



BIG THICKET BULLETIN

ISSUE 165

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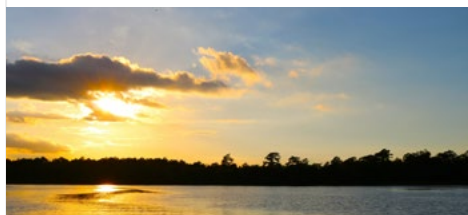
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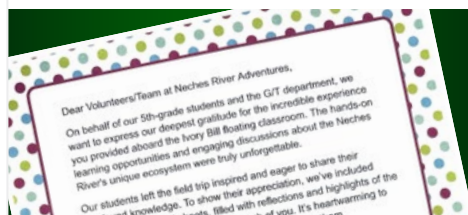
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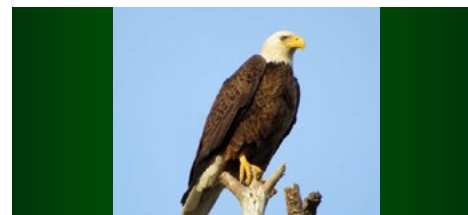
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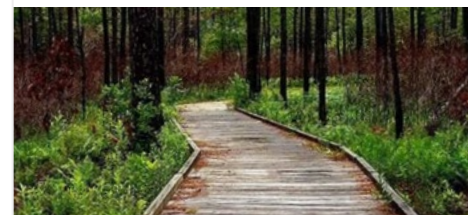
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BTA Milestone! Happy 60th Anniversary! Part V

CAPTAIN BRUCE WALKER, BTA PRESIDENT

with excerpts from *Saving the Big Thicket* by James J. Cozine, Jr

The Yarborough Years: In 1958, Mary Lasswell, a Texas writer, published *I'll Take Texas*. One chapter was devoted to the Big Thicket region. U.S. Senator Ralph Yarborough, elected in 1957, from Henderson County just north of the Big Thicket, remembered listening to his father spin yarns about his hunting exploits in the Thicket. The Big Thicket was a legendary land to the impressionable young Yarborough. As he read the book his interest in the Thicket was revived. He was finally in a position to help save a portion of the Big Thicket.

However, Yarborough postponed any federal action on the Thicket. Governor Price Daniel was trying to establish a State Park in the same area. Additionally, Yarborough was involved in a struggle to form the Guadalupe Mountain National Park, and he had introduced a bill to establish a Padre Island National Seashore. He believed that pushing two national parks in Texas at the same time would be politically unacceptable.

In 1963, Yarborough attended a dedication of the "Big Thicket Scenic Area" in Sam Houston National Forest, a small 1,130 acres. At the dedication he proclaimed that the scenic area "is a beginning, but only a beginning" toward preserving the Big Thicket. Earlier in the year, Yarborough had asked Secretary of Interior Stewart Udall to investigate the death of 300 herons in a rookery in the Thicket. The birds were apparently killed by a pesticide dropped from a plane. Although it was never determined if the incident was accidental or not, the episode strengthened his desire to preserve the region.

When the Big Thicket Association's President, Dempsie Henley, invited Yarborough to tour the region in 1965, the State was no longer pushing for the State Park in the area and Guadalupe Mountain National Park was headed for approval and Padre Island National Seashore had been established in 1962. Ex-Governor Price Daniel and the Senator decided to work together (despite being past political rivals) with the BTA in order to advance the creation of a Big Thicket national park.

Less than two weeks after Yarborough's visit, the major timber companies met in Houston to decide "What our move should be and when." Weldon Watson, the Executive Director of Texas Parks and Wildlife and Governor John Connally heard from the timber executives. They wanted the state to act before the federal government became too deeply involved. A state proposal called for a single-unit park of 20,000 acres. Watson maintained that one large single tract had certain advantages over the "string of pearls" concept advocated by Henley and the Big Thicket Association. However, the state did take a "wait and see" attitude before committing state funds for the project. On October 20, 1966, Senator Yarborough introduced a bill entitled "A Bill to Establish the Big Thicket National Park in Texas". The bill called for a national park not to exceed 75,000 acres within Hardin, Liberty, San Jacinto, Polk, and Tyler counties. The Senator refrained from enumerating the exact locations, because he knew the Big Thicket was still ill-defined and to specify the location would open his bill to more criticism. From past experience, Yarborough realized that it might take years before his bill would pass Congress and become law.

As members of BTA, we are proud of our over 60-year commitment to the preservation of the Thicket and the efforts of Texans like U.S. Senator Ralph Yarborough.



Sen. Ralph Yarborough. Courtesy of BTA, F.E. Abernethy
"A Thicket Marsh"

Big Thicket Association Hosts Annual Super Bowl Sunday Hike

Diane Thompson, BTA Executive Director

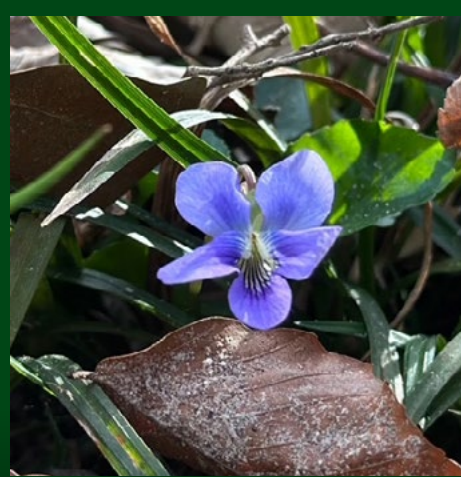
Big Thicket Association has a special tradition on Super Bowl Sunday. Every year before the Super Bowl, members and friends head to the Big Thicket National Preserve to hike and get some exercise before going home to indulge in those delicious Super Bowl snacks we all love. Besides Big Thicket Association members, Sierra Club and the Sabine Neches Chapter of Texas Master Naturalist joined us for the hike.

This year the destination of our hike was the Kirby Nature Trail on highway 420 in Kountze. The Kirby Nature Trail is a three-loop trail that covers approximately 2.5 miles. It's an easy hike for everyone with some wooden bridges, old cypress trees, swampy baygalls, a thick growth forest, and an iron bridge crossing Village Creek. On this winter day it was warm and sunny, a perfect day for a hike.

Ranger Kevin from the Preserve guided the hike and gave interpretation at multiple stops along the way. We learned the Big Thicket is a rich, biodiverse area. It is a transition zone with swamps, deciduous forests, central plains, pine savannahs, and sandhills. There are roughly 1,320 species of trees, shrubs, vines, and grasses, 60 mammal species, 86 reptile and amphibian species, 34 species of freshwater mussels, nearly 1,800 invertebrate species, 97 fish species, at least 300 bird species, and 660 species of mushrooms. Among the plants in the Preserve are four of the five carnivorous plants found in the U.S.

Ask yourself, why is the Big Thicket so diverse? How did all these plants get here? There is an answer to this question and if you visit the Big Thicket National Preserve Visitor Center on Highway 420 in Kountze, TX you can find it.

I encourage you to visit your National Preserve soon to learn about this local treasure.



Photos by Diane Thompson

Big Thicket Association Capital Campaign Funding for Neches River Adventures – Twin 150s Yamaha Outboard Engines

Campaign Overview: Neches River Adventures offers free Environmental Education Classes to area schools on board the *Ivory Bill* pontoon boat. We also offer Public & Private Eco-History Tours (fees apply) in addition to Eco-Art Boat Tours on the Neches River and into the backwater channels of the Big Thicket National Preserve. The *Ivory Bill* is our most visible community program and requires more funding, personnel, volunteers, and assets than any of our other projects.

Currently, the *Ivory Bill*'s two outboard engines need to be replaced.

Campaign Description: The 2007 model Yamaha twin 150 outboard engines on the *Ivory Bill* were on the vessel when BTA obtained it in 2013. They have over 4,000 hours on each of them and have developed mechanical issues despite haul-outs multiple times a year and excellent scheduled service from Jorgensen Marine in Beaumont, TX. Jorgensen quoted \$33,000 to replace both engines with new Yamaha 150s. While BTA's Neches River Adventures has an *Ivory Bill* maintenance savings account containing some funds, the cost of replacement is much greater than the savings account. The campaign began in December and we have already reached over two-thirds of our total goal.

Campaign Brief: BTA is asking our partner organizations and supporters to join us in our Capital Campaign to raise funds to replace the two outboard engines on the *Ivory Bill*. Our 2025 season begins soon and it's imperative that we purchase new engines this year to ensure a successful future for our largest community program. Please consider donating to BTA's Capital Campaign for the *Ivory Bill*'s engine replacements.

We appreciate your support.

<https://www.bigthicket.org/donations>



Looking Back

1887 in the Big Thicket: Awe and desolation

Dennis Durkee, BTA director

"A far as the eye can see, it is the same: the tangled undergrowth and fallen trees block and interpose an almost impossible barrier ... In many places we have to get down on our hands and knees to crawl through the thick, close-knitted growth of baygall bushes and canebrakes. Not a human being can be seen for miles."

Today we try to imagine how the Big Thicket looked before man made his mark. John Caplen's firsthand account in 1887 is a great early resource. It was printed in 1887 in *The Sunny South*, a weekly magazine in Atlanta. It was reprinted in the 1966 book "Tales from the Big Thicket," edited by Francis E. Abernethy.

Caplen spent 10 days riding for 150 miles around Polk and Hardin counties. "As far as the eye can see," he wrote, "it is the same."

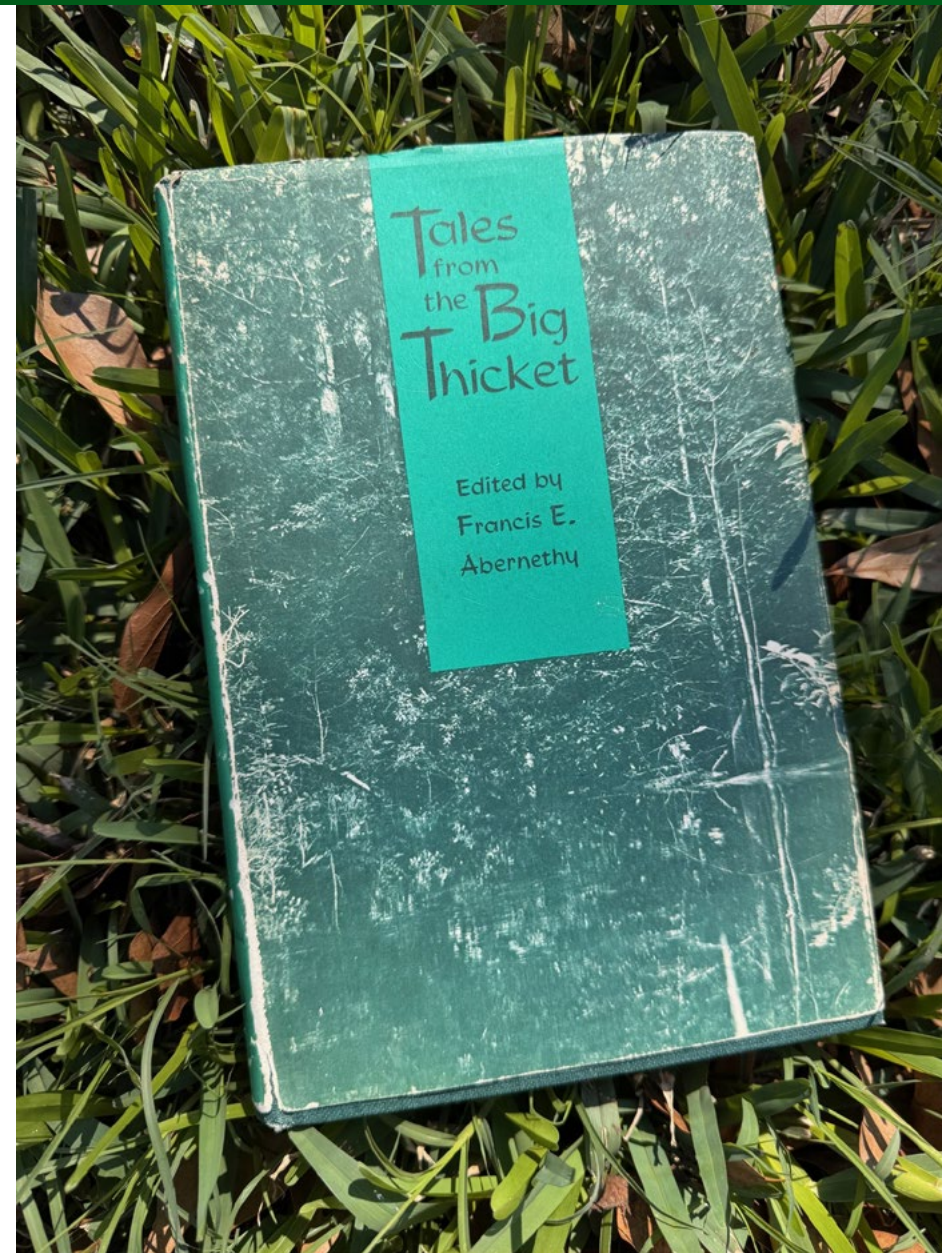
"A dim trail through the thicket is all we have to guide our way; the eyes of our guide are constantly scanning the ground so as to follow the trail. A feeling of awe and desolation comes over me as I look up and around at the big pine trees, white oaks, and magnolias that we pass in pushing our way through the canebrakes. Not a

voice is heard except our own; and when we are passing a grove of pines, the mourning of the wind makes us feel as if the Judgement Day was about to come."

He wrote about meeting some local residents. "The people who live in the pine woods of East Texas are very primitive in their habits ... Traveling through the deep piney woods of this part of Texas, you often find grown men and women that have never seen any prairie country, mountain, or valley, railroad, or steamboat. They grow to manhood and womanhood in the heart of the thicket pine woods and are contented and happy in their log cabins. Oh, contentment, what a blessing!"

He predicted that the Big Thicket would someday be filled with fruit orchards. "This timber country produces fine fruits. June apples, peaches, pears, and grapes grow to perfection when properly cultivated. At some future day fruit culture will be a source of great revenue to the people of the piney woods," he wrote.

He missed the mark on that. But his firsthand account from 1887 still bears fruit for us today.



John Caplen's account of his 1887 journey through the Big Thicket area was reprinted in "Tales from the Big Thicket," edited by Francis E. Abernethy. The book was published in 1996 by the University of Texas Press.

Fear to Hope Youth Project

Mary C. Johnston, BTA Director and ToD Chair

The Big Thicket Association (BTA) and the Thicket of Diversity are partnering in year two of Fear to Hope. The effort is a multi-state experiment coordinated by Dr. Rob Atkinson and students at Christopher Newport University in Newport News, Virginia. BTA's environmental educator Jennie Knapp helped recruit area schools. Two Lion youth groups are also participating.

Texas team leaders are Jordan Brittan of West Orange Stark High School, Susan Ellis of Nederland's Central Middle School and Amy Wilson from Nederland High School, Diana Suire of Orange's Little Cypress Junior High, Shaelyn Anderson from Vidor Junior High School, Lions Bobby Fagen and Charlene Gresham from Polk County Leos and Rick and Mary Johnston with the Hardin County's Sour Lake Lions.

Rising sea and salinity levels are impacting the health of wetland ecosystems and cedar trees growing along the Eastern and Gulf coasts. The emergence of ghost forests with stands of dead trees in these marshy lowlands is a new cause for alarm.

In the experiment each team planted 20 cedar trees. 10 served as the control and 10 were watered with a specified saline solution amount. Throughout the school year trees are monitored. Students record the height of seedlings and learn to use a caliper to measure each tree's diameter.

Results will be shared with Christopher Newport University and be presented at an annual symposium in Newport News in the spring.



Cub Scouts Pack 10 of China and Sour Lake under Cub Master Andrew Wolf met in the Johnston back yard to plant and measure trees.



Successful President's Day Volunteer Event - We had 120 volunteers come spend part of their President's Day with Big Thicket staff and other partners, to continue the restoration efforts in Big Sandy Creek Unit. They planted 900 longleaf pine seedlings and 7,000 bluestem grasses in 3 hours. These events have helped Big Thicket's efforts on restoring the Longleaf Pine savannah ecosystem. Check on volunteer.gov for other volunteer events happening in the future. Submitted by Megan Urban, Public Information Officer, Big Thicket National Preserve.



Ranger-led programs continue to be offered this winter and spring time. Visitors can join Ranger Max on a ranger-led paddle trip or try one of our new night programs. In this photo, Ranger Kevin leads visitors on a night hike as he shares stories about Big Thicket while Ranger Scott is taking visitors on a trip through the night sky with the telescope on the Longleaf Pine trail. More information can be found on the website www.nps.gov/bith or by calling the Visitor Center at 409-951-6700. Submitted by Megan Urban, Public Information Officer, Big Thicket National Preserve.

Forest Legacy 2024 Funded Projects

Shared by Ellen Buchanan, President of the BTNHT and past BTA President, with information from the US Forest Service

The Big Thicket-Neches River Corridor project will protect 39,762 acres of Sustainable Forestry Initiative certified timberland along 63 miles of the Neches River, including over 24,000 acres of forested wetlands. This will be the largest working forest conservation easement in Texas, strategically buffering a federally protected river corridor of the National Park Service's Big Thicket National Preserve (BTNP). This conservation easement will increase protected lands in the Big Thicket region by 35%, increase connectivity within BTNP, conserve habitat for rare and diverse species, and contribute to floodplain protection—all while keeping the property in private ownership and in forest production.

This project is made possible by the diligence of the TAMU Forest Service, who will hold the conservation easement, The Nature Conservancy and The Conservation Fund.

In 2024, the Forest Service is investing nearly \$544 million in 63 projects that

will conserve more than 608 million acres of private forestlands across the United States, ensuring these special places will remain for the communities that rely on them.

States, local partners, and tribes have helped to identify forests that provide outstanding benefits to the public. These forests will be conserved through conservation easements and land acquisitions.

These forests are vital to the fabric of local communities and economies. The investments will ensure that these forestlands will remain working forests while advancing the most critical conservation issues, like protecting watersheds, reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfires, and conserving habitat for at-risk species.

Forest Legacy was established by Congress and is administered by the Forest Service. Forest Legacy receives funding through the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA).



David Bezanson, TNC

Letter from Port Arthur ISD

Dear Volunteers/Team at Neches River Adventures,

On behalf of our 5th-grade students and the G/T department, we want to express our deepest gratitude for the incredible experience you provided aboard the *Ivory Bill* floating classroom. The hands-on learning opportunities and engaging discussions about the Neches River's unique ecosystem were truly unforgettable.

Our students left the field trip inspired and eager to share their newfound knowledge. To show their appreciation, we've included their field trip record sheets, filled with reflections and highlights of the amazing things they learned from each of you. It's heartwarming to see the positive impact this experience has had on them.

A special thanks also goes to the generous donors who made it possible for us to attend this educational adventure free of charge.

Your commitment to supporting young minds and fostering environmental awareness is truly commendable.

Thank you for your time, dedication, and passion for education. You have helped create lasting memories and inspired our students to care deeply about their environment.

With heartfelt gratitude to our amazing *Ivory Bill* volunteers,
Pamela Mahan & Valerie Harrison
G/T Enrichment Teachers
PAISD

A few things our students have learned while taking a ride on the *Ivory Bill*!

- ➔ "The difference between a National Preserve and a National Park."
- ➔ "Spanish moss is a sign that the air is fresh."
- ➔ "Turbidity is the measure of water clarity."
- ➔ "Macro invertebrates are creatures that have no backbone."
- ➔ "NEVER pull the red tag on a life jacket."
- ➔ "Ammonia is human, animal, industrial waste. and decomposed plant matter."

For more info about taking your class on a No-Cost environmental education field trip, please visit: Nechesriveradventures.org



Now Hiring Part-time River Boat Captains & Deckhands

The Big Thicket Association operates the *Ivory Bill*, a 45-foot covered excursion boat on the Neches River for School Field Trips, Saturday Public Eco-History Tours, Eco- Art Boats, and Private Charters. The boat operates on the open river, and is capable of navigating the shallows of cypress-lined backwater channels of the Big Thicket National Preserve. The vessel has the capacity to carry thirty passengers and crew members are USCG approved. River guides, docents, and educators are Big Thicket Association staff members, volunteers, or special guest.

Crew Requirements:

Captains are required to hold a current USCG Mariner Credential, TWIC Card, 1st Aid & CPR/AED Certification, *Maritime Consortium Membership, and attend training aboard the *Ivory Bill*. Captains can be volunteers or paid contractors. Contractors are paid \$35 hourly.

Deckhands are required to hold a current 1st Aid & CPR/AED Certification, *Maritime Consortium Membership, and attend training aboard the *Ivory Bill*. Deckhands can be volunteers or paid contractors. Contractors are paid \$20 hourly.

* The Maritime Consortium is a random drug testing program. Enrollment is paid by the Big Thicket Association.

Apply: <https://form.jotform.com/240386358244056>

Editor's Bird Corner: Bald Eagle

Phoebe H. Dishman, BTA Director, Bulletin Editor

What a thrill to see our national bird in the Thicket, and elsewhere! From an essay of mine some years ago:

The young eaglet from Sooner Lake, whose progress has been beamed all over the world via "nest cam," is eleven weeks old today. I continue to check on him/her from time to time. How fascinating, what a blessing, to have seen him grow from a tiny gray fuzz ball, helpless, to the strapping adolescent he is today. He spends less and less time in the bowl of the nest. He perches at the outer edges, or hops up onto the manmade beams that support the nest. He flexes and flaps his mighty eagle wings, as if to say, "What are these strange, magnificent, promising things attached to me? What am I to do with them?" I think he'll figure it out before long, for his parents are gradually reducing his food-allowance. His first flight will be soon, very soon. Perhaps even today.

More recently, Eli Federman wrote:

The eagle offers us more than a patriotic emblem. Its sharp vision urges us to focus on what matters. Its flight challenges us to rise above obstacles. Its nest reminds us of the importance of building strong foundations for future generations. In a world grappling with division, the eagle calls us to rise above turmoil, find clarity and soar toward the promise of something great.



Image: courtesy Golden Triangle Audubon Society

Mussel Science Café, a Great Success

Mary Catherine Johnston, BTA director,
Thicket of Diversity chair

The Big Thicket Association and the Thicket of Diversity Science Committee were thrilled to host Senior Malacologist David Ford of Edge Engineering at a Science Café on January 13th.

His presentation highlighted the importance of freshwater mussels and his unique finds on the Neches River, one of the most biodiverse waterways in Texas. Ford is a rescue diver so he has first-hand underwater experience. An interesting slideshow accompanied his narrative.

Mussels are ecosystem engineers as they serve as a water filter and draw in contaminants. They are also recognized as a keystone species. Healthy mussel populations and thriving wetland ecosystems go hand-in-hand. Unfortunately, many species are now threatened or endangered. Factors impacting mussels include climate changes due to drought and high-

water events and man-made alterations to waterways. It is generally known globally that the species is in trouble. Because of their longevity, mussels are the sentinels of our river and can be compared to the canary in the coal mine.

Ford compared historic research and decided to model a current project after Christensen and Pyne (2020). It is notable that Dr. Mathew Pyne is an Associate Professor of Biology at Lamar University and a member of the Thicket of Diversity Committee. Ford chose to re-inventory sites to analyze the status of mussels today. To date, he has identified 21 of the 32 known species in the Neches River system. Overall, mussel species appear to be increasing, but this includes the invasive zebra mussel and Atlantic Rangia, a species possibly spread from an accidental release in intracoastal ballast water and the movement of commercial oysters.

The increased numbers could indicate improved river health or perhaps be an indicator of the skill of Ford as a collector. Nevertheless, his project continues, and the Big Thicket Association is eager to follow its progress!



Jason Watson, Environmental Director at LNVA Salt Water Barrier, with David Ford – Mary C. Johnston



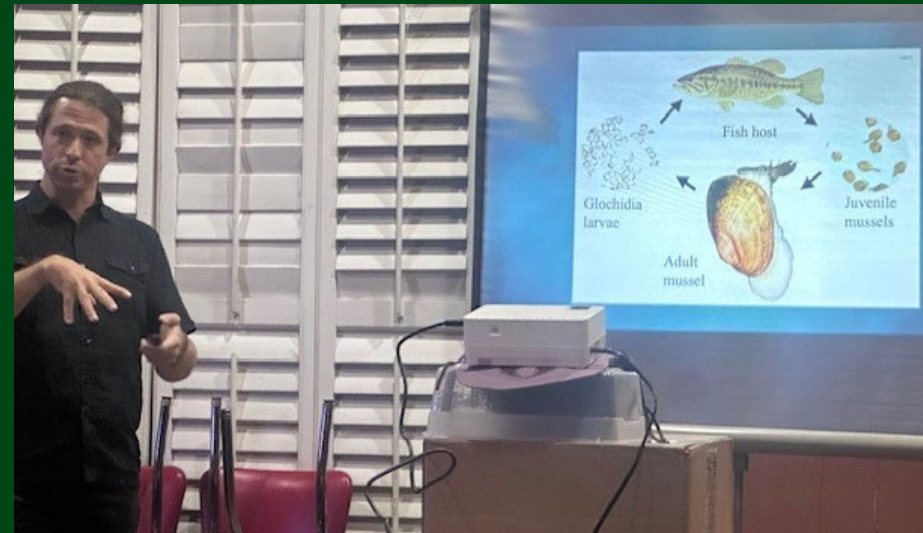
Audience at the Café – Diane Thompson

Note from Editor: Someone who attended the Café was inspired to write a poem—

*I learned that it takes quite a tussle
To learn the whereabouts of a mussel,
How in the streambed it doth nustle,
Ne'er complaining nor making a fussle.
The Neches kind aren't good to gussle,
But to study them is worth the hustle.
Eco-health upon a shell—
To learn about them we do well.*



BTA Executive Director Diane Thompson, David Ford, BTA director and Thicket of Diversity chair Mary Catherine Johnston



David Ford – Diane Thompson



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*. **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).

Science Café

April 7th at 6 pm

El Viejo Tony Mexican Bar & Grill, 4545 Dowlen Rd., Beaumont, TX
Tim Pylate, Armand Bayou Nature Center Executive Director - Snake Identification: Venomous vs Non-venomous (free event)

12th Annual Neches River Rally

September 6th - Cooks Lake to Scatterman Paddling Trail - LNVA
Saltwater Barrier Boat Ramp - 6790 Bigner Road - Beaumont, TX 77708
(Fees apply) Registration for this event is currently not open.

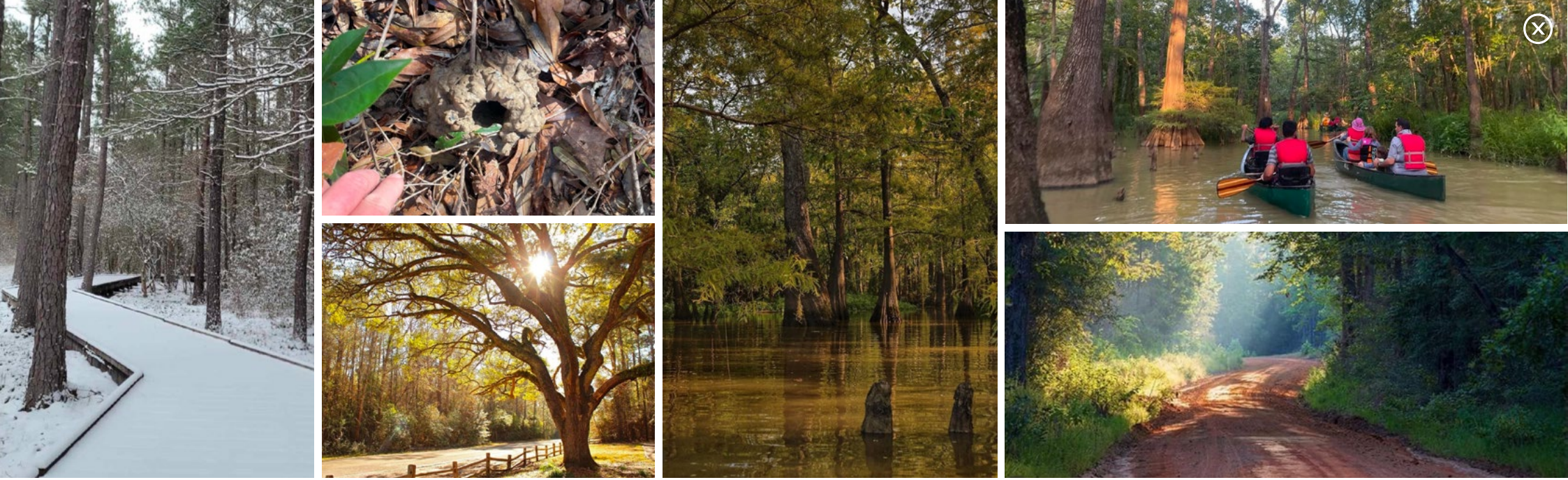
Big Thicket Day on the Neches

October 11th - Collier's Ferry Park on the Neches

Free family friendly event - Exhibitors and vendors, activities for children, live musical entertainment, a keynote speaker, and lunch. Plus, free *Ivory Bill* boat tours.

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/biith
- 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
- The Portal to Texas History
www.texashistory.unt.edu
- 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



Thanks to Penny Clark and Lamar University Special Collections, BTA Bulletins from BTA's inception forward are now available online through The Portal to Texas History, a digital repository hosted by the UNT Libraries. Go to texashistory.unt.edu, then search on Big Thicket Association Bulletins, for a fascinating look at our history.