



BIG THICKET BULLETIN

ISSUE 163



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BTA Milestone! Happy 60th Anniversary! Part III

CAPTAIN BRUCE WALKER, BTA PRESIDENT

Creating the first national preserve in the nation was a very complex undertaking, because the National Park Service was mainly in the business of setting aside public lands for their scenery and expansive vistas, whereas the Big Thicket National Preserve was set aside almost exclusively because of its biology, and its biological integrity had to be protected while allowing public access. Within the Preserve’s matrix of isolated units and stream corridors the bureaucratic challenges of managing the park were complicated, and the Preserve’s administrative policies were often developed through trial and error with limited financial resources and insufficient personnel.

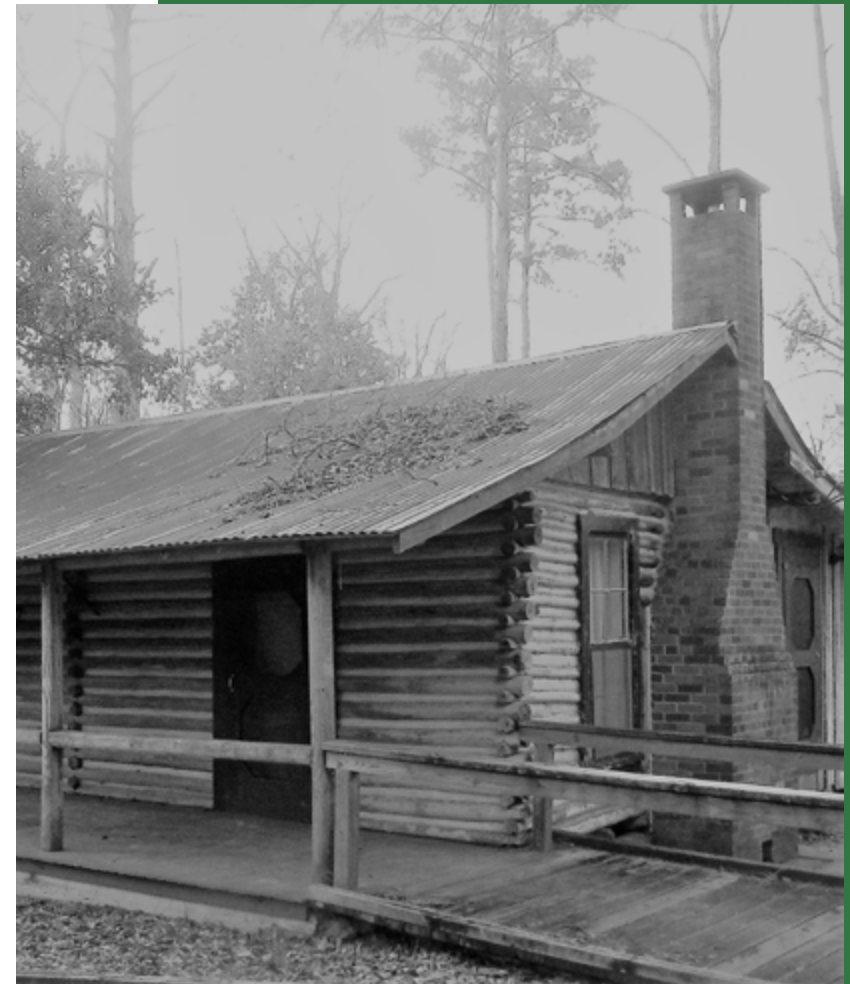
In 1978, an Information Center was opened at the south end of the Turkey Creek Unit in the old Staley log cabin. The first nine miles of the Turkey Creek Trail was opened as the Preserve’s first hiking trail, at the north end of the Turkey Creek unit, far removed from the Information Center. Twenty-five years later, in October 2001, the Preserve’s current Visitor Center was opened. Today there are 40 miles of hiking trails and 33 miles of paddling trails in the Thicket.

In 1980, hunting permits were given out “equally” to all hunters. In the beginning, the local people were not effectively informed about how to obtain the hunting permits and there was uncertainty over the differences between federal and state hunting regulations. This created a situation in which outside hunters far outnumbered local hunters. Local people became bitter about the process, some nearly to the point of violence. The Park Service realized that the process had to be changed and soon registration sites were established in public schools nearest the unit involved and permits given on a first-come first-served basis, which gave the locals an edge.

As Preserve superintendents and their staffs managed public access, they were able to find the time and resources to fund scientific studies of the Preserve’s plant growth communities; rare, scarce, and endangered species; archeological sites; birds, reptiles, and mammals; and the impact of oil and gas exploration. Preserve policies had to be worked out in the midst of sometimes heated controversies among environmentalists and local communities.

As a Friends Group of the Preserve, we are proud of our 60-year commitment to preservation and conservation of the Thicket. We are equally proud of the National Park Service and their stewardship in maintaining such a challenging, complex, and unique Preserve within the National Park System.

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



Staley Cabin

Board Member Spotlight

Diane Thompson, BTA Executive Director

Big Thicket Association is fortunate to have an amazing Executive Board, who unselfishly give of their time and talents for a great cause. Please take this opportunity to get to know more about them.



Captain Bruce Walker with Diane Thompson on the Ivory Bill

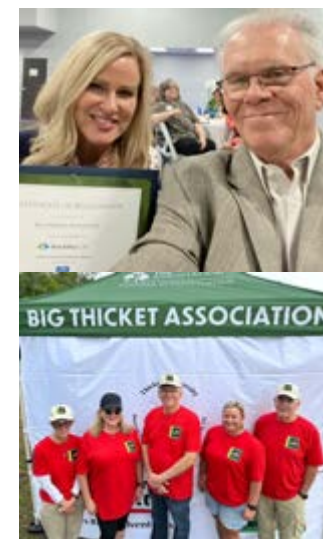
President, Captain Bruce Walker

During Captain Walker's eight-year tenure as BTA's Executive Director he had great vision and began some new projects that are now BTA's biggest projects. He is responsible for implementing the Neches River Rally, Neches River Adventures (Public Eco-History Tours, Private Charters, and a robust NO COST Environmental Education Program), Eco-Art Tours on the Ivory Bill (Earth Church, Texas Rivermen, Keith Carter Photography, Solar Eclipse Cruise, Nature Painting, July 4 Fireworks, Halloween Party), First Monday Lunch with the Big Thicket National Preserve Superintendent to collaborate on projects, and the founding of two paddling trails with the help of others (Cooks Lake to Scatterman and Collier's Ferry to Lake Bayou). When Bruce began Neches River Adventures, he acquired his USCG Merchant Marine License. Bruce says that he was lucky to work with and to have the enthusiastic support of BTA board members like past president Jan Ruppel, and others, to bring these projects to fruition.

Bruce retired from Time Warner as an advertising and marketing executive and has an extensive background in budgeting, writing business plans and grants, and overseeing fundraising projects.

Past President, Mr. John Stafford

Mr. Stafford was BTA's President for three years. During his tenure and still today he is active in several non-profit organizations. He has been instrumental in introducing and maintaining BTA's QuickBooks accounting system, updating the BTA website and Constant Contact applications, and automating BTA's on-line reservations, memberships, and donations. John is active on many BTA committees including the IT Committee. Recently he and Dale Parish (Past BTA Secretary) installed two new office computers. No easy feat, and rife with complications, it took several days. They stayed the course and were able to complete this task. He recently solved another IT problem when BTA's internet was not working at all. Now he is very involved with the new PA system soon to be installed on the Ivory Bill boat. He is a wiz at all things IT! John is retired from ENGlobal Engineering as an electrical engineer and project manager. The firm focuses on oil and gas automation solutions, subsea control systems, and engineering and construction projects.



John Stafford at Grant Award Ceremony with Diane Thompson

Past President John Stafford and Captain Bruce Walker at the NRR with BTA staff

These two men are a tremendous asset to BTA and certainly appreciated for their countless volunteer hours and service.

Thank you, Sirs!

Fun with STEM at Kountze Public Library

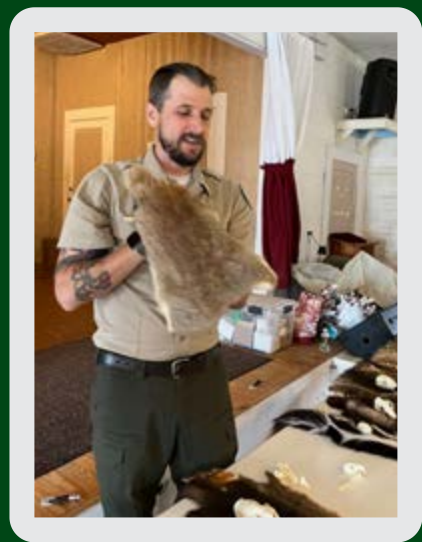
Mary Catherine Johnston, Friends of Kountze Public Library President, BTA Director

BTA's Thicket of Diversity exhibited at the Friends of Kountze Public Library's Summer Reading Program. With 115 youth participating, Kountze Public Library's Fun with STEM - Science, Technology, Engineering and Math hosted throughout the month of June was a great success!

Funding for the presentations and gifts was made possible through grants from the Foundation for Southeast Texas, Hancock Whitney, and the Education Development Corporation's Literacy for a Lifetime book match.

Environmental groups who provided support included Hardin County Texas AgriLife, Sabine Neches Master Naturalists, Southeast Texas Poison Control, Big Thicket National Preserve, Big Thicket Natural Heritage Trust, Big Thicket Biosphere Reserve, Big Thicket Association's Thicket of Diversity, Texas Parks and Wildlife's Village Creek State Park, Entergy, and Bee Keeper Irene Austin. Other partners included Education First Federal Credit Union, Kona Ice, Beaumont Children's Museum, Oral Reader Cooper Walters, Sour Lake Lions, and building host Floyd Boyett at the County Seat Music Hall. Kudos go to librarians Tami Winger and Julie Cowart for the library decorations, prizes and great support.

The excellent program was coordinated through the energy of the dedicated members of the Friends of Kountze Public Library.



Images by Mary Catherine Johnston
Texas Parks and Wildlife - Ranger Alex
Big Thicket National Preserve - Ranger Max and Ranger Kenny
Thicket of Diversity exhibits

The Emergence of Ghost Forests in Southeast Texas

Mary Catherine Johnston, BTA Director, Thicket of Diversity chair

In the first Big Thicket Science Symposium, hosted May 18 at the Big Thicket Visitor Center, Dr. David Cooper of Colorado State University shared research on a major issue critically impacting the region. His cooperative project with Joel Wagner of the National Park Service began in 2018. It focused on hydrology and the impact of salinization on biodiversity in the Big Thicket of Southeast Texas.

The Big Thicket is extremely dependent on water as 46% of its acreage is wetlands. The Preserve connects waterways from Sam Rayburn to Steinhagen Lake, the Neches River, channels, drains, creeks and bayous. Unfortunately, as climate change and dramatic weather events escalate, wetland degradation is exacerbated.

The researchers reviewed literature and from data created charts to analyze the effects of salinity on bald cypress swamps and on freshwater vegetation. Substantial effects occur in the > 2-4 ppt range. Leaf burning occurs in 8 days. Seedling growth and photosynthesis are reduced around 50% and up to 25% of seedlings die. According to Krauss (1999), in the 5-10 ppt range the results are devastating. 75% of seedlings die after 8 ppt after 30 days of saturation.

Cooper and Wagner set up 12 stations in the Preserve to monitor salinity levels. They identified that the critical tipping point was reached in 2023 during the extended drought. If there is a positive side to the recent flooding, it is that 2024 salinization levels are probably at zero as waterways have been flushed. Monitoring is ongoing.

An alarming phenomenon has been noted on the East Coast of the U.S.: stands of dried-up trees that were once thriving green woodlands. They are found in marshlands influenced by fluctuating water levels poisoned by salt water. Alarmingly, this trend is now visible along the coast of Southeast Texas. Approximately 1500-2000 acres of ghost forest have been identified within the Big Thicket. Bald cypress have died, and biodiversity has been significantly reduced to a cutgrass monoculture.

Continued hydrology research on the impacts of salt water in wetlands along the Gulf Coast is of vital importance. The forest remnants haunting marshlands in newly forming ghost forests is shocking. With a better understanding, efforts can be made to mitigate damages. Possible constructive actions could include the addition of salt water barriers downstream and modified water management at upstream reservoirs. The restoration of cedar forests in new areas can be accomplished by planting bald cypress in suitable geochemical and hydrologic environments. Without a doubt, further study and the dissemination of salt water intrusion research such as that by Cooper and Wagner is necessary to ensure the protection of the natural resources of Southeast Texas and the ultimate future of our wetlands.



Symposium presenters



*Dr. David Cooper
Images by Mary Catherine Johnston.*

BTA Science Café

Mary Catherine Johnston, BTA Director,
Chair of Thicket of Diversity

Another Science Café was hosted at the LogOn Café on August 5th, featuring Doug Huggins. Major Huggins is a graduate of Lamar University where he received a Bachelor of Science in Communications. He is also a graduate of Lamar Institute of Technology's Police Academy where he graduated valedictorian in 2001.

In 2003, he started a more than 20-year career with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's State Parks Division. He has enjoyed the opportunity to work and live in many beautiful and wild places in Texas. At Palo Duro Canyon State Park in the Texas Panhandle, he experienced a landscape rich in history, geology, flora, and fauna. At Atlanta State Park, in northeast Texas, he was exposed to the importance of protecting cultural sites related to Native American burials. At Bastrop State Park in central Texas, he developed an appreciation and working knowledge of managing the natural resources of the Lost Pines Region, one of the few remaining habitats of the endangered Houston Toad.

As a major with the TPWD State Park Police, Huggins is responsible for law enforcement and emergency management for state parks in southeast and south Texas, including parks that span the entire Texas coast. In his presentation Huggins shared interesting park experiences and photographs and concluded with the motto, "Remember, life's better on the outside."



At the LogOn – Diane Thompson



Doug Huggins – Diane Thompson



Mary Catherine Johnston, Doug Huggins, Diane Thompson – Carol Chilton

Looking Back: Big Birthdays for the Big Thicket

Dennis Durkee, BTA Director

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Big Thicket National Preserve, let's take a look back at earlier milestone anniversaries:

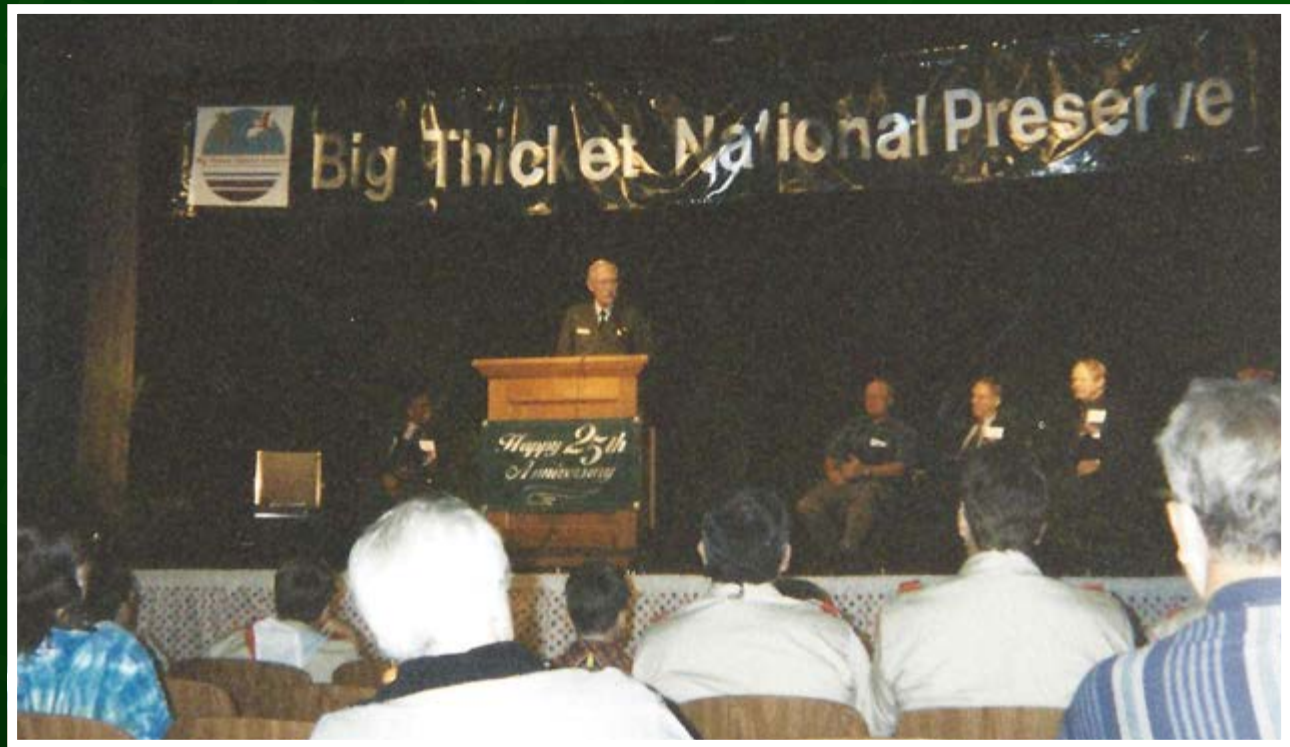
1984

10th Anniversary

The tenth anniversary was celebrated on Saturday, Nov. 10, 1984, at Triple-D Guest Ranch (now Triple-D Ranch Event Venue) outside of Warren. It was delayed from October for two reasons – to avoid speech-making until after the November elections (Reagan-Mondale for president plus congressional races) and to coincide with the Nov. 5-9 conference of the American Association of Naturalists in Nacogdoches, which included many visits to the Big Thicket as well as the anniversary celebration. Texas Gov. Mark White declared Nov. 10 as “Big Thicket Day” in the state.

The keynote speaker at 11 a.m. was Dr. Philip Johnson of the John Gray Institute in Beaumont. The Lamar University brass ensemble provided music before a 12:30 p.m. luncheon. During the afternoon, about 100 people participated in hikes in the Preserve.

Earlier, in October, the anniversary was celebrated with 10K “walkfests” in the Preserve organized by the Golden Triangle Sierra Club and the Triangle Trekkers hiking club.



Preserve superintendent Pete Petersen speaks at the Big Thicket National Preserve's 25th anniversary celebration on Oct. 23, 1999, at Kountze Middle School.

Photos courtesy of Penny Clark, Special Collections, Lamar University

Looking Back: Big Birthdays for the Big Thicket

Dennis Durkee, BTA Director

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Big Thicket National Preserve, let's take a look back at earlier milestone anniversaries:

1994

20th Anniversary

The "new" headquarters building hosted the 20th anniversary on Saturday, Oct. 29, 1994, from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Speakers were U.S. Rep. Charles Wilson, D-Lufkin; U.S. Rep. Jack Brooks, D-Beaumont; and Andrew Sansom, executive director of Texas Parks and Wildlife. The new maintenance center was dedicated. Other activities included building tours; music by the Lamar University Jazz Band, the Dulcimer Society and local folk musicians; local cultural exhibits; nine Big Thicket authors autographing books; quilting and spinning demonstrations; and storytellers.



Big Thicket National Preserve's 25th anniversary included a cake.

Photos courtesy of Penny Clark, Special Collections, Lamar University

Looking Back: Big Birthdays for the Big Thicket

Dennis Durkee, BTA Director

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Big Thicket National Preserve, let's take a look back at earlier milestone anniversaries:

1999

25th Anniversary

Thematic exhibits from the eight counties that share the Big Thicket were featured at the 25th anniversary on Saturday, Oct. 23, 1999, at Kountze Middle School. Participating counties were Hardin, Jasper, Jefferson, Liberty, Newton, Orange, Polk, and Tyler. Exhibits were open from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. with nature and cultural activities such as woodworking, spinning and weaving. Folk guitarist Clay Grant and the Alabama-Coushatta dancers performed in the auditorium. Speakers were U.S. Rep. Jim Turner, D-Crockett; Pete Gunter, local author and environmental philosopher; John H. King, regional director of the National Park Service; and former U.S. Rep. Charles Wilson.

Hardin County Beautiful Committee and the Kountze Chamber of Commerce hosted a barbecue which featured presentations by "Ma Thicket" and an historical spoof from Kountze Middle School students.



Pete Gunter serenades with his guitar during the 25th anniversary celebration in 1999.

Photos courtesy of Penny Clark, Special Collections, Lamar University

Eco-Art Boats aboard the *Ivory Bill*

Captain Bruce Walker, BTA president



BTA's Neches River Adventures hosted three Eco-Art Boats this spring and summer. Each of these Mini-Fundraisers provided our passengers a unique, fun, and educational adventure into the Big Thicket.



Texas Two-Step Solar Eclipse Keith Carter Photography Class July 4th Fireworks

Photos by Bruce Walker & Diane Thompson

Black Buzzard

Phoebe H. Dishman, BTA Director, Bulletin Editor

Excerpt from Evangeline and the Mysterious Strangers, 2015

With no warning at all,
 he's flying straight for my face.
 His aim, evidently, the balcony rail.
 Just in time he sees me,
 veers for the nearby oak,
 in which he crash-lands
 with stunning force.
 The oak and I absorb the impact.
 The tree branch steadies
 to support its new load.
 And what a load.
 A vision of loveliness he's not.
 Who is he?
 Two feet tall in his stocking feet,
 with a wingspread of five,
 he's *Coragyps atratus*.
 Black vulture.
 Pale gray legs has he,
 supporting a hulk of a body covered
 in rusty black feathers.
 Stubby tail has he,
 shoulders hunched,
 dark snake of a neck.
 And his face? Well ...
 I decide to embrace the discipline of close attention.

Surely it won't be for long.
 Oh really?
 As if reading my thoughts, he settles down for a nap.
 The good news is,
 once he draws in that naked neck,
 once those pale legs disappear under the bulk of his breast,
 he doesn't look quite so bad.
 He rests.
 But now and then
 his periscope goes up—
 perhaps something has died!
 Refreshed, he stands and stretches.
 Then he takes to the air.
 I should say, rather,
 that he falls heavily out of the tree,
 evidently on purpose.
 His angels bear him up.
 Circling, he glides close to me,
 feathered fingers outstretched
 in farewell.
 Then he flaps away, out over the lake.
 He becomes a dot in the distance.
 Then he is gone.
 Thus ends my close encounter
 with the dark side.



*Rescued turkey vulture, cousin to black vulture / Liberty chapter
 Golden Triangle Audubon Society, September 2019*

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 and 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!

Big Thicket National Preserve



50th Anniversary

Celebration

**Celebrate the past, present,
and future of America's first
national preserve.**



**October 12, 2024
10:00 am to 4:00 pm
Big Thicket Visitor Center**

**6102 FM 420
Kountze, TX 77625
(409) 951-6700**



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. Please visit www.nechesriveradventures.org for details.

11th Annual Neches River Rally

Saturday, September 7

Cooks Lake to Scatterman paddling trail
LNVA Saltwater Barrier Boat Ramp
6790 Bigner Road - Beaumont, TX 77708
<https://www.bigthicket.org/rally>
Registration is now closed for this event.

Explore the Big Thicket

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

Fall Bus Tour

Being planned by BTA Membership committee.

Big Thicket Day: 50th anniversary of the Big Thicket National Preserve

Saturday, October 12th: 10:00 am – 4:00 pm
Big Thicket Visitors Center

This is a FREE event that is open to the public and will offer an opportunity for families to visit the preserve and celebrate the creation of Big Thicket National Preserve. There will be activities for the entire family including kids' activities, booths by area conservation organizations, lunch provided by the Big Thicket Association, and more.
<https://www.nps.gov/bith/planyourvisit/50th-anniversary.htm>

Big Thicket Day: Annual BTA Membership Gathering

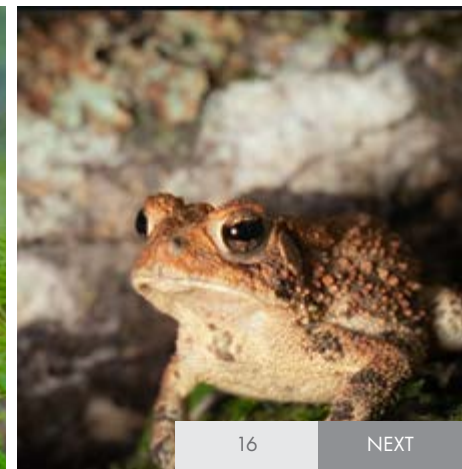
October 12, 2024, in conjunction with the Big Thicket National Preserve's 50th Anniversary, at the Big Thicket Visitors Center in Kountze. BTA Members will have an opportunity to meet our current BTA Officers and Directors and our newly elected Officers & Directors.



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

