

# BIG THICKET BULLETIN

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Issue #125

## REPRESENTATIVE BRIAN BABIN VISITS



(L to R): John Stafford, Bruce Walter, Bruce Drury, Rep. Brian Babin, Jan Ruppel, Edward Comeau, Charles Smith, and Maxine Johnston.

Congressman Brian Babin, (R-TX36) and his Regional Director of Community Relations Rachel Iglesias met with Big Thicket Association (BTA) and Big Thicket National Preserve (BTNP) representatives at headquarters near Kountze on January 30. Present were Acting BTNP Superintendent Edward Comeau, BTA President Jan Ruppel, BTA Vice-President John Stafford, Bruce Walker, BTA Executive Director, BTA Directors Dr. Bruce Drury and Charles Smith, and Maxine Johnston, BTA Advisory Board. The purpose of the meeting was to acquaint Dr. Babin with the content, scope and variety of activities conducted by the BTA.

Dr. Babin was born in Port Arthur, reared in Beaumont and now resides in Woodville, TX where he has a dental practice. In 2014, Dr. Babin was elected to the U.S. Congress to represent the counties of Hardin, Tyler, Liberty, Orange, Jasper, Newton and Chambers. He serves on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee and the Science, Space, and Technology Committee providing a critical platform for him to serve the economic needs of the district, which includes NASA's Johnson Space Center, four deepwater ports, and numerous oil and gas refineries.

After introductions, President Ruppel reviewed the history and goals of the BTA. BTA was established in 1964, celebrating its 50th anniversary this past October. She explained that two of the Big Thicket Association's largest projects are the Thicket of Diversity and the Neches River Adventures.

The Thicket of Diversity is conducting an All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory (ATBI) in partnership with the Big Thicket National Preserve, The Nature Conservancy, Texas Parks & Wildlife, John H. Kirby State Forest, Big Thicket Natural Heritage Trust and Watson Rare Native Plant Preserve. The inventory is being done to identify every living species inhabiting the Big Thicket National Preserve and surrounding area. Taxonomic Working Inventory Groups (TWIGS) are the heart and soul of the ATBI effort. They perform the field sampling and identification of organisms collected during the inventory.

Another important objective of the Big Thicket Association is to promote knowledge of the history and ecology of the Big Thicket. Because of Beaumont's proximity to one of the units of the Big Thicket National Preserve, the Neches River Adventures offers an exceptional opportunity for students to learn about the history, ecology and economic importance of this area. Neches River Adventures offers free educational tours for thousands of students each year as well as weekly public tours and private charters.

Ms. Johnston presented Dr. Babin with several books and materials relating to the history of the Big Thicket National Preserve and the Big Thicket Association's vital part in its inception and operations. Dr. Babin expressed his appreciation for the opportunity to meet everyone and to learn more about the Big Thicket Association and the Big Thicket National Preserve.

## SCIENCE CONFERENCE IN NACOGDOCHES, APRIL 17-19, 2015

On April 17-19, 2015, Stephen F. Austin State University will host the sixth Big Thicket and West Gulf Coastal Plain Science Conference. The focus of this year's plenary session will be "Watersheds and Waterflow" to be addressed by invited speakers. Dr. Francis "Ab" Abernethy, professor emeritus of English at Stephen F. Austin State University and editor emeritus of the Texas Folklore Society, and Dr. Kirk O. Winemiller, Regents Professor, Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences, Texas A&M University have agreed to give plenary presentations.

The Science Conference provides a forum for scientists and resource managers to share their research in the West Gulf Coastal Plain ecosystem, which comprises a variety of communities including southeastern pine forests, bottomland hardwood forests, and prairies. All topics relevant to the ecology of the region are appropriate, including studies of plant communities, wildlife, restoration ecology, effects of climate change, invasive species, fisheries, and large-scale disturbance ecology. In addition to the general call for papers, symposia or special sessions may be planned and available on a variety of topics. Contact the Program Committee [BigThicket2015@gmail.com](mailto:BigThicket2015@gmail.com) if you are interested in

hosting a session. Presenters are encouraged to submit manuscripts to be published in a special issue of the peer-reviewed journal, *Southeastern Naturalist*. All manuscripts will be subject to the full peer-review process and the standards of the *Southeastern Naturalist*.

Registration fees are \$100 by 20 March; late registration is \$150 and student registration is \$25. Registration for only one day is \$60.

Optional field trips are not included in fees. Three trips are planned: 1) Saline Prairie, led by Will Godwin and Jason Singhurst; 2) Tonkawa Sand Hills, led by James Van Kley, and 3) Birding in the SFA Experimental Forest, led by Cliff Shackelford.

Sponsors of the event include the Big Thicket Association, Stephen F. Austin State University, USFS Southern Research Station, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and the Big Thicket National Preserve.

Please contact Dan Saenz of the U.S. Forest Service (Conference Chair) with questions at [dsaenz@fs.fed.us](mailto:dsaenz@fs.fed.us) or check the conference website at [www.bigthicket.org](http://www.bigthicket.org) for additional information.



*NPCA volunteers on January 19*

### NPCA's Longleaf Pine Restoration Project

National Parks and Conservation Association (NPCA) held their annual Longleaf Pine Planting project on MLK Day, January 19. Ryan Desilu and other Big Thicket staff members worked with over 90 volunteers, who "dibbled" more than 10,000 longleaf pines! NPCA's Suzanne Dixon, Senior Director, Regional Operations, and Erika Pelletier, Texas Coordinator, worked with the group.

### Imagine Your Parks

Calling all artists! The National Park Service and the National Endowment for the Arts have come together to encourage the creation of and greater public engagement with art relating to the work and mission of our national park system. Artistic expression of thrilling landscapes and moving American stories played an important role in the roots of the conservation movement, making collaboration between the agencies a perfect partnership. "Imagine Your Parks" celebrates the 50th anniversary of NEA and the 100th anniversary of NPS. – Learn more at: <http://arts.gov/grants-organizations/art-works/nea-nps-funding-collaboration>.

### The Conservation Fund and Board of Directors Meeting

The Conservation Fund and our Board of Directors invite you to join us on a float down the Neches River. Since 1985, we have conserved more than 75,000 acres and 175 river miles of public and private lands along this historic river. The event will be held in Lufkin, Texas on Monday, April 13, 2015. The river float will be held from 8:00 AM–3:00 PM. Dinner will be held from 6:00 PM–10:00 PM.

### Texas Independence Day

The Polk County Historical Commission held a Texas Independence Day program on Saturday, February 28 at the Old City Cemetery.

## EXCELLENCE IN FIRE MANAGEMENT

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*Fire Management team at Big Thicket National Preserve*

Earlier this month the Fire Management team at Big Thicket National Preserve was recognized for their hard work and ability to maintain a high standard of excellence.

Each year, the National Park Service Intermountain Regional Office of Fire and Aviation presents the Ken Castro Memorial “Excellence in Wildland Fire Management” award to a National Park Service unit whose overall fire program exhibits: success in managing a large wildfire, effectively treating acreage with prescribed burns, provides support to other National Park Service units in the region, and participating in local, regional, and national incident response teams, fire management planning teams, and interagency partnerships.

Throughout 2014 the Big Thicket National Preserve Fire Management team has planned and assisted with burn operations at four other National Park Service units, including Yellowstone National Park and Padre Island National Seashore. “Big Thicket National Preserve Fire Management personnel continually set a high bar for achievement in the fire community,” stated Intermountain Regional Fire Management Officer Michael Davin.

Fire is a natural part of the southeast Texas ecology. However, as humans moved to this area and established homes and business, natural fire was suppressed. “The important work done by the Big Thicket National Preserve Fire Management team is essential to the health and vitality of the preserve’s unique ecology,” said Acting Superintendent Edward Comeau. Comeau continued, “Without on-going fire management, the Big Thicket would look very different and the ecological diversity of the region would shrink.” The Fire Management team is on track to burn approximately 4,000 acres in 2015. Most notably they will be working to prepare a 250 acre tract of land in the preserves Big Sandy Creek Unit, west of Woodville, Texas, as part of a monumental tree planting effort. In 2016 the National Park Service will celebrate its centennial. To mark this anniversary, preserve staff will undertake a significant Longleaf Pine restoration effort. With the assistance of hundreds of volunteers, 100,000 Longleaf Pine seedlings will be planted, establishing a

centennial forest. The Fire Management team is using a variety of techniques, including fire to suppress non-native species and prepare this site for planting.

Big Thicket National Preserve Fire Management Officer Fulton Jeansonne said that this award “shows the depth and quality of the Big Thicket Fire Management personnel.” Jeansonne expressed great pride in the accomplishments of this team.

The Fire Management crew at Big Thicket National Preserve was previously recognized with the Ken Castro Memorial “Excellence in Wildland Fire Management” award in 2011.

Big Thicket National Preserve is in southeast Texas just north of Beaumont and 75 miles northeast of Houston. The preserve consists of nine land units and six water corridors encompassing more than 112,000 acres scattered across a 3,500-square-mile area. The Big Thicket, often referred to 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 of these different vegetation types come together in the thicket, exhibiting a variety of vegetation and wildlife that has received national interest.

For general information about Big Thicket National Preserve, visit [www.nps.gov/bith](http://www.nps.gov/bith) or call the preserve visitor center at +1.409.951.6700.



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### Dean of Texas Folklore

Friends of Historic Nacogdoches held BanitaCreek “Trail Blazer” on Tuesday March 10 to honor Dr. F. E. Abernethy for his work on trails. Abernethy is the author of *Tales from the Big Thicket* and numerous other works. His years with the Texas Folklore Society earned him the title, “Dean of Texas Folklore.”



Jan Ruppel, President,  
Big Thicket Association

**Focus From October to January**

Develop a focus for 2015, continue working on By-Laws, restructure committees, meet monthly with Acting Superintendent Edward Comeau, develop a timeline for BTA projects, and discuss and review of 2015 Budget.

During my first conversation w/Acting Superintendent Edward Comeau in November, he requested an explanation to the shift in focus on BTA's mission statement. The following is my explanation:

**Big Thicket Association Mission Statement**

*The Big Thicket Association's mission is to preserve, protect, and promote the Big Thicket region, its natural resources and cultural history, for the enjoyment and well-being of present and future generations through advocacy, education and research.*

In addition, the original purpose, as stated in BTA By-Laws, includes ...

- *To promote and fund research contributing to knowledge of the Big Thicket*
- *To promote and to fund publication of cultural and scientific Big Thicket literature*
- *To promote the welfare of the Big Thicket National Preserve*

**Background**

**1974 – 2005** BTA focuses on preservation and protection / land acquisition, advocacy and promotion of cultural history through establishment of a museum and publications

**2006** TOD established

**2008** Worked with Representative Brady to get a bill passed to increase size of Preserve. Never came to fruition with focus of Congress

Stalemate in Congress on attitude toward National Parks, closing down of the government in 2013, funds diminished

**Big Thicket Association began redirecting our focus to find a new purpose**

**2012** TOD became a greater emphasis as we hired a TOD Director

**2012** New Executive Director

**2013** New president whose focus was aligned with Executive Director: promotion of Preserve through education

**2013** more funding came in with SEP program and grants, the acquisition of Neches River Adventures, and a new Strategic Plan

**2014** 2nd year in office for president was about building the structure of the Executive Director's programs: Adventures, Rally and Big Thicket Days and building volunteers within the membership and community; Executive Director Bruce Walker and Director of the Adventures Michael Hoke sought partnerships to establish our Environmental Program; the Neches River Rally became our first fundraiser; and Big Thicket Day was revitalized

Between September 6 and October 12 we hosted two major events that placed BTA and the PRESERVE in the public eye, took the public into the Preserve where they became volunteers and participants as well as adventurers.

**Conclusion**

BTA's statement remains the same, the focus on semantics has been redirected due to Congress's direction and BTA's new administration.

The momentum we had garnered from the two successful events, Neches River Rally and Big Thicket Days, in a 5 week period this past fall illustrated what team work can accomplish. Walker, through his vision and creative ideas, has challenged us to think about potential energy in ourselves and what we can achieve. As an example, Michael Hoke has pursued his passion, and his vision for the Environmental Education program continues to expand. Others in January will be stepping up with ideas they would like to see pursued. For 2015, I would like to see us continue to build on the momentum created with our fall events.

*Jan Ruppel*

*President, Big Thicket Association*



*Brandt Mannchen*

### **The Power of One**

Brandt Mannchen and the Houston Sierra Club have been dedicated workers in the Big Thicket National Preserve as a labor force as well as advocates. This story shows the Power of One.

Brandt Mannchen pulls on his gloves and grabs a handsaw. For the next two hours of a damp morning, he will cut and pull and clear stands of yaupon holly before the thicket-forming shrub takes over one of the last great pieces of pristine coastal prairie in Texas. It isn't the way most people would spend time, but the job needs to be done.

For decades, Mannchen has been a singular force for the environment in and around Houston. Most of his work goes unseen, but it isn't without impact. "He is a stalwart," said Jennifer Powis, a lawyer who serves on the Sierra Club's local board. "Our air quality is better and our national forests are better managed because of his work."

"It's hard to get a clear-cut victory," said Mannchen, who does the work without pay. "People get burned out, and I'm singed all over. But I'm lucky because I have found something that I believe in."

Mannchen, earned a bachelor's degree in environmental science from Sam Houston State University. He then spent nearly 30 years working in various roles for the city's air quality bureau. While there, Mannchen took a day off to attend a public hearing on the state's long-range water plan. Despite his shyness, he felt compelled to speak. A Sierra Club member was impressed and invited him to join the group.

After retiring from the city in 2004, Mannchen devoted himself full-time to the Sierra Club, tackling a wide variety of thorny issues - from smog to sprawl to the survival of the Big Thicket, a vast East Texas expanse of towering woods and murky swamps known as America's ark for its astonishing variety of wildlife.

Mannchen is surrounded by books. It's from these sources that Mannchen forms his lengthy responses to the environmental impact statements prepared by the government. Federal law requires agencies to publicly evaluate how their decisions, such as building a highway or dredging a ship channel, would affect nature.

The process provides an opening for the public to raise questions and offer alternative approaches, and Mannchen takes full advantage of it. He fills a valuable role because his comments are a way for the public to help shape a project.

"A lot of people can write letters," said Mary Anne Piacentini, executive director of the nonprofit Katy Prairie Conservancy, "but not many can craft them in a rational, scientific way that gets people to look at things differently."

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### **MOVE Visits The Big Thicket National Preserve**

St. Michael College (Vermont) once again sent volunteers to Big Thicket National Preserve for a week, January 4-10. The volunteer program called "Mobilization of Volunteer Effort" (MOVE) first came to Big Thicket in the late 1990s, and each year the Preserve benefits from their work. They have planted trailing phlox and longleaf pine, removed invasive plants, helped with Preserve trail work, and on several occasions worked at Marysee Prairie and Larsen Sanctuary.

On January 4, the group watched presentations on legislative history and management history of the Preserve, followed by lunch and a hike. Ryan Desilu managed their schedule for the week.



*St. Michael College volunteers at the Big Thicket National Preserve*

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### **Science Café: Freshwater Mussels of the Big Thicket**

Dr. Neil Ford, with the University of Texas – Tyler, presented a Science Café program on his research on freshwater mussels found in Big Thicket National Preserve at the Logon Café, 3805 Calder, in Beaumont, Texas on Wednesday, March 11.

Dr. Ford has completed a mussel inventory in the preserve and has identified two species of mussels here that are new to the state and one species that is potentially new to science. He is conducting this research as part of the All-Taxa Biodiversity Inventory (ATBI), an effort to identify all living organisms in the preserve. In addition to researching mussels, Dr. Ford has also conducted extensive research on reptiles, amphibians, and fish.

## Preserve News

Watch for information on the upcoming National Park Service (NPS) Centennial Celebration in 2016. Ken Hyde, Chief of Resource Management plans to plant 100,000 Longleaf Pine seedlings during that year. Other planned activities for the NPS Centennial included hiring a term Centennial Interpretive Ranger who will help plan the activities which at this time include some planned ranger led hikes and canoe trips.

BITH will continue to upgrade facilities and boardwalks around the preserve in 2015. The Sundew trail and picnic facilities at the visitor center really look great after all the work in 2014 in preparing for BTA celebration of the 50th Anniversary.

TOD Council met in January with a number of new members on the Council. President Paul P. Tinerella, PhD, CPBN, Insect Taxonomy and Biodiversity Conservation, Research Associate, ND State Insect Reference Collection, Katherine E. Winsett, PhD, Environmental Sciences Academic Program, NC State University, Science Chair, Joseph Singletary, Texas Agri-Life Extension Agent w/ Hardin County and Ellen Buchanan, Big Thicket Natural Heritage Trust President, both serve as Community members, and Shelly Vitanza, Managing Editor of southeasttexas.com, as the Media Representative, while Jason Gilder, Chief of Interruption and Ken Hyde, Chief of Resource Management are new representatives of BTNP. We welcome all and look forward to an exciting year for TOD developments.



### *We are in transition.*

With the Reporter's staff retirement, they have also requested the retirement of the name. We are seeking name requests, and help in design and layout of the Big Thicket Association newsletter. Contact the Field Research Station if you have skills that will meet our needs.

## 50th Year Celebration Photos (page 7)

From left to right, top to bottom:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>n</b> Tree landscape at Big Thicket National Preserve  | <b>n</b> Fall pine tree at Big Thicket National Preserve          |
| <b>n</b> Entertainment at previous Science Conference   | <b>n</b> Landscape image of trees and grass                       |
| <b>n</b> Representative Brian Babin and Maxine Johnston at Big Thicket National Preserve Office | <b>n</b> Previous Science Conference attendees plan their outings |
| <b>n</b> Previous Science Conference attendees enjoying a field trip                            | <b>n</b> Big Thicket National Preserve Visitor Center signage     |



## Mark Your Calendar

### Upcoming Events

#### April 13, 2015

The Conservation Fund and Board of Directors Meeting. River float 8:00 AM–3:00 PM. Dinner 6:00 PM–10:00 PM.

#### April 17-19, 2015

West Gulf Coastal Plain and Big Thicket Science Conference, Nacogdoches [commerce@sfasu.edu](mailto:commerce@sfasu.edu).

#### August 25, 2016

National Park Service (NPS) turns 100 years-old!

#### 2015-2016

ART WORKS “Imagine Your Parks!” The National Park Service and the National Endowment for the Arts have come together to encourage the creation of and greater public engagement with art relating to the work and mission of our national park system.



# Big Thicket Association

*So much more than parks and recreation*





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

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

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

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

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

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

National Parks Conserv. Assoc.  
[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)

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

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

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

Village Creek State Park  
[www.tpwd.state.tx.us.park](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us.park)

## Big Thicket Association Newsletter

Back in 1969, the BTA started a newsletter to keep members informed. The first issue of the *Big Thicket Reporter* was May 1969 – at first mimeographed and later printed in cooperation with the *Liberty Gazette* until 1981. From 1981 to 1994, membership newsletters carried various titles and editors.

In January 1993, Maxine Johnston and Ann Roberts started publication of the *Big Thicket Reporter* as an independent personal newsletter sent to a list of friends, conservationists, and libraries. When BTA reorganized in November 1994, the *Reporter* became the Association newsletter. We believe that the *Reporter* has served a useful function.

Recording BTA history has been rewarding—meeting and working with everyone from neighbors to scientists/writers/conservationists/legislators—who supported BTA efforts for a Big Thicket National Preserve, who encouraged establishment of state parks, and who worked with others to encourage private preservation projects.

Saying goodbye to our readers is a difficult task, but advancing ages suggest it is time to fold up the tent. We are certain that the Association will continue—and hopefully surpass—efforts to keep you informed. Thanks for all the memories!

**Maxine Johnston**  
*Editor*