



BIG THICKET BULLETIN

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BTA Milestone! Happy 60th Anniversary! Part IV

CAPTAIN BRUCE WALKER, BTA PRESIDENT

The Prelude to Preservation (Pre-Big Thicket Association): It takes just the right combination of folks, with varied interest, to motivate others to join the drive for preservation. In 1927, R.E. Jackson personally attempted to preserve a portion of the Big Thicket by leasing 18,000 acres of land in Polk County along the Polk-Hardin County line. Because of the dense underbrush, this area was known as the "Tiger-eye" country. Jackson used his lease as an anchor to lobby for both state and federal action to save at least 430,000 acres of the Big Thicket as a wildlife preserve. Jackson's proposal was enthusiastically endorsed by the Beaumont Chamber of Commerce, which believed that it would bring tourists into the Beaumont region.

However, Jackson's group was unable to generate the political support necessary to preserve the region. In the mid-1930's, attitudes began to change when the East Texas Big Thicket Association (ETBTA) won support of the Texas Academy of Science, who viewed the Thicket as an outdoor botanical laboratory. Hal B. Parks and Victor L. Cory, the two leading botanists in the state, led a short botanical expedition into the Thicket in 1936. The Association published the findings of the expedition. The Cory and Parks report became the "Bible" of those wishing to preserve the region. As a result of the survey, Texas newspapers began publishing articles describing the scenic beauty of the Big Thicket and provided the much-needed publicity for the preservation movement.

Armed with the Cory and Parks survey, the growing support of Texas Academy of Science and the aid of U.S. Senator Morris Sheppard, the federal government was beginning to consider the Big Thicket as a potential site for a national park. Finally, in 1938, the regional director of the National Park Service surveyed the Big Thicket to determine if it should be included in the National Park Service.

However, a series of unforeseen events frustrated the early preservation movement. The discovery of oil in Polk County in 1936, and again in 1942, upset the Association's plans to set aside the entire county as a wilderness area. The outbreak of World War II brought an unprecedented demand for lumber products to build battleships, training aircraft, and barracks. Additionally, just a few years prior to the war, the federal government had expended \$3,000,000 to establish over 1,799,000 acres of national park forest in Texas. This land was divided into four separate units: Sam Houston National Forest, Davy Crockett National Forest, Angelina National Forest, and Sabine National Forest. As a result, the preservation of an additional 435,000 acres for the Big Thicket was doubtful. The East Texas Big Thicket Association continued to exist as a paper organization until it finally expired in the late 1950s.

As members of BTA, we are proud of our 60-year commitment to the conservation and preservation to the Thicket. We are equally proud of the early preservationists, researchers, politicians, and businessmen like Dempsie Henley, who was elected to serve as BTA's first president in 1964. These are the folks, with various interest and skills, who laid the groundwork to establish the first National Preserve in the nation.

References and Excerpts from *Saving the Big Thicket* by James J. Cozine, Jr.



Rep. Emmett Lack, Gov. Price Daniel, and Dempsie Henley
(Source: Big Thicket Association files.)

Neches River Adventures Experiences Growing Pains

Diane Thompson, BTA Executive Director

Neches River Adventures *Ivory Bill* (NRIB) offers four kinds of excursions on the *Ivory Bill* boat: Public Eco-History Tours, Eco-Art Boats, Private Charters, and Environmental Education classes.

The last type, Environmental Education classes, is the largest program NRIB operates. NRIB serves all schools in the 8 counties surrounding the Big Thicket region. NO COST field trips are offered to public, private, and home schools. Frequently schools bring an entire grade level for class. This could be up to 150 students. While one group of students attends class on the boat, the rest of the grade level is rotating through stations on land. This required BTA to hire a Land Activity Coordinator who picks up the station materials at the marina, sets up stations at Collier's Ferry Park, and then teaches volunteers how to do the activities while she also teaches at one of the stations. While students await their turn on the boat, they are able to take a nature hike and learn about plants, play science games, learn about the effects of pollution on the environment and water, and many other activities.

BTA lost its Chief Captain in February 2024. After several months without this position, it was determined it was necessary to hire someone again. NRIB now has an *Ivory Bill* Operations Coordinator. This Coordinator is tasked with performing boat maintenance, scheduling boat maintenance and training for crew, and working as a deckhand as needed.

You can find the *Ivory Bill* on the Neches River all day every day in the spring and some weeks in the fall filled with students. Additionally, there were many charters booked this year. Here come the growing pains. The NRIB program is in desperate need of additional Captains, Deckhands, and Docents to fill all these positions. NRIB has some wonderful contract workers and volunteers in these positions, but it's not enough staff to continue being the successful program that has existed.

Big Thicket Association challenges you to take your next steps and become involved in this robust and worthwhile program. Classroom and onboard hands-on training are offered for all crew members. We provide our docents the proper resources to conduct a two-hour Eco-History tour...no scripts to memorize. And remember, it's always a great day to be on the water!



Big Thicket Day

Phoebe Dishman, BTA Director, Bulletin Editor

In our role as partner organization to the Big Thicket National Preserve, BTA helped BITH celebrate its fiftieth anniversary October 12 at the BITH Headquarters in Kountze. BTA Board members and staff were on hand to meet the public. We manned an informational booth throughout the day. We donated and served gumbo from Mama Jack's to a hungry crowd. We donated and served a decorated birthday cake. Your editor and her husband enjoyed our six-year-old granddaughter's reactions to the booths and exhibits. She was glad to see her aunt Katy helping with the BTA booth, and she was intrigued by the crafts displayed by the Alabama-Coushatta people. She met Maxine Johnston, Superintendent Wayne Prokopetz, and many others. At the BTA Thicket of Diversity booth she won a prize—a bug-collecting house that she couldn't wait to show her little brother, who has long been interested in bugs. The name Amelia points to a hard worker. The name Shepard indicates someone who tends. Future naturalists, unite.



Deputy Regional Director Lance Hatten speaking with park ranger



BITH 50th Anniversary Cake

Maxine Johnston and The Preserve's first Superintendent, Thomas E. Lubbert

Photos: Big Thicket National Preserve

Big Thicket Day

Phoebe Dishman, BTA Director, Bulletin Editor



Photos: Big Thicket National Preserve

Alabama-Coushatta dancer



Alabama-Coushatta Tribal Princess Aaliyah Johnson greets the audience

Housing Available for Big Thicket Researchers and Educators

Mary C. Johnston, BTA Director, Chair of Thicket of Diversity

The Big Thicket Association (BTA) manages a unique facility on 6 acres in Saratoga under an Agreement with the National Park Service (NPS). The Big Thicket Field Research Station and Learning Center is used to house visiting researchers, park volunteers, emergency and fire workers and for use as a meeting and training space for environmental groups. Years ago it housed the Big Thicket Association's Museum. The building was donated to the NPS and refurbished. An adjacent house was purchased to provide additional sleeping space.

Today the Field Research Station (FRS) can accommodate 22 people in its dormitory rooms and 4 in the Brammer House. The facility includes a kitchen, lunchroom that seats 30, a small laboratory and field guide library, showers and laundry amenities. The classroom is furnished with tables and chairs.

To date in 2024 the FRS has hosted American Youthworks volunteers, researchers from Texas State University conducting mussel surveys, and another group from Texas A&M College Station studying fish assemblages on Village Creek.

Rental of the FRS is primarily restricted to the support of ecological research and education within the Big Thicket National Preserve. The average cost per night per resident is \$20. For additional information regarding rental guidelines, availability and the reservation process go to <https://www.thicketofdiversity.org/field-research-station> or call 409-790-5399.



Early Big Thicket Recipes

Dennis Durkee, BTA Director

The old-time boarding houses around the Big Thicket offered more than a place to sleep -- they kept travelers and local work crews well fed. The hotels were popular during the heyday of the railroads, roughly from 1880s until the 1930s. They were usually located within a short walk from train depots. Their dining rooms were crowded for every meal.

In her 1998 book "Boardin' in the Thicket," local historian (and longtime BTA member) Wanda A. Landrey compiled histories and recipes from a dozen hotels around the region.

Try these old-time baking recipes that she collected:

GINGER COOKIES

Badders Hotel, Silsbee

- 1 cup sugar
- 1 cup brown sugar
- 1 cup butter
- 1 cup sorghum or ½ cup molasses and ½ cup pure cane syrup
- 2 eggs, well beaten
- 1 tablespoon vinegar
- 1 tablespoon vanilla
- 1 tablespoon ginger
- 3 teaspoons baking soda
- 3 teaspoons salt
- 5 cups flour

Cream the sugars and butter. Add remaining ingredients. Shape dough into medium sized balls. Place on greased cookie sheet. Bake at 375 degrees for 10 to 12 minutes.

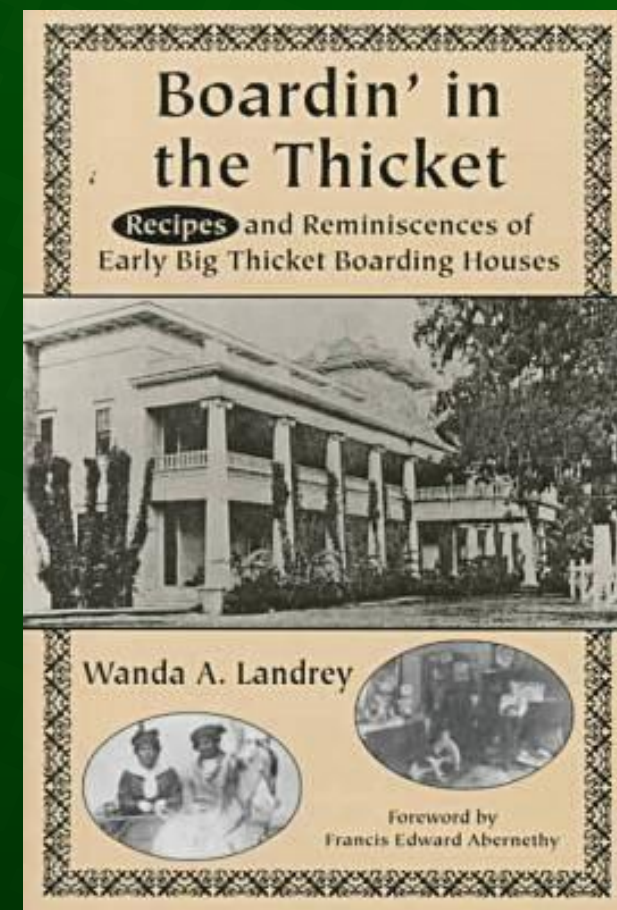
JELLY CAKE

Bessmay Hotel, Bessmay

- 2 cups sugar
- 1 cup butter
- 4 eggs
- 1 cup milk
- 3 cups flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- Pinch of salt

Jelly (blackberry jelly was used most often, but other jellies such as mayhaw were sometimes substituted)

Cream the sugar and butter. Beat in eggs. Add milk, flour, baking powder, and salt. Stir. Grease and flour five cake pans. Pour equal amounts of batter into pans for thin layers. Bake at 375 degrees for 20 to 25 minutes. Cool, remove from pans, and spread jelly between layers and on top of cake.



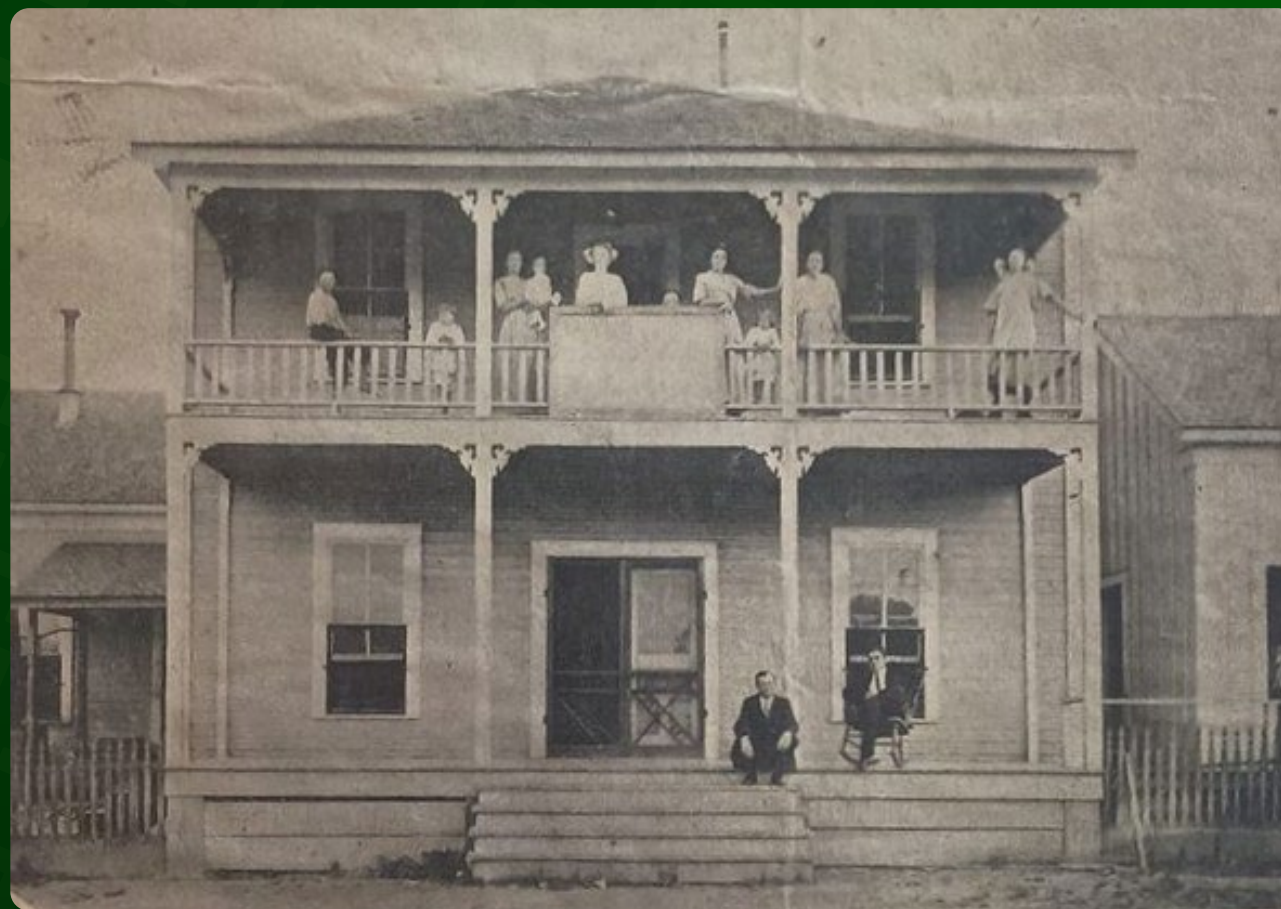
Wanda Landrey's "Boardin' in the Thicket" was published in 1998.

INDIAN PUDDING

East Texas Hotel, Colmesneil

- 4 cups milk
- 2/3 cup Indian meal (or any other kind of coarse cornmeal)
- 1 egg, slightly beaten
- 1/2 cup molasses
- 3/4 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon ginger
- 1 cup raisins
- 1/4 cup butter, melted

Scald milk. Pour milk slowly into meal, stirring constantly. Pour mixture into top of a double boiler and cook over medium heat for 20 minutes, stirring frequently. Remove from heat and add egg, molasses, salt, ginger, and raisins. Stir well and pour into a buttered pan. Bake for 45 minutes at 325 degrees. Pour butter over pudding and continue baking for 15 minutes. Serve warm with whipped cream or ice cream.



The Badders Hotel in Silsbee around 1906.

Neches River Rally

Phoebe Dishman, BTA Director and Bulletin Editor

On Saturday, September 7, over 150 paddlers enjoyed a beautiful day on the Cooks Lake to Scatterman Texas Paddling Trail in the Big Thicket National Preserve.

Thanks to our wonderful Rally Sponsors:

- 1. American Air Systems
- 2. American Valve and Hydrant
- 3. Beaumont CVB
- 4. Big Thicket Plumbing
- 5. Ellen Temple
- 6. ExxonMobil Wellness Center
- 7. First Security Bank
- 8. Lower Neches Valley Authority
- 9. Manna Merch
- 10. Munro's Uniform Services
- 11. National Parks Conservation Association
- 12. Port of Beaumont
- 13. Read Ice
- 14. Sabine Neches Navigation District
- 15. TotalEnergies



*Junior ROTC team
Two singles*

Special thanks to the Westbrook High School Junior Navy ROTC cadets and to the National Preserve's Superintendent, Wayne Prokopetz, and his Park Rangers. Big Thicket Outfitters, Gerald Cerda, was on hand with boats to rent and training as needed. With his helping hands and those of a host of BTA volunteers, we had a great time celebrating the Neches River and the Big Thicket Preserve, among our area's most essential treasures.

Photos by Judy Breaux Comeaux and Bruce Walker



What's cooking?

Kids and dad

Sponsor signage

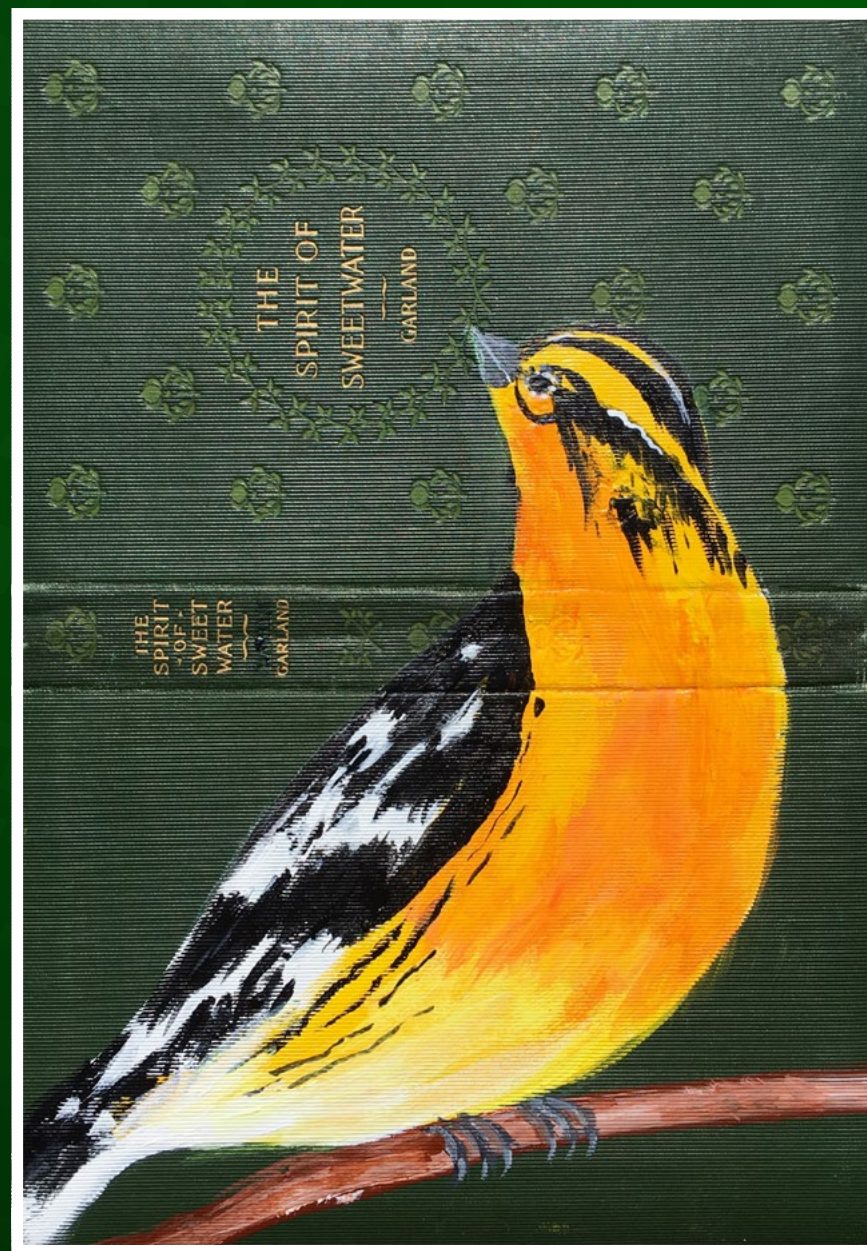
Ellen Temple, Madonna Tree

Photos by Judy Breaux Comeaux and Bruce Walker

Blackburnian Warbler

Phoebe H. Dishman, BTA Director, Bulletin Editor

Tiny bird of the canopy,
 Glimpse of orange, that would be me.
 Named for Anna Blackburne. She
 Was a botanist, eighteenth century.
 Whatever you call me, watch me bounce!
 On bugs and berries I do pounce!
 Springtime rivals I do trounce!
 Five inches long, third of an ounce!
 You looking up and I on the bough—
 We are connected, I and thou.
 I, the absolute joy of Now,
 And your response? An appreciative Wow!



Blackburnian warbler, painting by Isabelle Scurry Chapman

Big Thicket Association Science Café

Explore Fresh Water Mussels

January 13th 6:30PM

Cafe Del Rio, 2830 1-10 Beaumont, Texas 77703

Mr. David Ford is a senior malacologist (mussel biologist) and rescue diver. Mr. Ford has been working with mussels since graduating with an MS in biology from the University of Texas at Tyler where he conducted a habitat modeling project on rare mussels of East Texas and has been working with them ever since in Texas and across the country. Since graduating, Mr. Ford has been conducting various studies and surveys on mussels across Texas with a primary focus on the mussels of the Neches River Basin and Eastern Texas/Louisiana. His research has included stream size and its effects on mussel assemblage composition, the effects climatic events have had on assemblages, and long-term changes in mussel communities. Currently he is returning to old survey sites within the Neches and Sabine River basins to look at long term changes and investigating the upstream range and live history of Atlantic *Rangia* within the lower Neches River.

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I N M E M O R Y



Dr. Elizabeth Gunter
March 10, 1942 - November 6, 2024



Dr. Elizabeth Gunter

Dr. Elizabeth E. Gunter died November 6, 2024 in Denton, Texas, after a long illness. Liz was born on March 10, 1942 in Manhattan, New York. She attended St. Vincent's Academy, graduating with honors, and then attended college at Mount St. Agnes College in Baltimore, Maryland, on full scholarship, where she ranked first in her class and received a B.A. in French in 1963. In 1969 she earned her first doctorate, in Romance Languages, and that year became Assistant Professor of French at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. In 1969, Elizabeth met her future husband, Pete Gunter, who at that time also taught at the University of Tennessee, in Philosophy. They married soon after and moved to Denton, Texas in 1970. Elizabeth taught French for six years at Mountain View College in Dallas, as Pete began teaching Philosophy at the University of North Texas in Denton. In 1974, their daughter, Sheila, was born.

At this time, Elizabeth and Pete became members of a surprisingly small but very determined group of conservationists who worked tirelessly for the creation of the Big Thicket Natural Preserve in Southeast Texas, which, in 1974, was created by Congress, one of the very first national preserves in the United States. Elizabeth and Pete were both adamant about the importance of adding new land to the Thicket, not only to conserve what has been saved, helping to establish the Big Thicket Natural Heritage Trust to acquire land in the Thicket through donations or by purchasing it.

Earlier this March, Elizabeth's beloved husband, Pete, moved on. Now Elizabeth and Pete are undoubtedly reunited up Above, elated to be together, singing folk or classical songs, and, very possibly, happily arguing about the History of Ideas, or just how badly humans on Earth can derail the best of intentions, including elections.

The graveside service was held on Wednesday, December 11th at 2:30 p.m. at Roselawn Memorial Park in Denton. A Celebration of Elizabeth's life will take place at St. Barnabas Episcopal Church on Saturday, January 18th at 3:00 p.m. and will be live-streamed on the church's FaceBook website: [facebook.com/sibdenton](https://www.facebook.com/sibdenton). In lieu of flowers, the family would greatly appreciate donations to the Big Thicket Natural Heritage Trust, at <https://bigthickettrust.org/>

Excerpts from obituary by daughter Sheila. Full version, https://dentonrc.com/obituaries/dr-elizabeth-e-gunter/article_f7b48d33-5ea3-5fc2-bf18-0a4906d542f7.html



SAVE THE DATES

Science Cafe

January 13th - 6 pm - Cafe Del Rio – David Ford, mussel biologist and rescue diver – **Fresh Water Mussels**

Super Bowl Sunday Hike

February 9th - 2pm - Big Thicket National Preserve's Kirby Nature Trail - BTA guided hike (no fees apply)

Science Cafe

April 7th - 6 pm - Cafe Del Rio - Tim Pylate, Armand Bayou Nature Center Executive Director - **Snake Identification: Venomous vs Non-Venomous**

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*. **Private Charters** continue year-round and **Saturday Public Tours** resume March 22nd (fees apply). **Environmental Education Field Trips** resume in March (free to all qualifying area schools).

Big Thicket National Preserve Events

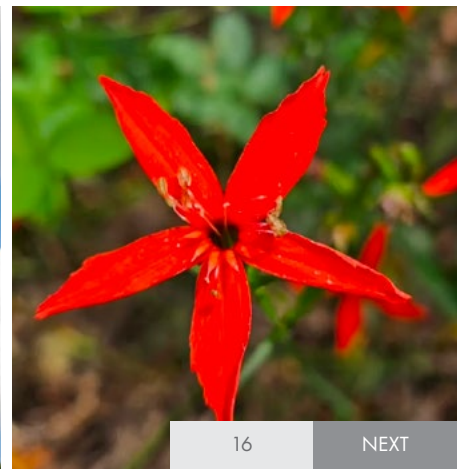
<https://www.nps.gov/bith/planyourvisit/calendar.htm>



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

