

# BIG THICKET BULLETIN

ISSUE 130

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# QUARTERLY MESSAGE *from* THE PRESIDENT

FOUR YEARS *and growing strong*

*Letter from Jan Ruppel, president of the Big Thicket Association*

My fourth year of office has begun. Patterns have been established; the work of the past years is paying off; and it's more about monitoring than developing.

The 2013 Strategic Plan nearly ate my lunch that first year of my presidency but it seems to have been worth the time. One of the consultant's focus was on the Nominating Committee indicating the Big Thicket Association needed to evaluate the kinds of skills and talents needed on the board. For the past two years that suggestion has made us more diverse and strengthened the board with members who been willing and able to take leadership roles that fit our skill set, which has been a bonus in assisting me with responsibilities.

The Advocacy Coalition Steering Committee has been active. Leslie Barras, a member of the Steering Committee, represented the coalition, made up of about eight organizations, on Thursday, March 31, at the South East Texas Regional Planning Commission speaking to financial issues regarding the 105 Toll Road. Five pro op-eds have appeared in the Orange Leader since April. Members of the coalition, Dale Parish, Sharon Odegar, Leslie Barras and Jan Ruppel have responded for the coalition.

Neches River Adventures season is in full swing. The extremely wet weather conditions have created some challenges. We've had several floods and high water to work around. In the Environmental Education program students are experiencing field labs and are enthusiastic about exploring real life situations in an outdoor setting. Our intern, Jen, is leaving and returning to her home state of Minnesota. We have enjoyed having her be a part of the program and thank her for the contributions she has made toward its success. Alison Tartar Dennehy is replacing Jen as our intern. We welcome her.



## MARK YOUR CALENDAR

### Upcoming Meetings and Events

#### July 9

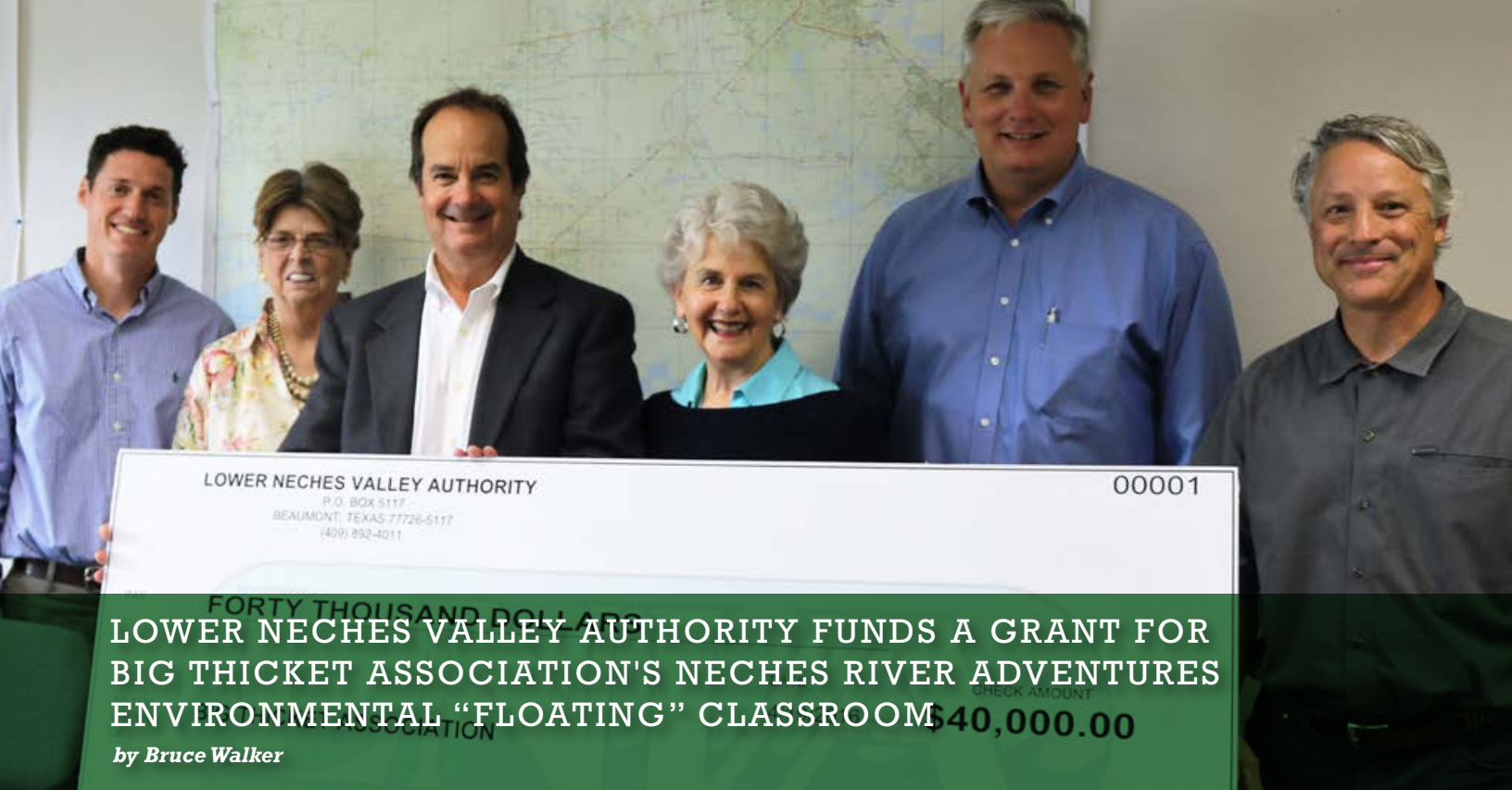
Board of Director's Meeting at Saratoga

#### September 10

Neches River Rally

#### October 1

Big Thicket Association Annual Meeting and Big Thicket Day with National Park Service hosting it at the Visitor's Center.



## LOWER NECHES VALLEY AUTHORITY FUNDS A GRANT FOR BIG THICKET ASSOCIATION'S NECHES RIVER ADVENTURES ENVIRONMENTAL "FLOATING" CLASSROOM

by Bruce Walker

*Pictured above from left to right: Caleb Spurlock, LNVA Treasurer · Jeanie Turk, LNVA Director · Steve McReynolds, LNVA President · Jan Ruppel, BTA President · Scott Hall, LNVA General Manager · Jordan Reese IV, LNVA Director*

The Lower Neches River Valley Authority (Lower Neches Valley Authority) recently presented the Big Thicket Association a check for \$40,000 to support the funding of the Big Thicket Association's Neches River Adventures Environmental Education Classroom. This is an environmental education program developed by the Big Thicket Association in which students travel the Neches River aboard the Ivory Bill, a 45 foot pontoon boat. Students take part in a variety of instructional programming much of which involves hands-on experiments and demonstrations while they explore the Neches River and various tributaries of the Big Thicket National Preserve. Staff on board the Ivory Bill include a licensed captain, first mate, and a certified teacher trained in providing aquatic experiences for students.

Besides providing classes for area students, donors also provide funding for teacher workshops. Workshops are presented in locations throughout the region.

Jan Ruppel, Big Thicket Association President, said "Funding provided by donors like Lower Neches Valley Authority, have given the Big Thicket Association the opportunity to provide these environmental educational classes *free* to public and private schools throughout Big Thicket National Preserve's seven county region."

Scott Hall, General Manager of Lower Neches Valley Authority, says that "The Lower Neches Valley Authority Commissioners began supporting the environmental classes in 2014 to assist the Big Thicket Association's efforts to provide area students the opportunity to learn more about the Neches River and its vital relationship with Southeast Texas communities, businesses, and industries. The floating classroom gives students an on-site view

of our area's resources that many would not have the opportunity to experience".

This year, The Big Thicket Association and the Big Thicket National Preserve are celebrating the National Park Service's Centennial Year. With donor support, the Big Thicket Association will host and co-host a number of centennial events to promote conservation of the natural resources and rich history of our National Parks including: Monthly Explore Your Thicket Hikes, Neches River Rally, and Big Thicket Day. From March through November, Big Thicket Association's Neches River Adventures also offers public tours and private charters on the river and into the Big Thicket National Preserve.



**Captain Spud DeVillier helps environmental education students with the new PFD's before boarding the Ivory Bill. The PFD's were funded with a grant from the Lower Neches Valley Authority (Lower Neches Valley Authority).**

# TOURISM TO BIG THICKET NATIONAL PRESERVE CREATES **\$7,893,000** IN ECONOMIC BENEFITS.

*Report shows visitor spending supports 112 jobs in local economy.*

*U.S. Department of the Interior*

A new National Park Service (NPS) report shows that 125,832 visitors to Big Thicket National Preserve in 2015 spent \$7,893,000 in communities near the preserve. That spending supported 112 jobs in the local area and had a cumulative benefit to the local economy of \$10,139,900. “Big Thicket National Preserve welcomes visitors from across the country and around the world,” said Superintendent Wayne Prokopetz. “We are delighted to share the story of this place and the experiences it provides. We also feature the park as a way to introduce our visitors to this part of the country and all that it offers. National park tourism is a significant driver in the national economy, returning \$10 for every \$1 invested in the National Park Service, and it’s a big factor in our local economy as well. We appreciate the partnership and support of our neighbors and are glad to be able to give back by helping to sustain local communities.”

The peer-reviewed visitor spending analysis was conducted by economists Catherine Cullinane Thomas of the U.S. Geological Survey and Lynne Koontz of the National Park Service. The report shows \$16.9 billion of direct spending by 307.2 million park visitors in communities within 60 miles of a national park. This spending supported 295,000 jobs nationally; 252,000 of those jobs are found in these gateway communities. The cumulative benefit to the U.S. economy was \$32 billion.

According to the 2015 report, most park visitor spending was for lodging (31.1 percent) followed by food and beverages (20.2 percent), gas and oil (11.8 percent), admissions and fees (10.2 percent) and souvenirs and other expenses (9.8 percent).

Report authors this year produced an interactive tool. Users can explore current year visitor spending, jobs, labor income, value added, and output effects by sector for national, state, and local economies. Users can also view year-by-year trend data. The interactive tool and report are available at the NPS Social Science Program webpage: [go.nps.gov/vse](http://go.nps.gov/vse). The report includes information for visitor spending at individual parks and by state.



## **BIG THICKET ASSOCIATION OFFERS COOL FAMILY ADVENTURES ON HOT SUMMER DAYS ON THE NECHES RIVER**

When you are in Beaumont this summer call ahead, **409-651-5326**, for reservations for a Saturday morning tour on the Ivory Bill, 10 am to noon on the Neches River for breathtaking riverside views of the Big Thicket National Preserve and its wildlife.

Mark **SEPTEMBER 12** on your calendar to participate in our annual canoe and kayak fundraiser, Neches River Rally. Watch for details of this pleasurable event designed to promote the Big Thicket National Preserve, while allowing you the opportunity to experience paddling through a stunning Cypress Tupelo Swamp as you enjoy the beauty and serenity of the area.



## **TRINITY RIVER NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE TEMPORARILY CLOSED**

We regret to announce that on Saturday, May 28th, the Trinity River National Wildlife Refuge is temporarily closing the Champion Lake Public Use Area and all trails due to the flooding currently going on. We will also have to cancel the June 4th Family Free Fishing Day Event as the five inches of rain we received on the 27th caused Champion Lake to overflow again. The lake waters will not recede in time for the fishing event. We will re-open as soon as the water drops below the deck on the Champion Lake fishing pier. The popular Champion Lake Public Use Area is located at the end of County Road 417 off of FM 1409 in southern Liberty. For further information, please contact the Refuge at **936-336-9786**.



## MAXINE AND THE PITCHER PLANT BOG

by *Ellen Buchanan*

Maxine Johnston told me about a pitcher plant bog in the Lance Rosier Unit that she and Harold Nicholas had found in the late 1960's, and she wanted to visit again knowing the Preserve staff had been to the bog late last year to clear the path of vegetation.

Maxine, Tom Maddux and I headed out from Batson following a Marysee Prairie workday in May. We turned off FM 770 onto Coe Road, which turned into Little Rock Road, and is also accessible from FM 326 south of Kountze. Maxine knew right where the boundary of the park began and right where the road to the north was located to begin our hike. Google maps identified the road as Fire Tower Road. We parked, sprayed down with bug spray and began our hike.

We were walking through the beautiful remnants of a long leaf pine savannah. There were several water hazards to walk around and sundews all over the road. We walked approximately a mile to the northeast reaches of the Unit. The bog is a short walk off the east side of the road.

Thousands of blooming pitcher plants stretched way back into the woods. The hike and swatting mosquitoes were well worth the effort. The pitcher plants were magnificent and Maxine was pleased to see them again. Maxine continues to out hike all of us.

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## NECHES RIVER ADVENTURES PROGRAM CONTINUES TO GROW WITH THE HELP OF TEXAS STREAM TEAM

by *Kathy Barrios, Environmental Educator*

Neches River Adventures classes have been invited by the Texas Stream Team to participate as the first and only Student Scientists to report directly to the statewide Citizen Scientist database of water quality. Data collected at our assigned GPS location at Ten Mile Bayou in the Big Thicket National Preserve will be added to the state website. This information will be available to teachers and students as a tool to look for changes and trends and compare their student's test results to similar aquatic ecosystems in Texas.

Students take this responsibility seriously and are proud of their contribution to the historical record of "their bayou". Stream Team has also created a Field Guide for students to record the results of their testing which can then be used to extend the lesson into the classroom.

Our partnership with Texas Stream Team continues to grow as our Environmental Educator, Kathy Barrios, has been asked to train and participate in the Texas Aquatic Science program. This cooperative education project is sponsored by Texas Parks and Wildlife, the Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies, and the Meadows Center. This project provides resources which will enrich our existing Middle School program and help us develop a program for High School students.

Upon completion of her training this summer, Mrs. Barrios will be qualified to facilitate Texas Aquatic Science activities and to provide training to area teachers. In addition, the Big Thicket National Preserve will be added to the Texas Parks and Wildlife website as a "Texas Aquatic Science Certified Site". This will provide opportunities to expand the Neches River Adventures program and bring attention to the Big Thicket National Preserve.

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## INTERNATIONAL MIGRATORY BIRD DAY AT BIG THICKET NATIONAL PRESERVE

by *Mary Kay Manning*

The preserve joined more than 700 other sites throughout North, Central, and South America on May 14 who were promoting festivals, educational programs, and conservation activities related to International Migratory Bird Day (IMBD) 2016. The staff offered two guided bird walks in Big Thicket National Preserve on the Sundew Trail and the Pitcher Plant Trail while kids participated in birding-themed games and other outdoor activities, including a short bird walk.

Through many events held throughout the Americas, IMBD celebrations explore how birds have inspired some of the most significant environmental conservation actions. For generations, migratory birds have connected communities across continents, providing unique opportunities for international collaboration and inspiring people to improve conditions for birds, all wildlife, and for ourselves.

National and international cooperation is an essential step toward safeguarding the world's migratory birds, whose long-distance flights often cross political borders, exposing them to widely varying conservation philosophies and laws. "This year's International Migratory Bird Day is a celebration of the capacity of individuals to compel world leaders to prioritize migratory bird conservation," says Dr. Susan Bonfield, Executive Director of Environment for the Americas. "Collaboration and a commitment to actions that protect migratory birds along their entire flyways, and throughout their lifecycles, are crucial to safeguarding migratory populations."

The Migratory Bird Treaty Act, enacted in 1916, has protected nearly all migratory bird species in the U.S. and Canada for the last century. By working together towards this common cause, we hope to initiate another century of bird conservation.



# UPCOMING CENTENNIAL EVENTS

## **Saturday, June 18, 10 am** **PADDLING TRIP**

Join park rangers for a guided canoe trip on the waters of the preserve. This program targets the casual and novice paddler. Canoes, Personal Floatation Devices and paddles will be provided. Trip locations vary and space is limited, so call our visitor center at [409-951-6700](tel:409-951-6700) to find each trip location and to register.

## **Friday, June 24, 8:30 pm** **NIGHT HIKE**

Engage your senses and learn about nocturnal animals on this night hike. Hike locations vary and space is limited, so call our visitor center at [409-951-6700](tel:409-951-6700) to find each trip location and to register.

## **Sunday, July 3, 10 am** **TURKEY CREEK TRAIL HIKE** **(MIDDLE SECTION)**

Earn mileage towards your Centennial Club award on this exploration of the Turkey Creek Trail from Gore Store Road to CR 4825 and back. The full round-trip distance is 6 miles; hikers can choose to hike a shorter or longer distance. Meet at the preserve visitor center at 9 :30 am to convoy to the location or meet at the Gore Store Road Trailhead access on the NORTH side of the road at 10 am, located three miles east of HWY 69/287 north of Village Mills. Be prepared with water, sunscreen, bug spray and snacks. Please call the visitor center at [409-951-6700](tel:409-951-6700) to register.

## **Saturday, July 9, 8:30 pm** **NIGHT HIKE**

Engage your senses and learn about nocturnal animals on this night hike. Hike locations vary and space is limited, so call our visitor center at [409-951-6700](tel:409-951-6700) to find each trip location and to register.

## **Saturday, July 16, 10 am** **PADDLING TRIP**

Join park rangers for a guided canoe trip on the waters of the preserve. This program targets the casual and novice paddler. Canoes, Personal Floatation Devices and paddles will be provided. Trip locations vary and space is limited, so call our visitor center at [409-951-6700](tel:409-951-6700) to find each trip location and to register.

## **Friday, July 22, 8:15 pm** **NIGHT HIKE**

Engage your senses and learn about nocturnal animals on this night hike. Hike locations vary and space is limited, so call our visitor center at [409-951-6700](tel:409-951-6700) to find each trip location and to register.

## **Saturday, July 16, 10 am** **PADDLING TRIP**

Join park rangers for a guided canoe trip on the waters of the preserve. This program targets the casual and novice paddler. Canoes, Personal Floatation Devices and paddles will be provided. Trip locations vary and space is limited, so call our visitor center at [409-951-6700](tel:409-951-6700) to find each trip location and to register.

## **Friday, July 22, 8:15 pm** **NIGHT HIKE**

Engage your senses and learn about nocturnal animals on this night hike. Hike locations vary and space is limited, so call our visitor center at [409-951-6700](tel:409-951-6700) to find each trip location and to register.

## **Sunday, August 7, 10 am** **BEAVER SLIDE & BIRDWATCHERS** **TRAILS**

Earn mileage towards your Centennial Club award as you explore two short trails, the Beaver Slide and Birdwatchers Trails. The full round-trip distance is 2.5 miles. Meet at the preserve visitor center at 9 am to convoy to the location or meet at the Beaver Slide Trailhead at 10 am, located on FM 943, one mile west of the intersection with FM 1276 and three miles east of Segno, Texas. Be prepared with water, sunscreen, bug spray and snacks. Please call the visitor center at [409-951-6700](tel:409-951-6700) to register.

## **Saturday, August 13, 8:00 pm** **NIGHT HIKE**

Engage your senses and learn about nocturnal animals on this night hike. Hike locations vary and space is limited, so call our visitor center at [409-951-6700](tel:409-951-6700) to find each trip location and to register.

## **Saturday, August 20, 10 am** **PADDLING TRIP**

Join park rangers for a guided canoe trip on the waters of the preserve. This program targets the casual and novice paddler. Canoes, Personal Floatation Devices and paddles will be provided. Trip locations vary and space is limited, so call our visitor center at [409-951-6700](tel:409-951-6700) to find each trip location and to register.

## **Friday, August 26, 7:45 pm** **NIGHT HIKE**

Engage your senses and learn about nocturnal animals on this 1-mile walk. Hike locations vary and space is limited, so call our visitor center at [409-951-6700](tel:409-951-6700) to find each trip location and to register.

## **Saturday, October 1, 2016** **BIG THICKET DAY**

In partnership with the Big Thicket Association, we will celebrate the establishment of Big Thicket National Preserve on Saturday, October 1, 2016. Hosted at the preserve visitor center, just north of Kountze, Texas, the day's events will include kids' activities, special speakers, ranger-led hikes and much more. We hope to see you there!

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Find additional information on all the preserve's upcoming events and programs on our [website](#) on [Facebook](#), or by calling our visitor center at [409-951-6700](tel:409-951-6700).

# TX DOT PLANS WOULD ELIMINATE BOAT ACCESS AT PINE ISLAND BAYOU

By Bruce Walker, Executive Director, Big Thicket Association

TxDOT held an open house public meeting in Beaumont to discuss the proposed improvements to US 69 at Pine Island from Tram Road to Cooks Lake Road in Jefferson and Hardin counties.

The proposed project includes:

- Constructing new continuous northbound and southbound frontage roads along US 69 between Tram Road and Cooks Lake Road
- Building new frontage road bridges over Pine Island Bayou
- Removing the existing U-turn located south of Pine Island Bayou to improve mobility
- Removing the existing boat ramp located north of Pine Island Bayou, given the addition of the frontage roads and bridges
  - TxDOT initially identified three existing boat ramps providing access to Pine Island Bayou that could be used by the public instead of the US 69 boat ramp
  - These ramps are located at US 96 at Village Creek bridge north of Lumberton, Village Creek State Park access ramp on Park Road 74 in northeast Lumberton, and Lower Neches Valley Authority Saltwater Barrier boat ramp on Bigner Road in Beaumont
  - These ramps are located approximately 8 miles from the US 69 ramp (please note there is a \$3 entrance fee for adults into Village Creek State Park)
- The project is not anticipated to require the acquisition of additional right of way; therefore, no residential or commercial displacements are anticipated

More than 130 people attended the public comment meeting to talk to TxDOT engineers and voice their concerns. The widening project is expected to cost \$12 million and construction could begin in 2017.

Bruce Walker, Big Thicket Association Executive Director, and Ellen Buchanan, Big Thicket Heritage Trust President, attended

the meeting to learn more, voice concerns regarding BITH, and hear comments from many citizens that are opposed to removing the much used boat ramp.

Stacie Swearingen lives on Cooks Lake Road said that access to the bayou is essential for first responders in emergencies that includes flood evacuation, and TxDOT plans should include a new boat ramp because the other area ramps are inadequate. She says, “It’s completely irresponsible not to have one.” Kerry Wood said, “If we lose the boat ramp, we lose a whole piece of nature. They can put a new boat ramp in right next to it.” Bob Wood, Hardin County Emergency Services District board member said, “That’s reasonable. We need additional egress from Jefferson County, but we don’t want to change Hardin County’s. We don’t want to destroy wildlife.” (Beaumont Enterprise, May 17, 2016)

State Representative James White, R-Woodville, said he will write a letter of support of keeping the ramp. He said, “My suggestion to TxDOT is to accommodate the boat ramp. The impact is not only environmental, recreational, and cultural. There are also concerns regarding first responders roadway access and water access.

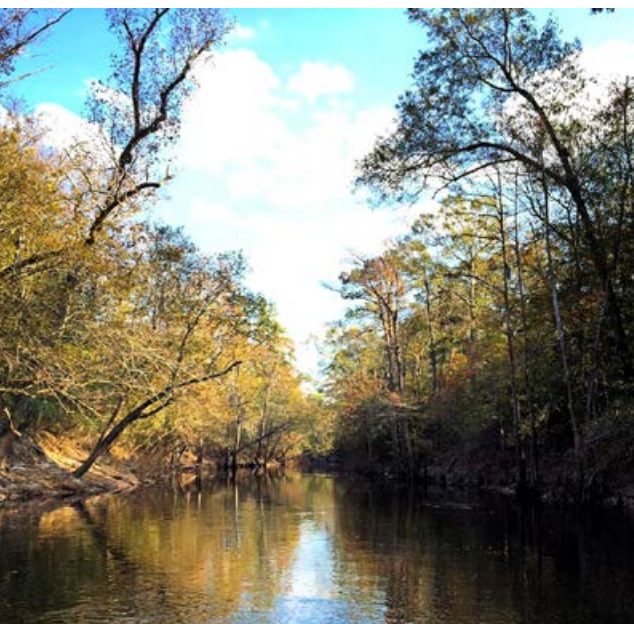
The Big Thicket Association will continue to monitor TxDOT’s proposal regarding this project as well as other roadway projects that limit access or destroy habitat and wetlands in the Big Thicket National Preserve.



State Rep James White and Ellen Buchanan



**BIG THICKET ASSOCIATION**  
*Partners in Preservation*







**Big Thicket Association**  
P.O. Box 198  
Saratoga, TX 77585-0198

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

John Stafford  
[jstafford@bigthicket.org](mailto:jstafford@bigthicket.org)

**Send address changes to address  
noted above**

## WEB SITES

Big Thicket Association  
[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 Conservation Association  
[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)

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## 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.

