



BIG THICKET BULLETIN

ISSUE **147**

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

2020

JULY
AUGUST
SEPTEMBER

3

Congress Passes Great American Outdoors Act »



4

New BTA Executive Director »



5

Hiking »



6

The Future of the Open Outdoors for Kids, Houston Focus City Project »



7

Mark Your Calendar »

8

Capturing Change Though Time with Chronolog »



9

Birds of the Big Thicket: Catbird »

10

Remembering "Sug" Blackwell »

11

Westgate Receives Award »

12

What's Been Happening During the Pandemic »



Congress Passes Great American Outdoors Act

This bipartisan legislation represents a historic victory for our national parks and will authorize billions of dollars to fund critical maintenance projects and to conserve vulnerable lands.

Conservation groups across the nation have been working for two decades to secure these two vital park initiatives that have been so underfunded.

Visitors to national parks expect a personal experience that reflects America's rich history and natural beauty, but many parks are in desperate need of repairs and are reaching a breaking point. Tourists are encountering closed roads and trails, outdated facilities, locked restrooms, and other serious problems.

Any deferred maintenance and land and water conservation projects that receive funding through the Great American Outdoors Act would be chosen by the Department of the Interior from a list of eligible national park projects. There are many examples of high-priority repairs and conservation needs at beloved national parks throughout the country that might benefit directly from these funds.

Comments:

NPCA (National Parks Conservation Association): "Congress just overwhelming passed legislation to provide \$6.5 billion to fix parks so we can leave them in great shape for the next generation; create 100,000 infrastructure-related jobs to put hardworking Americans back to work; ensure \$900 million every year goes toward funding new local, regional and national parks. The bipartisan Great American Outdoors Act is now going to be law thanks to your support and passion for our national parks. We did it!"



WELCOME

New BTA Executive Director

by Kathy Smartt, BTA President

The Executive Committee of the Big Thicket Association is pleased to announce the hiring of Ms. Wendy J. Ledbetter to assume the position of Executive Director, currently held by Mr. Bruce Walker who will be retiring this fall.

Ms. Ledbetter has over 25 years of conservation and management experience most recently as Forest Program Manager for Texas Chapter of THE NATURE CONSERVANCY. She is also a former officer and board member of Big Thicket Association with close ties to our organization. Her education includes a bachelor's degree in Wildlife Biology from Colorado State University. In 2008, she was awarded BTA's R.E. Jackson Conservation Award. Her knowledge of East Texas, and particularly the entire Big Thicket Area, will be invaluable to the organization. We are sure everyone will assist and support her in this new adventure.

Please welcome Wendy back to our organization.

Congratulations to Mr. Walker on his upcoming (second) retirement and for his many years of highly successful service and hard work for BTA. He may be seen in coming months as he captains the IVORY BILL and continues his involvement with BTA.



Wendy Jo Ledbetter
aboard the Ivory Bill



Hiking

by Aimee Lieby

Hiking is a wonderful way to enjoy nature, get a little exercise, and expand your horizons. For little to no cost, you can explore your world up close and personal. The Big Thicket National Preserve is the perfect destination for this in large part due to its exceptional biodiversity. All you need is a good pair of shoes, hydration, sunscreen, bug spray, and a sense of adventure!

The Turkey Creek Unit, located in Hardin and Tyler Counties, is the perfect starting point and offers a variety of trails to accommodate hikers of every level. This unit is the most developed section of the BTNP according to the National Park Service, and offers over 20 miles of trails to explore.

The Kirby Nature Trail, conveniently located less than 3 miles from the BTNP Visitor Center, offers 1.5-2.5 miles of marked trails with a mixture of boardwalks, bridges, and dirt paths. Signs along the trail help you learn about various natural points of interest, including many of the common trees in this region. This trail is perfect for beginners and families with kiddos, as well as hikers looking for a relatively leisurely hike.

Beginners and flora enthusiasts alike will enjoy the Pitcher Plant Trail, located in Warren. This trail features a nice wooden boardwalk that takes you through a large bog full of pitcher plants and sundews, native carnivorous plants. The entire trail, which takes you on a dirt path into a mixed woodland area, is 1 mile long.

For those looking for a little more adventure, check out the Turkey Creek Trail and the Sandhill Loop. You can access the Turkey Creek Trail from any of the 6 trailheads scattered throughout the region. This trail is 15 miles long, so you can hike to your heart's content! At its southernmost point, the Turkey Creek Trail provides the only access to the Sandhill Loop at this time. These trails will take you through a variety of plant communities, including hardwood forests, longleaf pine groves, and cypress sloughs.



You will frequently hike alongside Turkey Creek and other waterways that provide opportunities to see waterfowl, otter families, and other critters, as well as the beautiful cypress and tupelo trees native to this region!

When hiking the Turkey Creek Unit, expect to see a wide variety of fauna including East Texas toads, river otters, yellow-crowned night herons, red cockaded woodpeckers, five-lined skinks, green anoles, copperheads, Dekay's brown snakes, dragonflies, spiders, and so much more. Always remember that wild animals are best observed from a distance!

A few tips before you venture out to explore the Big Thicket: never hike alone, always share your plans with a friend or family member before you leave, have an emergency plan and carry emergency supplies, carry plenty of hydration and nutrition, protect yourself from exposure to the elements, stick to designated trails unless you are an experienced hiker, leave nothing but footprints and take nothing but pictures, and of course have fun!

Check out the park's website for more information and trail maps: nps.gov/bith

The Future of the Open Outdoors for Kids, Houston Focus City Project

by Cheyenne Millard, Student Conservation Association Intern, NPS

Over the past four years, Big Thicket National Preserve has managed the Open Outdoors for Kids (OOK) Houston focus city program. Thanks to a \$150,000 grant from the National Park Foundation, the OOK-Houston program (formerly known as Every Kid in a Park or EKIP) reimburses transportation costs for 4th grade, Title 1 classes to natural, cultural and historical field trip destinations in and around the Greater Houston area, including Big Thicket National Preserve. Houston is one of several focus cities across the nation to host this program and among the first focus cities when this program was conceived in 2016 as part of the centennial celebration of the National Park Service.

The program that is overseen at the Big Thicket, partners with over 30 sites across the Greater Houston area in order to provide educational field trip opportunities to underserved communities. For the past four years, OOK-Houston has reimbursed field trips for 60 schools across 22 districts, servicing more than 8,500 students. This program has also supported career development for six youth corps Student Conservation Association (SCA) interns who have acted as the OOK Coordinator each school year. Three of these service positions were hosted at Big Thicket National Preserve where they also contributed to preserve operations.

The OOK-Houston program has come a long way since its beginnings in 2016, but there is still a lot of room to grow. It is in the interest of that growth that the Big Thicket is now passing the reins over to the Citizens' Environmental Coalition (CEC), a non-profit group based in Houston. As the OOK program enters its fifth year in service of the Houston community, the CEC will be able to utilize their already established connections with schools and field trip sites as well as their central location within Houston to expand on the program that has been developed at the Big Thicket. The preserve will continue to be a field trip site and close partner with OOK. Big Thicket is proud to have created a strong base for this program and it will be exciting to watch OOK expand even further with the CEC!



To learn more about OOK-Houston visit our website at <https://www.hereinouston.org/fieldtrip> or contact the program coordinators at houstonekip@gmail.com.



Mark Your Calendar

Big Thicket Association announces event cancellations

The Big Thicket Association has always made the safety of our Neches River Rally and Big Thicket Day participants and volunteers our top priority. This year, we are cancelling both events in response to the current global pandemic. We wish to thank both committees for all their hard work. BTA hopes to be able to hold these popular events again in 2021.

Big Thicket Day Annual Meeting goes virtual

Big Thicket Day on the Neches will not be held at the historic Collier's Ferry Park this year. We will conduct our annual membership meeting on Saturday, October 10, via a virtual format. Our members will be able to participate by attending the meeting online to get up to date information about BTA projects and programs and how we have been impacted by COVID-19. Members will be able to ask questions, meet our new Executive Director, and we will have election results for our 2021-2022 board of directors.

Our keynote speaker will be long-time Executive Director of the Texas Conservation Alliance, Janice Bezanson. She has 30 years of experience protecting rivers, forests, and water resources. Her efforts have led to protection of more than 100,000 acres. She has successfully campaigned for creating and protecting wildlife refuges and other natural areas. Ms. Bezanson was the 2015 recipient for the BTA's R.E. Jackson Conservation Award.

We will send more information later regarding the online annual meeting and how to join us.

Ivory Bill Tours Resume: Special Discounted Rates for Private Charters

For a limited time, we are offering special discounted rates for our private charters. Tours are 2 hours in length and can be tailored to fit your needs. Private charters can be booked any day of the week and any time of day, during daylight hours. Book now for any date between now and the end of 2020. (COVID-19 protocols apply.)

\$300.00 Non-profits & Family Rate - \$400.00 Business Rate

This offer expires October 2, 2020

Ivory Bill Tours Resume: Saturday Public Tours

We have resumed our popular weekly Neches River Adventure Tours aboard the Ivory Bill and into the Big Thicket National Preserve. For more information about the Ivory Bill or to book private charters or public tours, go to bigthicket.org or call 409-651-5326.



Capturing Change Though Time with Chronolog

by Jason A. Ginder, Chief of Interpretation and Education, NPS

Changes in our environment are difficult to see and understand because they happen gradually, and often without much excitement, plus long-term monitoring projects are expensive and complex. During the summer of 2020, Big Thicket National Preserve was approached by Chronolog, a digital citizen science project that encourages visitors to participate in recording the changes in our natural world. By crowdsourcing this data collection, Chronolog creates a fun way for every visitor to the park to contribute to scientific study and environmental monitoring throughout the preserve.

Chronolog’s mission is twofold: First, to engage people with nature in an interactive new way. Second, to keep a record of environmental changes for scientific use. By making environmental conservation a collaborative activity, people become interested in participating and compelled by the findings.

Big Thicket National Preserve decided to commission three Chronolog stations in the preserve. The first two were installed at the beginning of July. One is located on the Kirby Nature Trail, highlighting a Cypress Tupelo Slough that sees significant changes in water levels and seasonal changes in vegetation. A second station was installed at the Pitcher Plant Bog along the Pitcher Plant Trail on the north end of the Turkey Creek Unit, where it will highlight the seasonal changes in the pitcher plants, frequent prescribed burns, and other unique feature at this location. A third station will be installed in the Big Sandy Creek Unit later this year along Lily Road, near the new Longleaf Pine Forest Restorations signs that were installed in January of 2020.



Everyone is encouraged to submit a photo anytime they find themselves at a Chronolog station, including park staff. More information on this program can be found at <https://www.chronolog.io/>. Special thanks go to the preserve’s Resource Management team for helping with compliance and PEPC and the Facilities and Maintenance Management crew for their assistance with the installation of these stations.



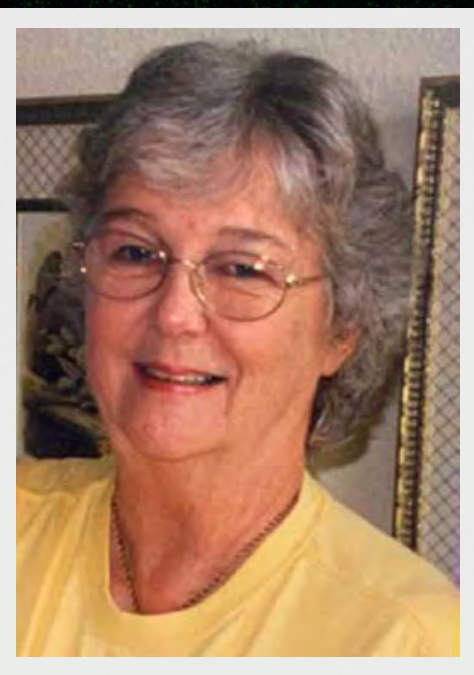
Birds of the Big Thicket: Catbird

A poem by Phoebe Dishman

O dusky gray, of thee I sing
 One of my favorites on the wing
 In the Thicket you nest and dine
 I guess you know we're intertwined
 Covert angel deep in the trees
 Self-contained, you live as you please
 Furtive presence in the grove
 What is the spell that you have wove?
 Rambling riff of burbles and squeaks
 Makes me smile as we have speaks
 Nasally "mew" that gives you your name
 Makes me laugh and wish you the same
 Black of eye and cap and tail
 Merry catbird, thee I hail!



Painting by Isabelle Scurry Chapman



“Sug” Blackwell

1937-2020

The family of Mary Margaret “Sug” Seewald Blackwell celebrated her life on July 17th at St. Mark’s Episcopal Church in Beaumont. She was a victim of Covid-19. Sug is remembered as a long time supporter of the Big Thicket Association and a wonderful cook who contributed to many of our potluck dinners.





Westgate Receives Award

Cardinal Cadence: The Magazine of Lamar University
Summer 2020

James Westgate, professor emeritus of earth and space sciences, has been awarded the Texas State University System Regents' Professor Award, which honors college professors for their outstanding professional excellence and significant educational contributions on the international, national and communal levels.

Since joining LU in 1989, Westgate has been principal investigator or co-P.I. for more than \$1.7 million in science, education and research grants and garnered more than \$1.2 million in grants aimed at providing scholarships and opportunities for teacher graduate students.

What's Been Happening During the Pandemic

by Big Thicket National Preserve, Interpretation and Education Staff, NPS



COVID-19 Update

As our understanding of this pandemic increases, we have come to expect that providing traditional in-person visitor services may not always be possible, so the park initiated new procedures that encourage solo and small group recreation in the park. To this end, in late July NPS staff started issuing back-country camping permits over the phone and mailing the completed permits to the requesting parties. Starting on September 1st, park staff will also begin issuing hunting permits over the phone. Due to their remote and small group nature, back-country camping and hunting are ideal recreational pursuits to undertake during the COVID-19 pandemic. Updated information on the park's modified operations can be found at <https://www.nps.gov/bith>.

Website Updates & New Content

The extended visitor center closure and suspension of all ranger-led programs gave park staff the opportunity to focus on several long-standing projects. We started with the goal of updating all existing content in the "Plan Your Visit" and the "Get Involved" sections of the park website. As the COVID-19 pandemic continued, we decided to add a webpage highlighting the parks response to COVID-19 and current operating posture. Finally, we added new wayfinding resources that highlight each park unit under "Places to Go," and added new pages to the "History and Culture" section. Future work on the park's webpage will focus on adding additional content to the "Nature", "History and Culture", and "Photo and Multimedia" sections. Explore more at <https://www.nps.gov/bith>.

Dragonfly Mercury Project Continues

Last year we told you about a study being conducted by the park's resource management team and NPS Gulf Coast Inventory and Monitoring Network (GCI&MN) through the collection and analysis of dragonfly larvae to provide data on where and how much mercury contamination is affecting national parks. That work continued this summer, as park staff collect samples in four different sites through the park. Shown here the team collects samples at a pond just off the Beaver Slide Trail in the Big Sandy Creek Unit. This project started in 2015 and we've been informed by the GCI&MN that additional funding has been allocated to continue this work into 2021.

What's Been Happening During the Pandemic

by Big Thicket National Preserve, Interpretation and Education Staff, NPS



Defending Our Space

The next time you visit the VC you will notice a significant change to the surrounding vegetation. Creating defensible space by keeping your property lean and green is instrumental in helping protect your family and home from wildfire. Defensible space is the buffer you create between a building on your property and the grass, trees, shrubs, or any wildland area that surround it. This space is needed to slow or stop the spread of wildfire. Defensible space is also important for the protection of the firefighters defending your home. This summer the preserve's Fire Management crew is working to clear defensible space around all park buildings..



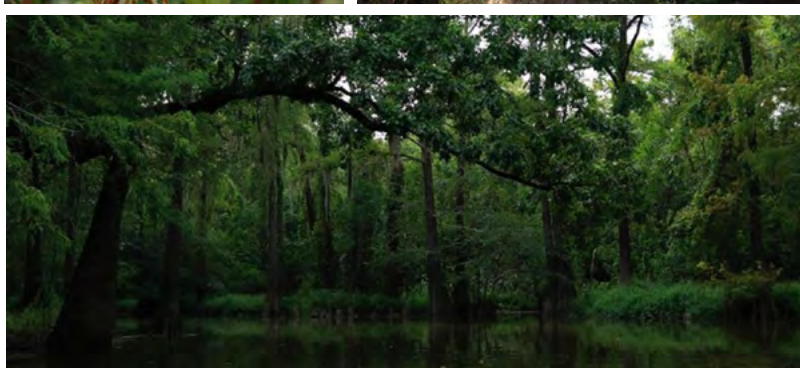
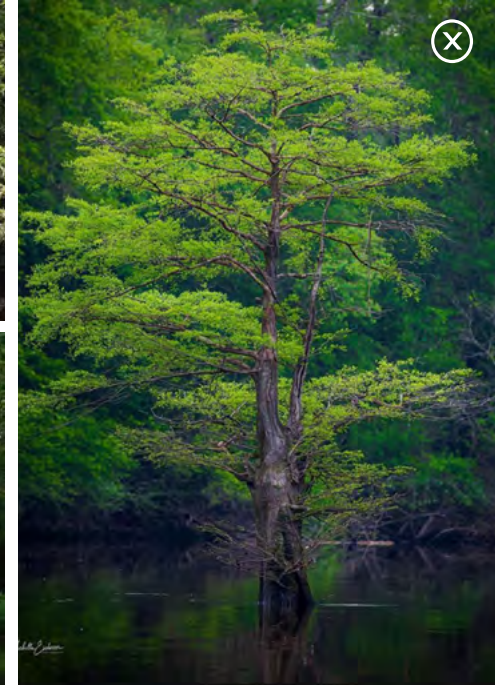
Volunteers Germinate Native Grasses

On July 10th we had a family of volunteers, two interns, and two park rangers meet in the Big Sandy Creek Unit to collect grass cuttings and then transfer those cuttings into nursery trays for ongoing habitat restoration projects at Big Thicket. These habitat restoration projects have been a great way to bring volunteers in the park to work outside in small groups, so volunteers and staff can maintain a safe distance.



Lakeview Day-Use-Area

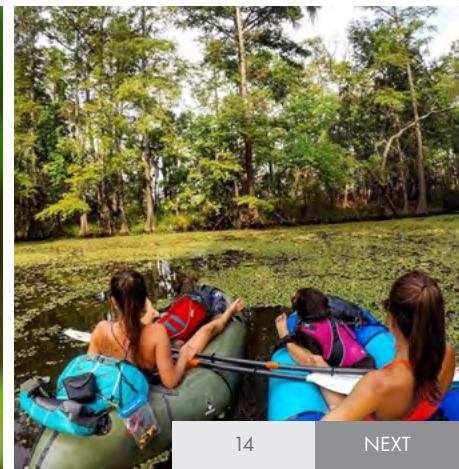
Found in Orange County on the east side of the Neches River in the Beaumont Unit of the national preserve, this day-use-area has always drawn a lot of local community members looking to recreate along the river. During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, large groups gathered here at the water's edge, often in violation of county orders and CDC guidance. In consultation with US Congressional Representative Brian Babin's Office and the Orange County Sheriff's office, the NPS decided to temporarily close this area. With new infrastructure now in place to discourage vehicles from driving on the beach, the Lakeview DUA reopened to the public just in time for the Fourth of July holiday.



BIG THICKET ASSOCIATION

PARTNER IN PRESERVATION

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Big Thicket Association
700 North Street, Suite 79
Beaumont, Texas 77701

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Web Sites

- Big Thicket Association
www.bigthicket.org
- Big Thicket National Preserve
www.nps.gov/bith
- 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
- Outdoor Nature Club, Houston
www.outdoornatureclub.org
- Sierra Club Golden Triangle Group
www.texas.sierraclub.org/triangle
- Texas Black Bear Alliance
texasblackbear.weebly.com
- Texas Conservation Alliance
www.TCAtexas.org
- Village Creek State Park
www.tpwd.state.tx.us.park

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.

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