



BIG THICKET BULLETIN

ISSUE 154



BIG THICKET
ASSOCIATION

PARTNER IN PRESERVATION

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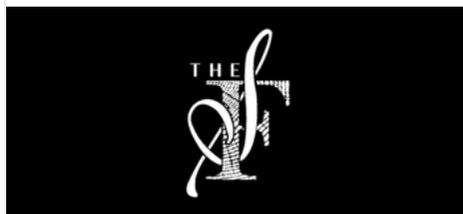
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A Message from the President

John Stafford, BTA director and board president

Greetings to Members and Friends of BTA!

As most of you know, we were shocked and saddened by the sudden illness and passing of our friend, treasurer and long-time board member Dr. James Westgate. Jim was a treasure in more ways than one and a pleasure to know and work with. His humor and passion for all things environmental and 'fossils in the dirt' was second to none. He is sorely missed and our heart-felt condolences go out to his family.

As mentioned earlier, two of our events, Neches River Rally (Salt Water Barrier) and Big Thicket Day (Colliers Ferry) should be on your calendars for **September 10** and **October 8**. Both events were highly successful in past years and we anticipate even bigger and better in 2022.

Our Environmental Education programs continue to be very busy with many new schools represented due to efforts of Dir. Jennie Knapp. As you know we offer **free** one and two hour tours for both public, private and home schools in our area. **Docent volunteers are still needed for this and other Ivory Bill tours.** Contact Jennie Knapp at nribedu@gmail.com.

BTA's new on-line booking system, FareHarbor, is proving very successful and is making it easier to book and manage passengers and crew. Public tours began on March 26 and are enjoyed by all as they visit the Preserve and enjoy beautiful scenery. Our captains and crew are very busy with school groups, public tours and private charters. If you are able to volunteer, contact Capt. Bruce Walker at 409-651-5326.

The Big Thicket National Preserve recently loosened restrictions on activities at our Field Research Station and Learning Center located in Saratoga Texas. We already have served several groups working on projects both in and around the Big Thicket area. Several research projects are resuming including freshwater mussels, bees, leeches, and a new project for tiger beetles through Rice University. **Funds are still available for new research projects through grants for TCEQ.**

Special thanks to 'retired executive director' Bruce Walker for stepping back into his work shoes to help with grant applications and program management. We look to our past sponsors and members to help financially and with their time and talents.

We look forward to a great year in 2022 with many activities, thanks to our hard working board and committees.



Big Thicket Staff Stay Busy During Spring Season

Megan Urban, Chief of Interpretation and Education, Big Thicket National Preserve

The Big Thicket staff have stayed busy during the spring months, between our spring interpretation programs, restoration crews working alongside the resource management staff, and other projects around the Preserve.

The resource division continued restoration efforts of longleaf pine savannah ecosystem utilizing prescribed burns, mastication, herbicide applications and planting longleaf pine and native groundcover species. As one can imagine, these efforts are labor intensive and cannot be achieved with park staff alone. So, BITH applied for and received funding for an AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corp (NCCC) crew. Youth crews like our NCCC crew play a key role in leveraging resources in parks with limited staffing. During the six weeks the NCCC crew was with the Preserve, they assisted with treating over 35 acres with herbicide application within our restoration areas. It would have taken months of work for park resources staff alone to treat that acreage! Due to the success of working with our NCCC crew, the Preserve will be hosting two more youth crews, CorpsTHAT deaf and hard of hearing conservation crew, Student Conservation Association (SCA) Conservation Leader Corps crew, and a Scientist in Parks (SIP) throughout the summer and fall of this year.

In the Interpretation division, staff was busy with nature walks, public paddle trips and the re-start of the education program. For the first time since the fall of 2019, students from local communities visited Big Thicket for ranger-led education programs. The youth kayak program has been taking youth groups from southeast Texas and Houston out on the water. During the summertime, rangers will be busy with both the public programs and programs for schools, libraries, and other community events. We have also started the pre-planning for Big Thicket's 50th Anniversary! Look for more information coming soon.



NCCC crew, photo courtesy NPS

Big Thicket Mussel Research Outreach

Mary Catherine Johnston, BTA director, Thicket of Diversity chair

Mussel research, facilitated with the BTA's Thicket of Diversity funding, has resulted in a journal publication in *Hydrobiologia*. Alison Tarter, Southern Regional Climate Center, Texas A&M; Tarter and A.N. Schwalb, Texas State University; D.F. Ford, Edge Engineering and Science, Houston; D.E. Symonds, Stantec Consulting, Columbus, OH; and N.B Ford, University of Texas at Tyler published "Impact of extreme climatic events on unionid mussels in a subtropical river basin." They tested specific predictions of extreme climatic events on freshwater mussels, a species that is highly imperiled. Recent and historical Big Thicket mussel data was compared.

Drought had the most detrimental impact leading to community-wide declines. Flooding led to shifts in community composition and spatial distribution. It was noted that dominance of species shifted to those more tolerable of disturbance.

The impact of flooding was likely buffered by connectivity with extensive backwater areas, forming large wetlands, which may serve as crucial refuges for mussels during extreme climatic events. According to the authors, protecting wetlands is crucial to protect freshwater mussels and the ecosystem services they provide.

Research was performed through the Thicket of Diversity with penalty monies from a Texas Commission on Environmental Quality enforcement action. Tarter and Schwalb research is active and ongoing as recipients of funding for "Freshwater mussel biodiversity survey and evaluation of population response to catastrophic flooding within the Big Thicket National Preserve (part 2)."



Photograph: *Potamilus amphichaenus*



Captain Gerald Langham, Jim Blackburn, Isabelle Chapman.
Photo credit, Bruce Walker.



Bonnie Walker demonstrates plein air watercolor.
Photo credit, Bruce Walker.



Bonnie Walker with art students. Photo credit, Bruce Walker.

BTA's Neches River Adventures Launches Eco-Art Boats

Captain Bruce Walker, NRIB Committee Chair, Interim BTA Executive Director

The Neches River Ivory Bill (NRIB) Committee introduced a new series of programs for 2022. The Eco-Art Boats are designed to offer special presentations of art, poetry, literature, and photography aboard the Ivory Bill.

April 3rd, we had a great time doing our first Eco-Art Boat on Sunday afternoon. Our guest artist, Bonnie Few Walker of Jasper, taught a Plein Air Watercolor Class. The class was held in the Preserve's Beaumont Unit, using cypress lined backwater channels of the Neches River in Pine Island Bayou and Cook's Lake as our backdrop. Bonnie gave a demonstration on painting techniques using watercolors. All the participants were furnished with art supplies to create their very own works. We enjoyed hearing Jim Blackburn's poem "The Ivory Bill Woodpecker", read by Phoebe Dishman. Father Sinclair navigated the boat through the tight twists and turns of the bayous. We discovered some real talented artists within our class and plan to host another watercolor class in the fall. Everyone went home with a special work created by Bonnie.

On May 1st, we introduced Eco-Earth Church as a special offering to hear a unique program by environmentalist and poet Jim Blackburn and artist Isabelle Chapman. The poems and paintings were inspired by the wonders of nature and featured in their new publication entitled Earth Church. This book is a series of poems and paintings which Blackburn and Chapman sent out daily for 365 days during the pandemic. The poems and paintings were created with the hope of connecting us with nature and each other during a very difficult time. Our tour guests were amazed as the Ivory Bill plied through the oxbow channels of Cook's Lake and were able to get a close look at the iconic Madonna Tree. Kathryn Walker read a passage from Geraldine Watson's book, Reflections on the Neches, describing the Madonna Tree as "something that looks like it belongs in a classical Chinese painting, the hollowed inside which forms a grotto where cypress knees form realistic images of the holy family."

Our intent is to host five or six Eco-Art Boats each year. We hope to connect local artists, poets, writers, and photographers, of all ages, with those who are interested in discovering more about what inspiration the Big Thicket has to offer. On June 5th, we will host another Eco-Art Boat on photography featuring Keith Carter.



Jim Blackburn, Kathryn Walker, Phoebe Dishman, Isabelle Chapman. Photo credit, Bruce Walker

Big Thicket Natural Heritage Trust Establishes Endowment

Mary Catherine Johnston, BTA director

A new Endowment has been launched through the Foundation For Southeast Texas, facilitated through the generous donation of four BTA Members. The Foundation helps non-profits invest for the future. Proceeds from the new fund will help sustain land acquisition and conservation work across Southeast Texas.

Deposits in stocks, bonds, or real estate can be made directly to the Foundation for Southeast Texas. If donating cash online at www.cfsetx.org, choose Big Thicket Natural Heritage Trust Endowment Fund from the drop down menu.

In addition, the Trust gratefully appreciates receipt of a \$1000 grant from the Foundation for Southeast Texas for printing costs related to the Endowment's promotion. For more information, you may contact Mary C. Johnston at mathicket@aol.com or 757-288-0190.





A secret cove near the Saltwater Barrier invites you to escape into a verdant world, alive with birds and aquatic animals. Photo credit, Aimee Lieby.



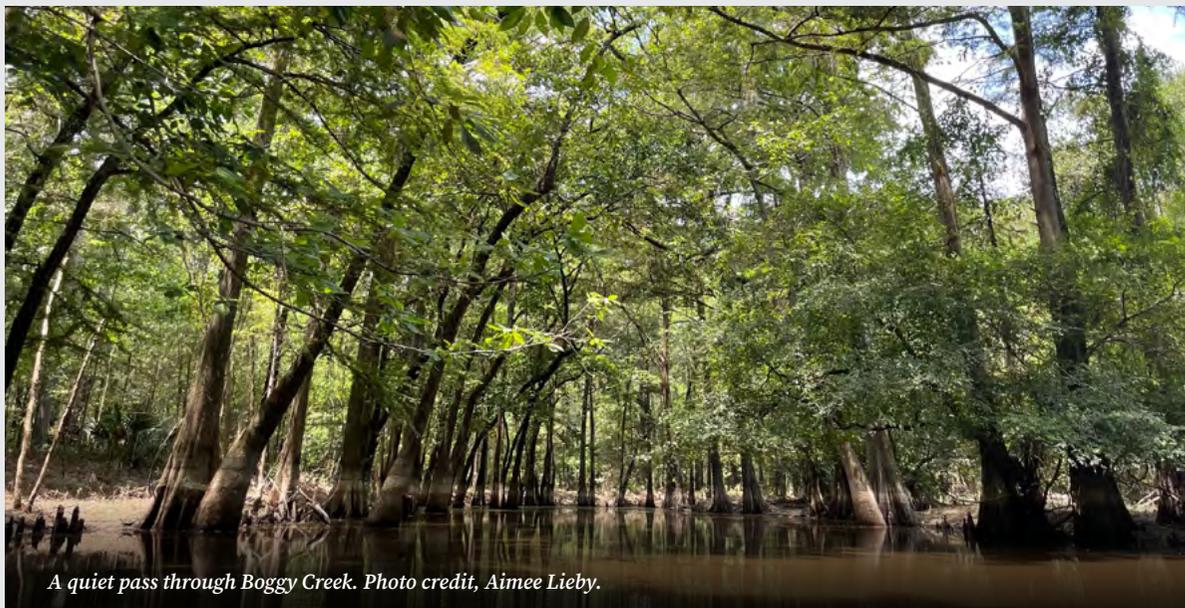
*An abandoned fish camp along the Neches River.
Photo credit, Aimee Lieby.*

Kayaks and Canoes

Aimee Lieby, BTA Director

As temperatures rise and summer rapidly approaches, few things are going to be quite as refreshing as an adventure on the water. The Big Thicket is the perfect setting for aquatic escapades! There are numerous waterways accessible to personal watercraft and a variety of options for enjoying them.

For a pleasant trip with many accessible sand bars, Village Creek is always a great option. Village Creek winds its way through the Big Thicket, starting up near Village Mills and ending at the Neches River after a 63-mile journey. The official Village Creek Paddling Trail comprises about a third of this distance. FM 418 is a popular starting point for a long paddle, while shorter trips such as SH 327 to Baby Galvez are also great options. Village

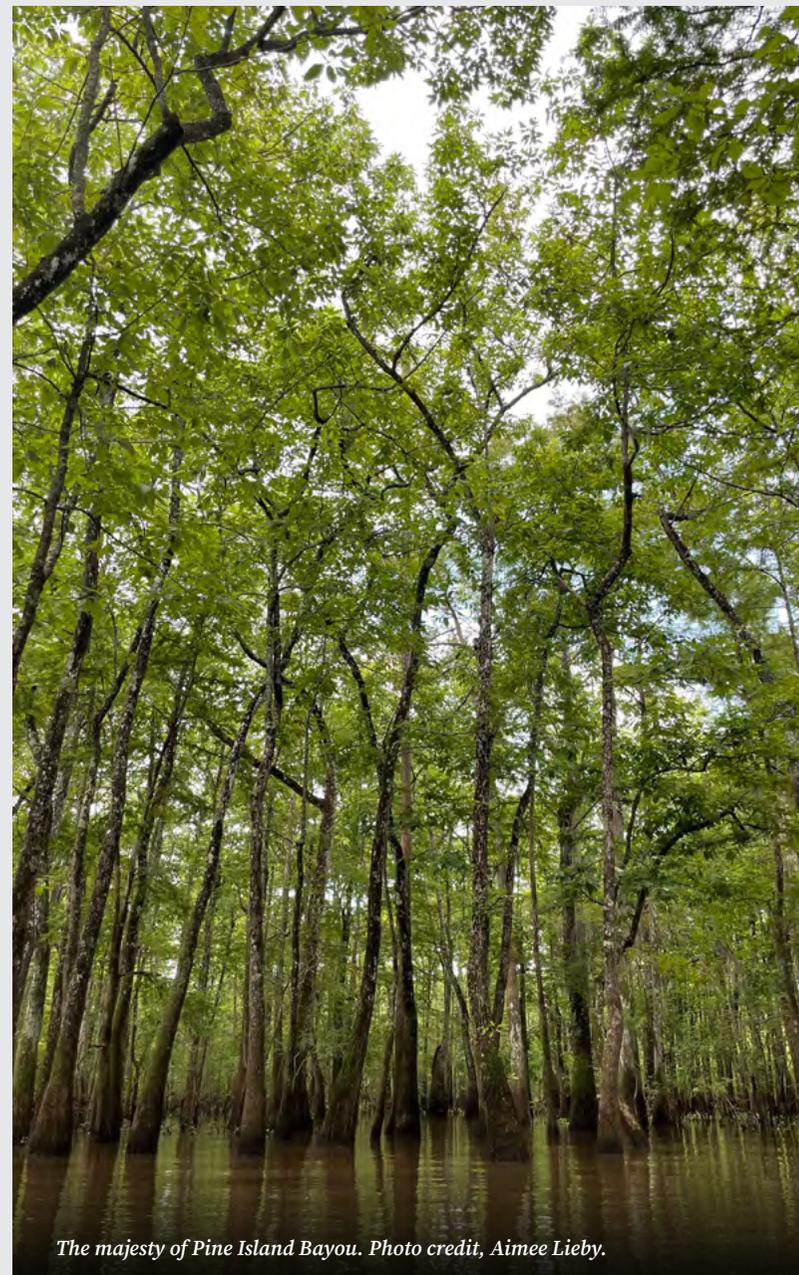


A quiet pass through Boggy Creek. Photo credit, Aimee Lieby.

Creek State Park, a local gem, offers a sandy watercraft launch at the back of the park as well. The Neches River is another popular waterway with access points throughout the region. A popular and very accessible launching point for exploring the Neches River is the LNVA Saltwater Barrier. From here you can access the Cooks Lake to Scatterman Paddling Trail, a 4.8 mile dedicated loop that takes you through a majestic cypress and tupelo slough with stops in Cooks and Scatterman Lakes, oxbow lakes teeming with brilliant flora and fauna. This trail also joins up with my third recommended waterway, Pine Island Bayou. Pine Island Bayou flows southeast through Hardin and Jefferson Counties. Launch your watercraft from the boat ramp under Hwy 96 under Cooks Lake Road and travel upstream to Boggy Creek to adventure through a quiet corridor of tupelo and cypress, or head downstream to pass by the old sawmill and check out the train bridge. Whichever waterway you choose, you are sure to see grazing herons and egrets, sunbathing turtles, a variety of rolling and jumping fish, and maybe even an otter at play!

Personal watercraft are always welcome on the waterways, in accordance with local laws. No boat? No problem! Village Creek State Park has a loaner craft program for use in their facilities. Big Thicket National Preserve regularly offers guided kayak and canoe tours using their equipment. There are also local outfitters ready to set you up for success, such as Big Thicket Outfitters. Happy adventuring!

<https://tpwd.texas.gov/fishboat/boat/paddlingtrails/>



The majesty of Pine Island Bayou. Photo credit, Aimee Lieby.



American Bittern

Phoebe H. Dishman, BTA director, Bulletin editor

*I will not stop this reporting of attachments.
There is evidence everywhere.*

– poet *Ada Limón*

The Bittern is a striped bird
Of him I wish to say a word
To quickstep humans, action prizing,
His gait seems slow and agonizing

As in the marsh he creeps along
A secretive bird, except for his song
His song, as described in Sibley's book
A booming, gulping BLOONK-adook

A blunt pronouncement from time to time
I'd hardly call it a come-hither chime
Except to the ears of his charming bride
Who smiles her way to his excellent side

Having gulped he resumes his disguise
One with the reeds his rendition of wise
Surreptitious savoir-faire
Motionless angel, beak in the air

His stripes he hopes will fool my eye
That I will simply walk on by
But I'm in love with his singular beauty
So I'll keep observing—it's my duty!

American Bittern, painting by Isabelle Scurry Chapman

I N M E M O R Y

Dr. Jim Westgate**1953-2022***Beloved professor, mentor, and friend**by Jan Ruppel, BTA advisory director*

In the early 1990's I first met Dr. Westgate at Dinosaur Day at the Texas Energy Museum. I was teaching fourth grade science at Pietsch MacArthur and would soon be introducing geology. I wanted my inner-city students to explore rocks by simulating what it might be like to go on a dig. Westgate had the interest and materials to give these children that opportunity. I was only one of many Jim coached into making science an exploratory experience for children rather than a worksheet-oriented experience.

Dr. Jim Westgate was a Regents Professor Emeritus of Earth & Space Sciences and among other subjects taught Environmental Science for 30+ years. Many of those years his students paddled up the Neches into the Big Thicket exploring its ecosystems—for several, their first introduction to the Big Thicket National Preserve. For approximately twenty years Dr. Westgate served on the Big Thicket Association's board of directors, for 6 years as its Treasurer. After the Ivory Bill was purchased, his Environmental Science students enjoyed viewing and experiencing the ecosystems from this vessel.

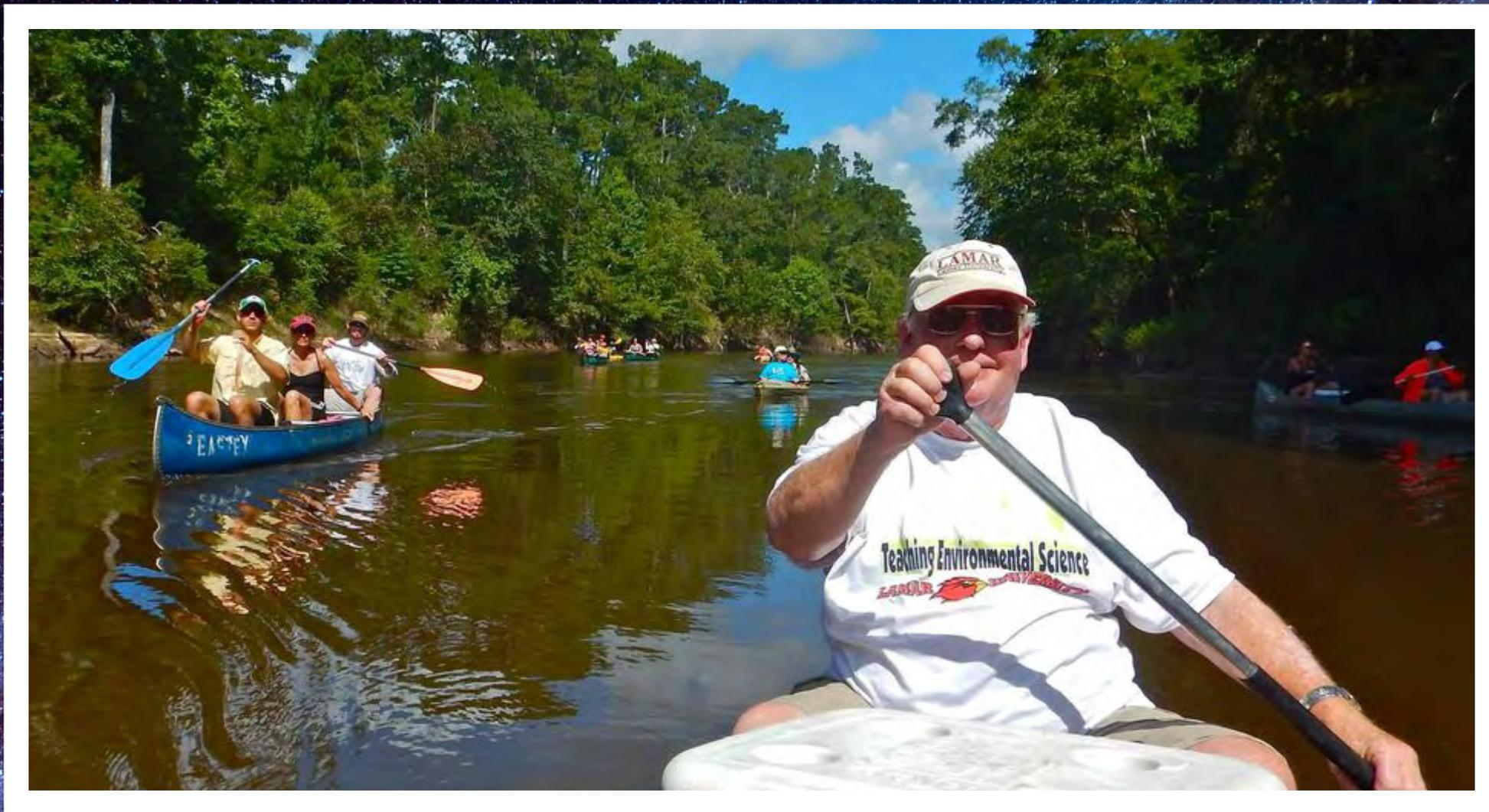
As a Co-founder of the JASON Project, Dr. Westgate served as Project Scientist and Advisor, and organized excursions for JASON trainers for over fifteen years. Brilliant, adventuresome, low-keyed, dry-witted, and soft spoken, Westgate knew how to put together an intriguing program that kept us infatuated with our topic, introduced us to top experts who were discoverers and inventors. Our education included exploring an inner island in Panama where research was being done on climate change, loss of blue crabs in the Chesapeake Bay, Louisiana coast before and after Hurricane Katrina, tornado alley and NOAA headquarters in the Midwest, viewing a grounded Hurricane Hunter plane and receiving a briefing of its interior equipment, traversing lava fields in Hawaii the year before the volcano exploded, exploring the land formation from the Pacific coast to Yellowstone National Park and its hot spots spewing boiling water, canoeing the Neches River in the BTNP, viewing the largest U.S. meteor hit in Arizona, climbing down into the Grand Canyon, then on to observing life forms in the Dead Sea. As trainer Jennifer Wright stated so well, "He was the fossil whisperer. He knew exactly where to pull over to find fossils and rocks whether it be on the side of a highway or at a rundown building in the middle of Utah. He took us on adventures that would make Rand McNally jealous. He made learning fun, real and relevant."

Westgate's creative spirit, humor and interest in making life more interesting for all of us was infectious and gave everyone a model of one who truly relished his career. Jim broadened our horizons, challenged and helped us focus on what was important to get across to our students and the teachers we trained for the JASON Project. I believe we would all agree, Dr. Jim Westgate was one of the greatest influences on what made each of us a successful educator. Jennifer Wright's Facebook quote said it so well: "He will be missed greatly but his footprint will remain in a fond corner of our memories and in our hearts".



I N M E M O R Y

Dr. Jim Westgate
1953-2022





SAVE THE DATES

Neches River Adventures: Public Tours from March - November 2022

10am to 12pm

Collier's Ferry Park, 5390 Pine Street, Beaumont, TX 77703

2 Hour: Eco-History Tours every Saturday from March 26th to November 5th. Leaving Collier's Ferry Park at 10am. Tour the Neches River's backwater channels into the Big Thicket National Preserve and the Port of Beaumont. Check our online scheduling for departure details and schedule changes for certain dates. Reserve your space aboard the Ivory Bill. Fees apply.

Neches River Rally: September 10, 2022

8am to 2pm

LNVA Salt Water Barrier Boat Ramp, 6790 Bigner Road, Beaumont, TX 77708

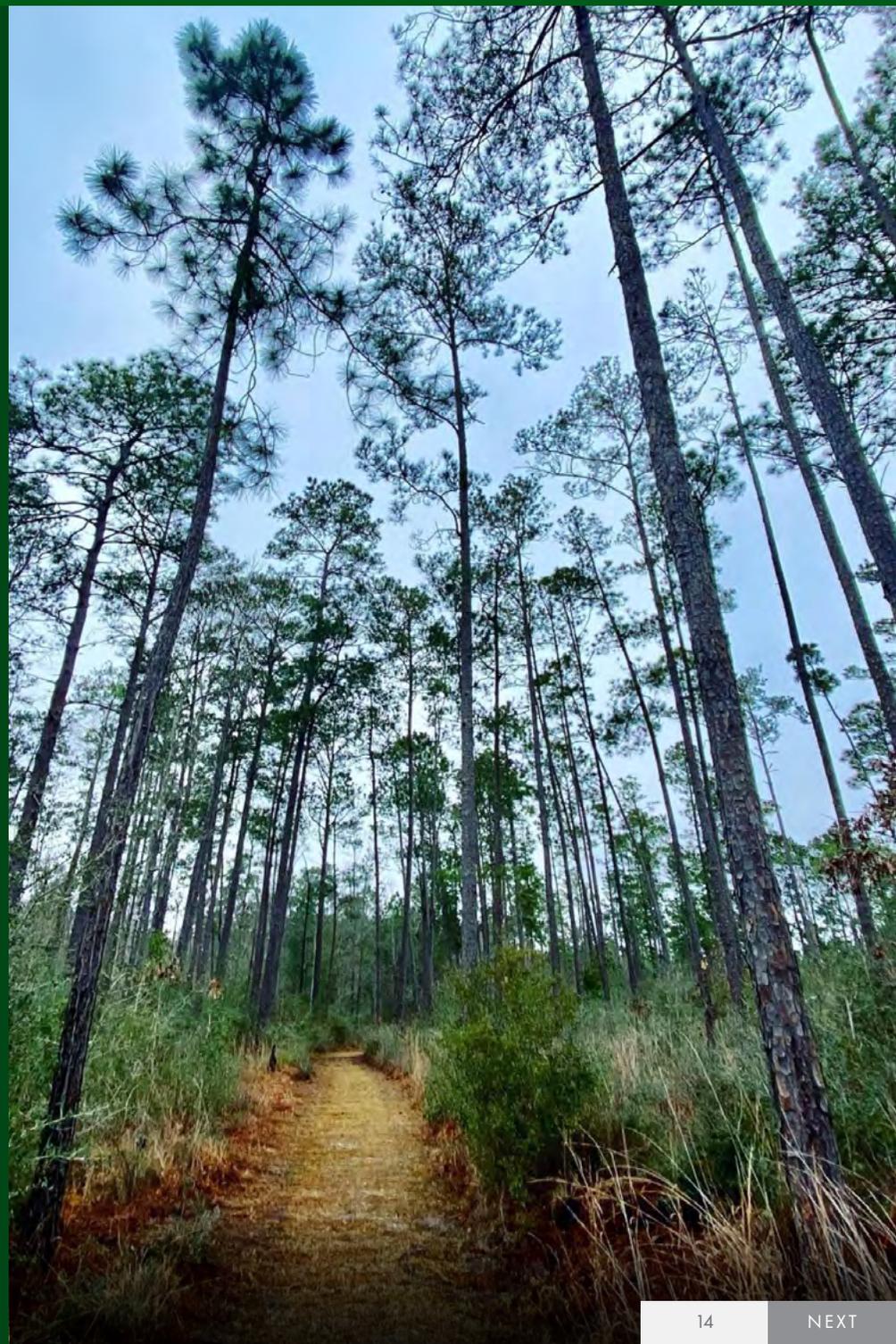
9th Annual Neches River Rally. This year's route will take paddlers through the Big Thicket National Preserve via the 4-mile Cooks Lake to Scatterman Texas Paddling Trail. Paddlers will experience the open waters of the Neches River and the bald cypress/water tupelo swamp. Canoes and kayaks will launch and return to the LNVA Saltwater Barrier location in Beaumont. Bring your personal boat or reserve a boat. All participants must pre-register. Fees apply.

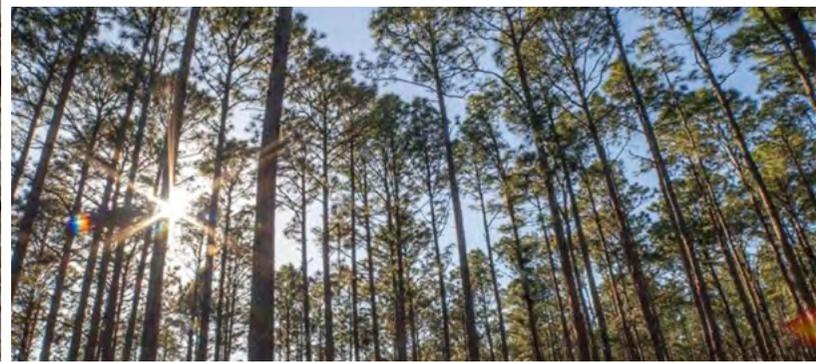
Big Thicket Day on the Neches: October 8, 2022

10am to 3pm

Collier's Ferry Park, 5390 Pine Street, Beaumont, TX 77703

Big Thicket Day on the Neches is a **FREE EVENT** that is open to the public. Activities in the park begin with our annual membership gathering at 10:00am. Beginning at 11:30am enjoy a complimentary picnic lunch, live entertainment, free boat tours aboard the Ivory Bill, and other activities for the entire family.

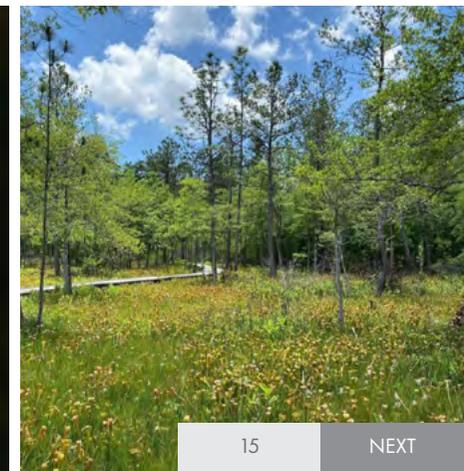
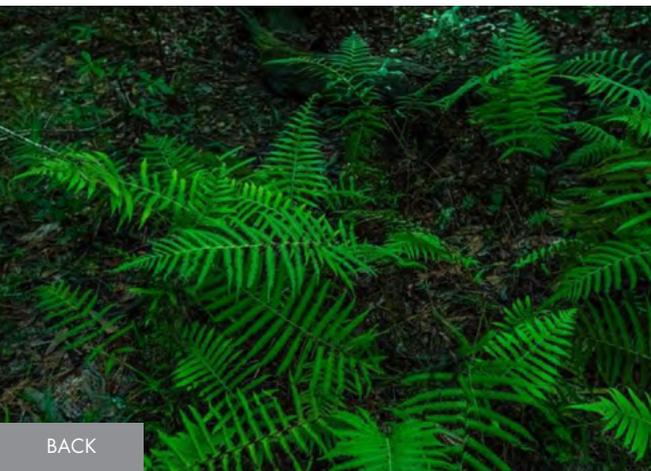




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Web Sites

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.

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