enforcement actions. For more details see [thicketofdiversity.org](http://thicketofdiversity.org).



*Fear to Hope: Lion Rick Johnston of Sour Lake assists with measurement of salt concentration – MC Johnston*

# Robert Laroche and Big Thicket Tiger Beetle Research

Mary Catherine Johnston, BTA director, Thicket of Diversity chair

As noted in the ToD report for 2023, Robert Laroche of Rice University is spearheading research to explore saline habitats across the Big Thicket for locally adapted populations of salt-associated tiger beetles. In Texas, a subterranean salt basin extends from the southern tip of the state up the Gulf Coast and across most of East Texas to the state’s northern border, encompassing the entire Big Thicket National Preserve. Across the range of the basin hundreds of salt domes of varying sizes have been documented. The biology of these habitats and the species that inhabit them is not greatly understood. Tiger beetles are a rich and diverse species associated with saline environments but few studies have actually been conducted, especially on the Eunota populations in salt domes.

A 2021 grant was awarded for research by the Big Thicket Association’s Thicket of Diversity. Funds were

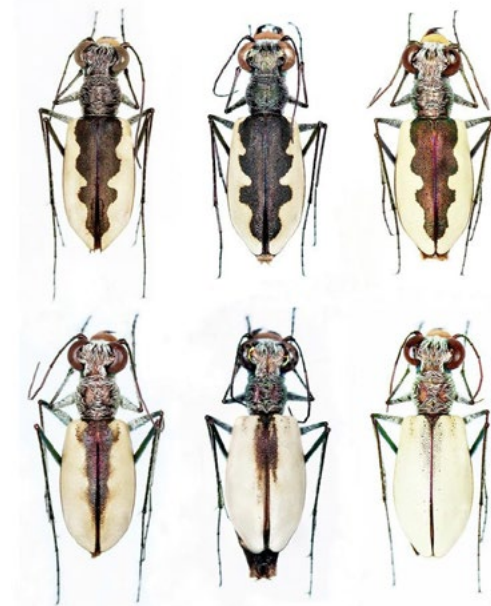
received through mitigation monies by a Texas Commission on Environmental Quality enforcement action. Laroche and his team worked to identify novel species living in the Big Thicket region and to describe the genetic structure and evolutionary relations within and between tiger beetle populations. Laroche also planned to resurvey local museum samples at Texas A&M as well as national collections at the Smithsonian and the American Museum of Natural History to look for historic samples of the species in the region.

Tiger beetles have large bulging eyes and are very fast, aggressive predators. They have an unusual mode of hunting as they sprint quickly towards their prey, then stop to visually reorient.

The Thicket of Diversity looks forward to Laroche’s final report and hopes that he can present his final findings to members and the public at a Science Café.



Laroche in the field



Tiger Beetles

# Neches River Adventures 2024!

Our Neches River Adventures 2024 season officially starts in March. It's not too late to book your spring or fall school field trips with our environmental educator, Jennie Knapp. Our Public Eco-history Tours begin on Saturday, March 23rd and end October 26th. Private Charters are available year-round on any day of the week and anytime during daylight hours. To book your tour, visit: <https://www.nechesriveradventures.org/>



## Big Sandy Creek Unit, Presidents Day 2024

BTA joined Big Thicket National Preserve and other partners to plant 7,000 plugs of Pinehill Blue Stem grass. One day closer to habitat restoration for red cockaded woodpeckers! Pictured seated is Big Thicket conservationist Maxine Johnston. Photo credit: Nancy Angell



# Red-shouldered Hawk

Phoebe H. Dishman, BTA director, Bulletin editor

Once I saw him in a lacebark elm, enjoying a nap. No sooner did he sense my surveillance than up came that magnificent head, stern gaze upon me. With a shake of his feathers, he was gone.

Another season, he appeared atop a utility pole, and I'm still not over the pattern on his back. He allowed me time to sketch him before he fell like a thunderbolt on prey beyond the fence.

One Christmas morning I stepped into the bright bitter cold and was astonished to see him gripping that fence, glaring at me over his shoulder, sharp wind blowing his breast feathers into incandescent wings.

By "him" I mean individuals of his species, seen by me over the years. Science calls the Red-shouldered Hawk a "medium-sized buteo," buteo being a kind of hawk. I call him a bird of fierce dignity and heart-stopping beauty. Likewise, the humans who formed the Big Thicket Association sixty years ago, then worked to birth a Preserve. Their spirit continues.

November 30, First Day of Advent  
Sighting in Backyard: Icon-bearing Hawk



Icon - Phoebe H. Dishman



Angel - Phoebe H. Dishman

I N M E M O R Y



*Richard M. Donovan  
April 8, 1936 - February 19, 2024*



## Richard M. Donovan

**April 8, 1936 - February 19, 2024**

As a youngster, Richard Donovan grew up on the Neches River. As an adult, he was one of the leaders in saving the river from further impoundment, an achievement that garnered recognition at a statewide level. His efforts included the wildly successful "Paddling the Wild Neches" book, which was published by Texas A&M University Press, and culminated with the designation of the Neches River National Wildlife refuge.

He had a long list of honors that included the National Wildlife Federation's Conservation Service Award, Sierra Club's Evelyn R. Edens Award, Texas Society Daughters of the American Revolution Conservation Award, Big Thicket Association's R.E. Jackson Conservation Award, and, along with his wife Bonnie, Texas Conservation Alliance's Ned and Genie Fritz Lifetime Achievement Award and Lufkin Association of Realtors Lifetime Achievement Award. Donovan had a 19-year career with Temple Inland. After retirement, he worked with his wife in making Donovan Real Estate Inc. an endeavor that lasted 21 years.

His true calling came with his work in preserving the Neches River. We will be forever grateful to him for his love of the Neches River and East Texas.





## SAVE THE DATES

### Neches River Adventures

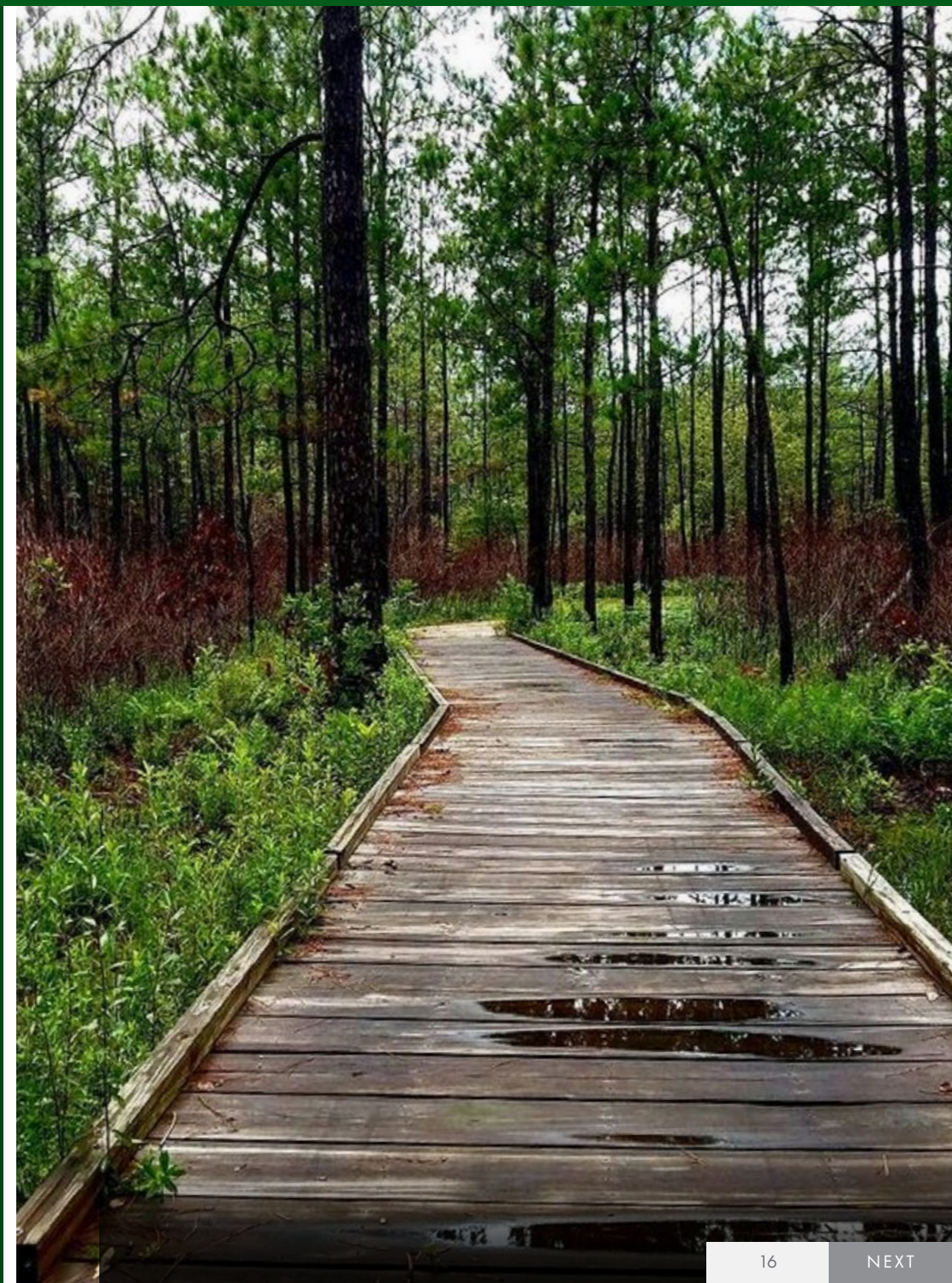
Tour the Neches River's backwater channels into the Big Thicket National Preserve and the Port of Beaumont aboard the *Ivory Bill* excursion boat. Private charters continue year-round; fees apply. Public tours and school environmental education tours resume in March 2024. [www.nechesriveradventures.org](http://www.nechesriveradventures.org) for details.

### Explore the Big Thicket

For activities in the Preserve, please see [nps.gov/bith](https://nps.gov/bith).

### 2024 Neches River Rally Saturday, May 4th

This family friendly event is a great way to experience the natural beauty of a Texas Paddling Trail: Cooks Lake to Scatterman. This scenic 4 – 5 mile loop captures the biological diversity of the Big Thicket National Preserve along the beautiful Neches River. To register, visit: <https://form.jotform.com/240374525567057>

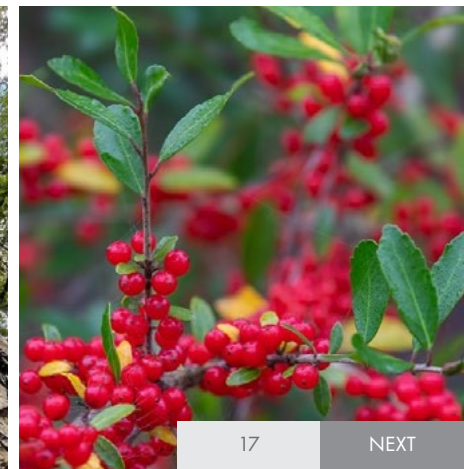
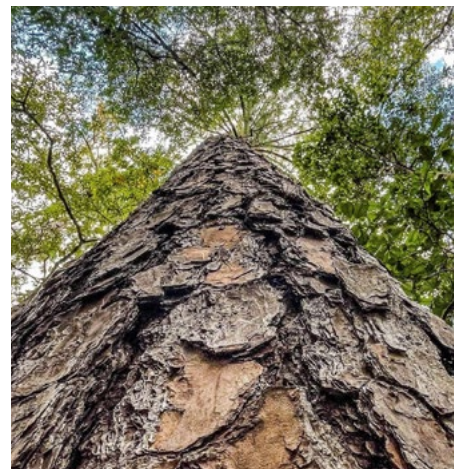




# BIG THICKET ASSOCIATION

PARTNER IN PRESERVATION

#BIGTHICKET





Big Thicket Association  
700 North Street, Suite 79  
Beaumont, Texas 77701

# BIG THICKET BULLETIN

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[www.bigthicket.org](http://www.bigthicket.org)

### Web Sites

- Big Thicket Association  
[www.bigthicket.org](http://www.bigthicket.org)
- Big Thicket Natural Heritage Trust  
[www.bigthickettrust.org](http://www.bigthickettrust.org)
- Big Thicket National Preserve  
[www.nps.gov/bith](http://www.nps.gov/bith)
- Conservation Fund  
[www.conservationfund.org](http://www.conservationfund.org)
- Gulf States Mycological Society  
[www.gsmco.org](http://www.gsmco.org)
- National Audubon Society  
[www.goldentriangleaudubon.org](http://www.goldentriangleaudubon.org)  
[www.houstonaudubon.org](http://www.houstonaudubon.org)
- National Parks Conservation Association  
[www.npca.org](http://www.npca.org)
- Native Plant Society of Texas  
[www.npsot.org](http://www.npsot.org)
- Nature Conservancy  
[www.nature.org/texas](http://www.nature.org/texas)
- Neches River Flood Planning Group  
[www.nechesfloodplanning.org](http://www.nechesfloodplanning.org)
- Outdoor Nature Club, Houston  
[www.outdoornatureclub.org](http://www.outdoornatureclub.org)
- Sierra Club Golden Triangle Group  
[www.sierraclub.org/texas/golden-triangle](http://www.sierraclub.org/texas/golden-triangle)
- Texas Black Bear Alliance  
[texasblackbear.weebly.com](http://texasblackbear.weebly.com)
- Texas Conservation Alliance  
[www.TCATexas.org](http://www.TCATexas.org)
- Texas Master Naturalist Association,  
Sabine Neches Chapter  
[www.txmn.org/sabine](http://www.txmn.org/sabine)
- Village Creek State Park  
[tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/village-creek](http://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

