



BIG THICKET BULLETIN

ISSUE 160



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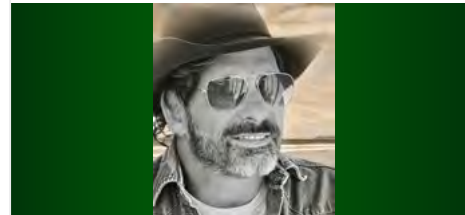
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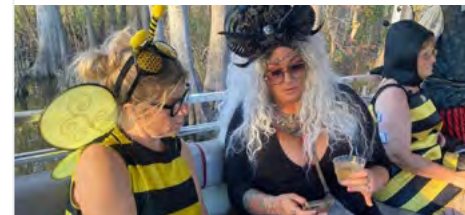
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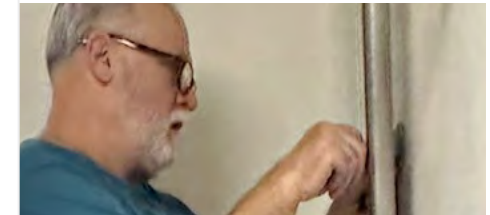
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A Message from the President

John Stafford, BTA director and board president

Greetings to Friends and Members of BTA!

Our annual **Big Thicket Day Celebration and General Membership Meeting** was held in early October at Collier's Ferry Park in Beaumont. It was another spectacular success organized by the committee with co-chairs Katy Hambright and Willie Watkins, as well as Director Diane Thompson and a host of others.

We thank our many Big Thicket Day sponsors: American Valve and Hydrant, Beaumont CVB, BMW of Beaumont, Coburn Supply, Education First FCU, LNVA, Rave Financial, Port Arthur LNG, Port of Beaumont, Reed Ice, Sabine Neches Navigation District and Total Energies. We appreciate our many exhibitors - this year over 20 organizations and groups tabled and had opportunities to visit with over 500 people. Guests also enjoyed tasty food by Cooks 2 Dozen Plus while listening to live music from John Cessac and surprise guest fiddler, David Varnado. Everyone also enjoyed free rides on the *Ivory Bill* and kayaking lessons from Gerald Cerda of Big Thicket Outfitters.

During our General Membership meeting new Directors for 2024-2025 were introduced including Dennis Durkee, Lori Horne and Micah Leigh. Incoming President Bruce Walker introduced keynote speaker Sandra Ramos of National Parks Conservation Association who spoke about the "Next 50 Years of the Big Thicket." Thank you, Sandra!

BTA's **Membership Committee** held our first guided **bus tour of Big Thicket National Preserve (East)** on November 4. Educational talks and short hikes were enjoyed at each stop along the route. Everyone seemed to really enjoy the day having an opportunity to see and learn more about the flora and fauna in our beautiful Big Thicket National Preserve.

BTA has announced the **2024 Neches River Rally** coming again on May 4, 2024 at the LNVA Salt Water Barrier on the Neches. There will be a rain-out date on September 7th if needed. Look for more announcements early next year.

Our **Neches River Adventures (NRA) Committee** had a highly successful season ending with a Halloween Costume Party/Cruise aboard the *Ivory Bill*. NRA continues to operate private charters year-round. Public tours will resume on Saturdays next March.

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.



John Cessac / with permission



Sandra Ramos / photo by John Stafford

BTA Membership Committee Hosts Big Thicket Bus Tour

Diane Thompson, BTA Executive Director

BTA's Membership Committee recently hosted its first "Big Thicket Bus Tour" on a beautiful fall day. Fifty-two passengers joined us. Sunny skies and cool temps made a perfect backdrop for the enchanting scenery of the Big Thicket. This first BTA Bus Tour focused on the east side of the park. The goal was to expose and educate others about this fantastic resource available to all. BTA hosted a diverse group of people, many who had never been to the Preserve or even hiked previously.

First stop was the Big Thicket National Preserve Visitor Center. Megan Urban, Chief of Interpretation, greeted participants and gave a presentation about the Big Thicket. Guests were also able to tour the Visitor Center.

Then it was off to the trails! The first stop was the Sundew Trail. The towering pines, American beauty berries, and remaining sundews were gorgeous this fall morning. Pitcher plants were in abundance on the Pitcher Plant Trail. One local photographer was surprised to see our 52 hikers plus a field trip of students from Abilene Christian University. Beech Creek Trail, noted for



Big Thicket Bus Tour 2023 East side of park



its peace and beauty, was the farthest northern trail explored. The final destination was the Kirby Nature Trail. Hikers visited the iconic bridge, cypress slough, and Village Creek peacefully meandering along sandy banks.

Feedback from participants was extremely positive and they stated they are excited to make reservations for BTA's second bus tour this spring on the west side of the park.

BTA's own newly elected secretary, Phoebe Dishman, wrote the following poem about the day:

Pitcher plants and sundews
Cypress knees and sloughs
Crunchy autumn underfoot
From trees of various hues
Fifty people on a bus
Maps in all our hands
A brilliant day exploring
Our precious Thicket lands!

BTA hopes to see you on our next tour of the Big Thicket!



A Year of Celebration

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

Big Thicket National Preserve staff started out the 49th anniversary strong with a fantastic Solar Eclipse event at the Visitor Center in October. Over 250 visitors attended the event, where they learned more about eclipses from Ranger Scott, earned a new Eclipse Junior Ranger badge, looked through a telescope at the sun and learned more about the partner organizations that support Big Thicket in many ways.

To celebrate the preserve's anniversary, Big Thicket staff challenges visitors to explore Big Thicket, exercise for your health and earn adventure pins as part of the "Choose Your Adventure" program that started in October. Visitors complete a variety of adventures to earn pins. Each pin category requires a different type or number of adventures. To learn more about what types of activities are considered an adventure, visitors can get more information at the Visitor Center or go online to www.nps.gov/bith.

Big Thicket staff also added a one-page insert to our popular Junior Ranger book, highlighting the anniversary and encouraging Junior Rangers of all ages to think about the specialness of Big Thicket and how they, alongside the park rangers, can continue to protect Big Thicket in the next 50 years. For those Junior Rangers who complete their book during an in-person visit, they can take home a special edition 50th Anniversary badge.

We encourage everyone to come visit Big Thicket during this year to learn more about why Big Thicket is so special!





Geraldine Watson honored

Penny Clark, BTA director

David Lewis and his fellow fungi scholars announced that Geraldine Watson was recently honored by the naming of a mushroom, *Cortinarius watsoniae*. A new species in subgenus *Myxacium*, it can be found in pine, mixed pine and hardwood forests in the Gulf States region of North America.

Watson was a tireless preservationist for the Big Thicket, utilizing her many gifts as painter, writer, speaker, tour guide, and biologist.

In the fall of 1964, the Big Thicket Association (BTA) was formed, and Watson became an enthusiastic board member. She enrolled in what is today Lamar University where she learned more about the natural world, and created an herbarium.

By the time the BTA was founded, much of the Big Thicket had been deforested by the lumber bonanza of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and by development, as more roads, homes, and businesses were built. Nevertheless, Watson utilized her knowledge to identify those units that were good candidates for preservation because of their distinct ecosystems. Her knowledge of the Big Thicket and passion for its preservation led to her reputation as a reliable and popular tour guide. Her tour parties included journalists, scientists, environmentalists, politicians, officials of the National Park Service, as well as many local organizations and school groups. When there were rumors that the ivory-billed woodpecker had been spotted in the Big Thicket, Watson gave tours to hordes of birders and writers for the best-known publications of the era, including *National Geographic* and *Life*.

Geraldine Watson working at the herbarium she created at Lamar University where she preserved plant specimens

In the early 1970s Watson played a key role in the crusade to create the Big Thicket National Preserve; in 1974 she testified before Congress on the potential scientific and economic value.

Watson and her fellow crusaders achieved success. In 1974 the Big Thicket National Preserve, the nation's first national preserve, was created. Then Watson worked for the National Park System as a park ranger/ecologist for fifteen years, serving as a liaison between local people and the National Park Service. She delineated the vegetation zones of the units of the Preserve, and collected and catalogued the plant life of the Big Thicket.

Watson created a preserve of her own, approximately 11 acres north of Warren, Texas. In 2009 she incorporated Watson Rare Native Plant Preserve, a 501c3 nonprofit corporation. The preserve is open to the public at no charge 365 days a year during daylight hours.



Big Thicket Natural Heritage Trust Protects Thicket Lands

Mary C. Johnston and Ellen Buchanan

The Big Thicket Natural Heritage Trust (BTNHT) conserves Thicket lands in big and small ways. The Trust recently purchased three lots in Orange County north of Vidor adjacent to the Big Thicket National Preserve. The property is prone to flooding and has been completely underwater during recent flooding events. The heavily forested thimbleful of land closes a gap in the National Park Service's boundary. Trust ownership and the land's eventual donation to the Big Thicket National Preserve prevents development and ultimately protects the floodplain.

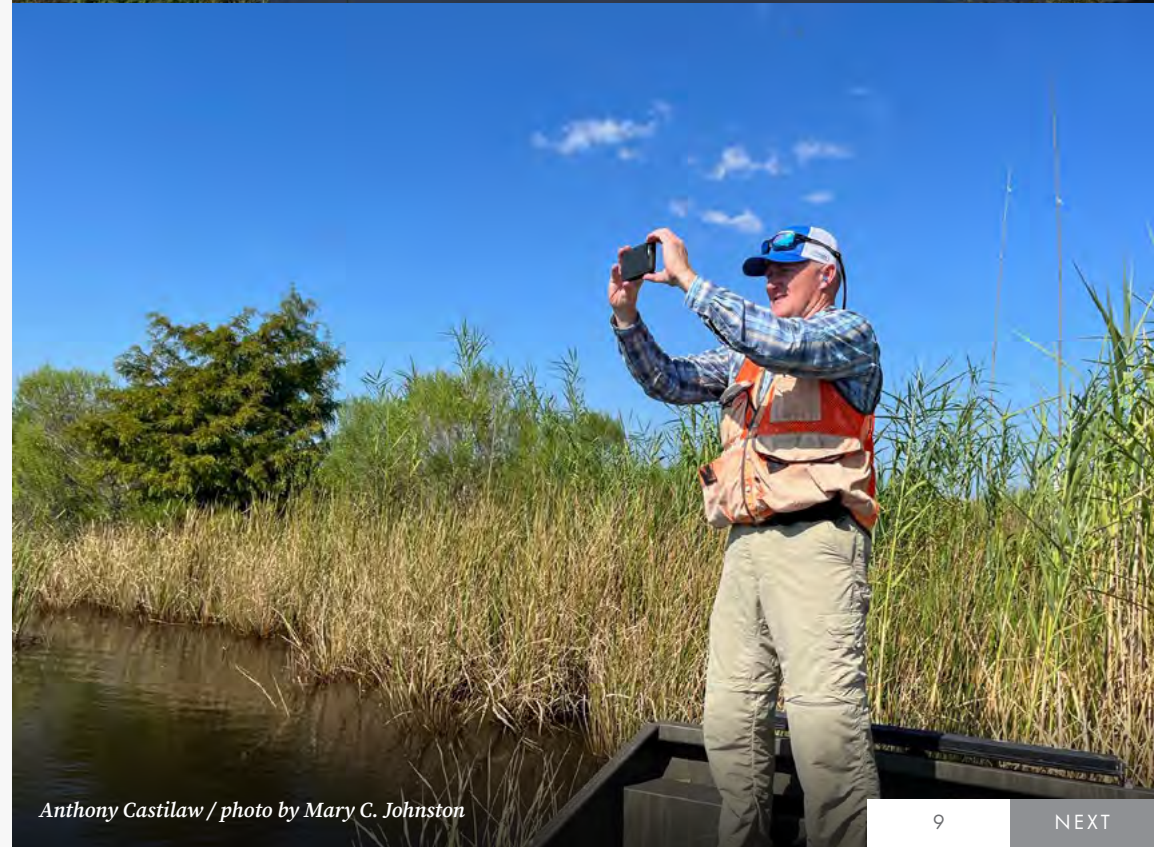
On September 7, Trust officers traveled with Castilaw Environmental Services, LLC to conduct annual monitoring of a Trust conservation easement. The group toured by airboat 474 acres of tidally-influenced marshland/ wooded wetlands. The easement protects natural resources and prevents any future use that could significantly interfere with its conservation value. Mitigation funds furthered the ability of the non-profit to steward the land. BTNHT was able to establish a Stewardship and Defense Endowment through the Foundation for Southeast Texas to ensure its protection in perpetuity.

The airboat tour was a unique glimpse into a wetland impacted by both man and nature. On entry to the wetland, giant skeletal stumps protruded from the marsh. According to the airboat captain, the group was viewing two timber cuts with some of them bearing the scars of being harvested by hand. Other dead trees, scattered along the waterline, showed the probable effects of salt water intrusion. In contrast, young cypress regrowth was evidenced. Bird activity was high, literally! Blue herons, osprey and even a bald eagle soared above the boaters.

If interested in joining the Big Thicket Natural Heritage Trust as a partner, email BigThicketTrust@gmail.com or call 409 382-5102.



Wetlands / photo by Ellen Buchanan



Anthony Castilaw / photo by Mary C. Johnston

Teddy Went Hunting in the Big Thicket – Almost

Dennis Durkee, BTA member and incoming director

It was happening. Then it wasn't.

President Theodore Roosevelt – one of the most famous outdoorsmen to ever hold the office – had plans in 1905 to hunt bear in the Big Thicket.

The president wanted to attend a reunion of his famous Rough Riders regiment in March 1905 in San Antonio. Teddy and the Rough Riders had gained fame during the Spanish-American War in the 1890s.

Col. Cecil Lyon of Sherman, a personal friend of Roosevelt, was in charge of organizing the president's visit to Texas.

A Houston Post story on Feb. 11, 1905, laid out Lyon's plan. Teddy would stop in Austin on March 30 on his way to San Antonio to attend the reunion on March 31. After the reunion, stops were planned in Houston, Fort Worth and possibly Amarillo. The president would then leave Texas for Colorado.

"Upon reaching Houston," the story said, "the president will make a detour to the 'Big Thicket' in East Texas for a five days' hunt after bear. Colonel Lyon has already made all the arrangements for the hunt."



President Roosevelt (center) poses with members of the Rough Riders regiment at their April 1905 reunion in San Antonio. (Photo courtesy of Library of Congress)

"I have been in correspondence with the natives of the Big Thicket region," Lyon told the Post. "I am advised that they already have a number of bears staked out for the president. I don't mean that there will be any tame bears palmed off on the president; of course, that will not be permitted. There are plenty of wild bears in the Big Thicket and the president will be given an opportunity to have some genuine sport."

The Washington Post explained on March 5, 1905, that "the only way the bear can be hunted successfully in the Big Thicket, plentiful as the game is, is with dogs trained to the chase. The dogs can make their way through the dense growths of the thicket with more facility than the lumbering bear can, and they soon bring bruin to bay."

But politics got in the way. Blaming a prolonged Senate session, the White House asked the Rough Riders to delay their reunion from March 31 to April 7.

"He will not hunt bear in the Big Thicket of Texas, as first announced, but will have a shot at wolves and jack rabbits in the Panhandle," the Post reported on March 8. "From San Antonio, the party will proceed direct to Fort Worth, thus cutting out Houston and the proposed bear hunt in the Big Thicket."

For the Big Thicket, it was the big political bear that got away.



President Roosevelt was not able to spend five days hunting in the Big Thicket during his 1905 trip to Texas, but he did take part in a rabbit hunt at the Burgess Brothers ranch near Fort Worth. The group enjoys a barbecue after the hunt. (Photo courtesy of Library of Congress)

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BEARS AWAITING HIM

Big Thicket of Texas to Be Invaded by President.

FULL OF WILDCATS AS WELL

Wolves and Other Game Also Abound in This Almost Impenetrable Part of the Lone Star State—Has a Water Turkey Whose Head and Neck Give It the Appearance of a Snake.

Special Correspondence of The Sunday Post.
Orange, Tex., March 1.—The Big Thicket of Texas, into which the Texas hosts of President Roosevelt are arranging to take their guest on a bear hunt during his coming visit to the Lone Star State, is the queerest streak of country in the way of thicket to be found anywhere in the Union. Although it lies in one of the most thickly settled parts of the State it has no population save bears, wildcats, wolves, and other wild beasts, and odd winged and creeping creatures. The Big Thicket is from five to fifteen

Washington Post headline on March 5, 1905.

Ivory Bill Halloween Celebration

Micah Leigh, BTA member and incoming director, *Ivory Bill* volunteer

On Sunday, October 29, 2023, 28 stalwart souls boarded the *Ivory Bill* for a haunted sunset cruise through the backwater swamps of the Neches River. With Captain Bruce "Blackheart" Walker, assisted by first mate Captain Timothy "Hook" Wynkoop, the ghost ship launched at 4:30 p.m. from Collier Ferry Park with a band of assorted vagabonds and ruffians. After sharing a brief history of the Big Thicket Association and the Preserve, Tavern keeper and High Priestess Micah "Madame Belladonna" Leigh served hearty platters of food that were eagerly washed down with wine and grog by the hungry passengers.

The cruise continued into the infamous 10 Mile Bayou where the crew explained the ecology of the bayous and swamps....and the absolutely true story of how Spanish Moss came to be.

Andy McCall, local storyteller, regaled the voyagers with ghost tales of the swamps and surrounding area. Between scary stories, tarot card reader Petrina from Mystical Enchantments interpreted cards for the curious. She was kept quite busy.

Drawings were done for prizes, a winner was selected for Best Costume, and everyone was given a Big Thicket luggage tag as a souvenir of the inaugural Halloween cruise. Wayfarers enjoyed a beautiful sunset and were lavish with their praise for the cruise as the *Ivory Bill* returned to the dock at 6:30 p.m.

Plans are already underway for the second annual Halloween cruise next October. Don't miss it!



Voyagers



Motley crew



Cap'n Blackheart and Storyteller Andy

Big Thicket Day on the Neches, October 7, 2023

Katy Hambricht, BTA director, Big Thicket Day co-chair

Big Thicket Day was a wonderful success. Close to 500 guests turned out to share a beautiful Saturday with the Big Thicket Association at Collier's Ferry Park and enjoy our program and park activities.

This year's annual BTA program was enhanced by the presentation of three awards: the Maxine Johnston Distinguished Service Award, to Paula Singleton, President, Watson Native Plant Preserve; the R. E. Jackson Conservation Award, to Hilton Kelley, Environmental Justice Activist; and the Thomas E. Lubbert Achievement Award, to Frank C. Sylestine, Big Thicket Fire Management, Fire Equipment Operator.

Keynote speaker Sandra B. Ramos, Texas Coastal Program Manager, National Parks Conservation Association, gave an informative talk on "The Next 50 Years in the Big Thicket."

Following our program, park guests enjoyed lunch prepared by Cooks 2 Dozen while listening to tunes played by Joe Cessac and nationally renowned fiddler David Varnado. Children crowded around the face painting booth of artists Marshall Schree and BTA's own Cindy Black, while others handled the red-tailed boa, Cayman lizard and other creatures brought by Gator Country. Park patrons tested their skills at Copper Bullet's axe throwing booth or petted Stable-Spirit's horses. Many toured Lamar State College Orange's maritime trailer and learned about employment opportunities in the maritime industry. Visitors enjoyed learning about our Big Thicket region from the Thicket of Diversity and Big Thicket National Heritage Trust, Friends of the RAW Outdoors of Greater SETX, Big Thicket author Ernest Brown, Big Thicket Biosphere Reserve, Big



Westbrook NROTC volunteers enjoy a brief rest



Cindy Black brings happiness

Thicket National Preserve, National Parks Conservation Association, Lamar University Special Collections, Sabine-Neches Chapter of the Texas Master Naturalist Association, Native Plant Society of Texas – Beaumont Chapter, and Village Creek State Park. Gerald Cerda of Big Thicket Outfitters, assisted by Westbrook NROTC volunteers, offered hands-on canoe and kayak demonstrations. BTA’s own Ivory Bill offered free, docent-led cruises on the Neches River throughout the day.

Free and open to the public, this event is held annually to celebrate the establishment of the BTA in 1964 and the Big Thicket National Preserve in 1974. BTA members helped with financial support.

A very special thank you to our major sponsors for underwriting: American Valve and Hydrant, Beaumont Convention and Visitors Bureau, BMW of Beaumont, Coburn’s Supply Company, Education First FCU, Lower Neches Valley Authority, Rave Financial, Port Arthur LNG, Port of Beaumont, Read Ice, Sabine Neches Navigation District and TotalEnergies.



Treats for birds



Mary Catherine Johnston presents award to Hilton Kelley



On hearing that Roxanne the boa is in a “calm mood” but isn’t always



*Johnny Thompson replaces shower heads /
photo by Diane Thompson*

Wish List Fulfilled at Field Research Station

Mary Catherine Johnston, BTA director

Saratoga's Big Thicket Field Research Station Learning Center continues to experience overnight use by researchers and students. Utilizing the facility this past year were the Nature Conservancy's fire crew, a NPS Intermountain Archeology researcher, Bat Conservation International leadership, and Student Conservation Association volunteers. Thanks to guest input all pillows now have hypoallergenic covers. BTA staff and volunteers replaced shower heads and ordered additional towels for the main building. Fresh batteries were installed in the smoke detectors in the Brammer House.

The BTA manages the station for the Big Thicket National Preserve. The space offers inexpensive options for overnight stays with dorm rooms, a classroom, kitchen, and laboratory space. Reservations are online at <https://form.jotform.com/91284322255151>. Call 409-790-5399 for information.

Big Thicket Day on the Neches Invocation

Phoebe H. Dishman, board member, Bulletin editor

Our invocation now we lift
 To the Source of every gift
 Source of light which in us burns
 Source to which we gladly turn
 When time and trouble take their toll
 And we need comfort for our soul
 And look, here's the Thicket, close at hand
 Our own Heaven, our own precious land
 Trees and lichens, creatures and birds
 How they inspire our highest words
 All thanks we give to those before
 Who fought the fight and won the war
 To keep the Thicket a place alive
 Where bodies and souls and hearts may thrive
 As people were moved by sharp alarm
 To guard, protect, and shield from harm
 We keep in mind their long-ago art
 We kindle the passion in every heart

Where hearts be dull because we're asleep
 Stir us please to what we can keep
 Oh what a privilege oh what charm
 To keep our place from hazard and harm
 Oh how it matters to contemplate
 Then act as Spirit motivates
 Some can speak and some can write
 Some can paddle and stay upright
 Some can compute and some can measure
 Some can teach the children, our treasure
 Each person has the honor and glory
 To remember, give thanks, and add to the story
 So here's to adding beauty and worth
 As we live and breathe on Mother Earth.
 As we work and play 'neath sky above
 They shall know us by our love
 Amen.



Environmental education on the Ivory Bill / BTA Facebook page

I N M E M O R Y



Dr. Richard C. Harrel, May 7, 1935 – October 8, 2023



Dr. Richard C. Harrel

May 7, 1935 – October 8, 2023

The Big Thicket has lost another conservation giant with the passing of Dr. Richard Harrel, Distinguished Emeritus Professor of Biology at Lamar University and president of Clean Air and Water, Inc., for over 40 years. Dr. Harrel's lifetime of research interests included ecology of freshwater and estuarine macroinvertebrates, the biomonitoring of toxic substances in aquatic environments, and the ecological succession of oxbow lakes.

He received numerous awards and recognitions, including the Regents Merit Award for distinguished teaching. He was awarded the rarely accomplished "Triple Crown" of Lamar awards: University Scholar Award, Distinguished Faculty Lecturer, and the University Professorship for a Life medal, Lamar's most prestigious academic honor. His Distinguished Faculty Lecturer award in 2003 was for his presentation entitled "Environmental History of the Lower Neches River: From Clean to Polluted to Recovering." In 2009, the Big Thicket Association awarded Harrel the Distinguished Service Award for his decades of research, field studies, and publications. He made a huge impact not only in the classroom, but also as an environmental leader. His work added significantly to baseline biological data for the Big Thicket region, improved water quality, and resulted in a cleaner, less-polluted environment. He helped make the Neches River a living river again. His legacy continues through his students.



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 for details.

Explore the Big Thicket

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

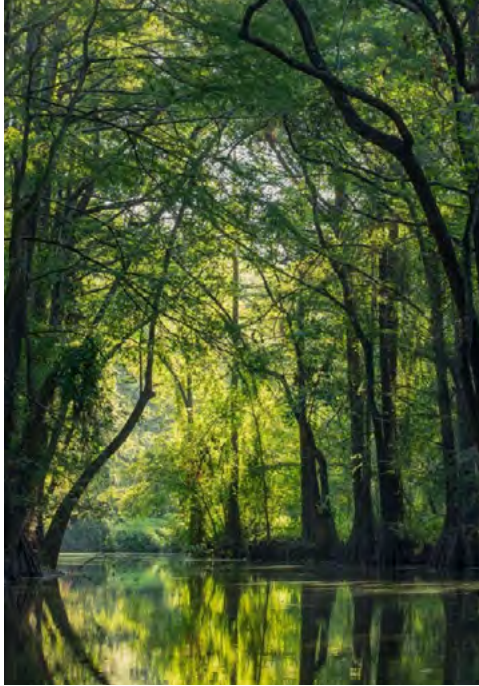
BTA Holiday Party on the *Ivory Bill*

BTA members only; Sunday, December 3, 2:30 – 4:30 p.m.

Science Café: Bears Etc.

Wednesday, December 13, LogOn Café, 6:30 p.m.

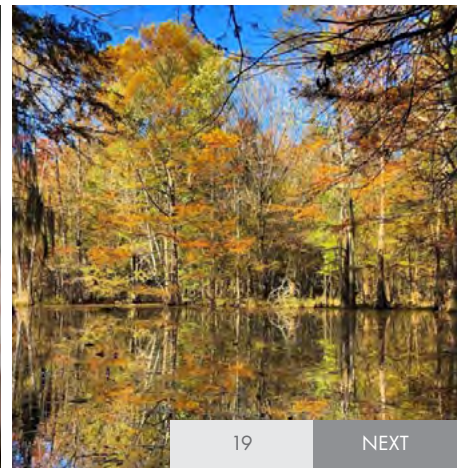
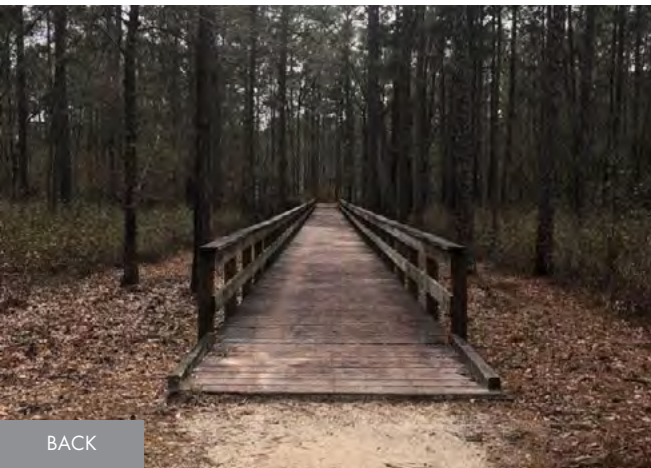




BIG THICKET ASSOCIATION

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.gsmyco.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

