



BIG THICKET BULLETIN

ISSUE 168



BIG THICKET
ASSOCIATION

PARTNER IN PRESERVATION

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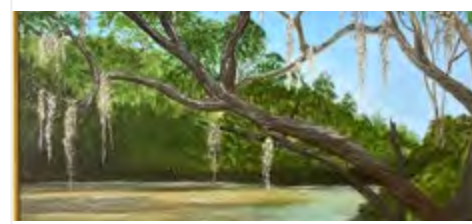
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Is conservation a relic of the past?

Captain Bruce Walker, BTA President

In previous articles, we featured key contributions from the many devoted conservationists that led to the establishment of the Big Thicket National Preserve. Most recently, we addressed the current threats from our current administration that could undermine the many successes that our Big Thicket founders celebrated over sixty plus years ago to establish the preserve and protect this "String of Pearls" for future generations.

Today we find ourselves in post-shutdown mode, after our elected officials in Washington decided to shut down all government services for 43 days. A shutdown that created further economic stress on our National Parks, thousands of park rangers and personnel, and hundreds of local communities that benefit from our parks. We felt that things could not get any worse for our Park Service. The shutdown occurred. The Preserve closed the Visitor Center. All operations and services at the park were abruptly stopped. Still the Big Thicket Association held our annual Big Thicket Day on the Neches to celebrate the 51st Anniversary of the Preserve. The Preserve staff were not allowed to participate.

A ray of hope: Grahame Jones, Executive Director of Texas Conservation Alliance and BTA's keynote speaker, gave a very positive address on **The Future of Conservation in Texas**. These are some of his quotes. "The future of conservation in Texas doesn't belong to government agencies or think tanks — it belongs to the people who love this state enough to defend it."

"The BTA and TCA share the same DNA — both were built on courage, persistence, and an unshakable belief that the people of Texas could shape their own conservation destiny. Across East Texas, **that legacy is still alive**. You can see it in the bottomland forests that cradle the Neches and the Sabine, in the tallgrass prairies slowly returning to life, and in the families who still measure the seasons by rainfall, hunting, and the call of the first sandhill cranes. This region reminds us that protecting nature is not a luxury — it's a way of preserving who we are."

Grahame reassured us that, "**Conservation is not a relic of the past — it's a movement that keeps being reborn, one person, one place at a time.**"



Conservationists Grahame Jones and Elizabeth Waddill take turns at the helm, during the Big Thicket Day Sunset Reception aboard the Ivory Bill. Image credit - Captain Walker

Sidenote on the shutdown: We visited with Big Thicket Preserve Superintendent, Wayne Prokopetz, post shutdown. He stated the Preserve staff were all present, in good spirits, and ready to get back to park business and serving the community. The Preserve's special events such as a ranger-led canoe trip and a Big Thicket by Lamplight (night hike) were held as scheduled. Prokopetz said the preserve did not suffer any vandalism and that some community volunteers helped pick up trash at the trailheads and tended to some minor issues. He thanked the community for their support and BTA for providing a much-appreciated welcome-back breakfast to the park rangers and staff.

When asked what can BTA do post-shut down, he stated that we "need to just keep doing what we do. Keep promoting visitation. Keep providing a voice for the Preserve."

BTA would like to thank the park superintendent, rangers, and staff for their dedication and service that they do every day for the Preserve and our community.



Conservationists Grahame Jones and Elizabeth Waddill take turns at the helm, during the Big Thicket Day Sunset Reception aboard the Ivory Bill. Image credit – Captain Walker

Big Thicket Association Hosts Events for the Community

Diane Thompson, BTA Executive Director

Big Thicket Association proudly hosted its 12th Annual Neches River Rally with a launch from the LNVA Salt Water Barrier boat ramp on September 6, 2025. With clear skies, smooth water, and an enthusiastic turnout, this event marked the largest Rally to date! The NRR attracted paddlers of all ages to experience the natural beauty of the Big Thicket National Preserve.

Participants paddled along the Neches River, winding their way to the Cooks Lake to Scatterman Paddling Trail, a 4.8-mile loop trail known for its breath-taking scenery and rich biodiversity.

Families, first timers, and seasoned paddlers alike found themselves immersed in a Cypress/Tupelo swamp, a peaceful haven brimming with wildlife and native flora unique to the Big Thicket ecosystem.

As paddlers returned to the boat ramp, they were welcomed by the lively sounds of John Cessac and David Varnado, whose live music added to the festive atmosphere. The smell of grilled hamburgers filled the air, bringing everyone together for a post paddle celebration.



Image credit - Diane Thompson

This event wouldn't have been possible without the incredible community support behind it. A heartfelt thank you goes out to:

- The Big Thicket National Preserve and their law enforcement team on the water
- The Lower Neches Valley Authority and their presence on the water plus assistance before the event
- Sabine Neches Chapter, Texas Master Naturalist Volunteers
- Kayaking Texas, NRR's exclusive outfitter
- 20 River Guides
- 22 JROTC students from Westbrook High School
- Big Thicket Association members and volunteers who handled registration, check-in, safety, and logistics
- Our Rally Cook: Richard Kratzer Cooking Team
- Our generous sponsors:
Ace Image Wear, Visit Beaumont, TX, Big Thicket Plumbing, Coburn's, Ellen C. Temple, ExxonMobil Wellness Center, First Security Bank, Kayaking Texas, Lower Neches Valley Authority, National Parks Conservation Association, Port of Beaumont, Read Ice, Sabine Neches Navigation District; TotalEnergies.

With such a dedicated team and strong turnout, the 2025 Neches River Rally proved to be more than just a paddling trip. It was a celebration of nature, community, and conservation.

Until next year keep paddling, exploring, and protecting the Big Thicket of Southeast Texas!



Image credits - Johnny Thompson

Looking Back: John Charpiot

Katy Hambright, BTA Director

From the silent pacing of a bobcat on his nocturnal rounds to the sudden flash of a kingfisher darting above sparkling creek waters, the Big Thicket is always full of wonders. That is just its way. One comes to expect the unexpected amongst its tall pines and dark places.

That is why it should come as no surprise to discover Jean Claude Justine "John" Charpiot residing in eternal slumber at Hooks Cemetery in Kountze, his grave marked by only a simple stone. John Charpiot was born on February 20, 1825 in Conflandey, Departement de la Haute-Saône, Franche-Comté, France. As a child he played in the same woods where Joan d'Arc heard the voices she ascribed to saints and archangels. Charpiot was an educator, a skilled blacksmith by vocation and an outspoken republican in his beliefs. Louis Phillip I clapped the young idealist, likened by many to Jean Valjean, in irons for two years after he refused to fight for the king. Charpiot was then shipped in chains to a penal colony in north Africa for another year, enduring untold hardships throughout his incarceration.

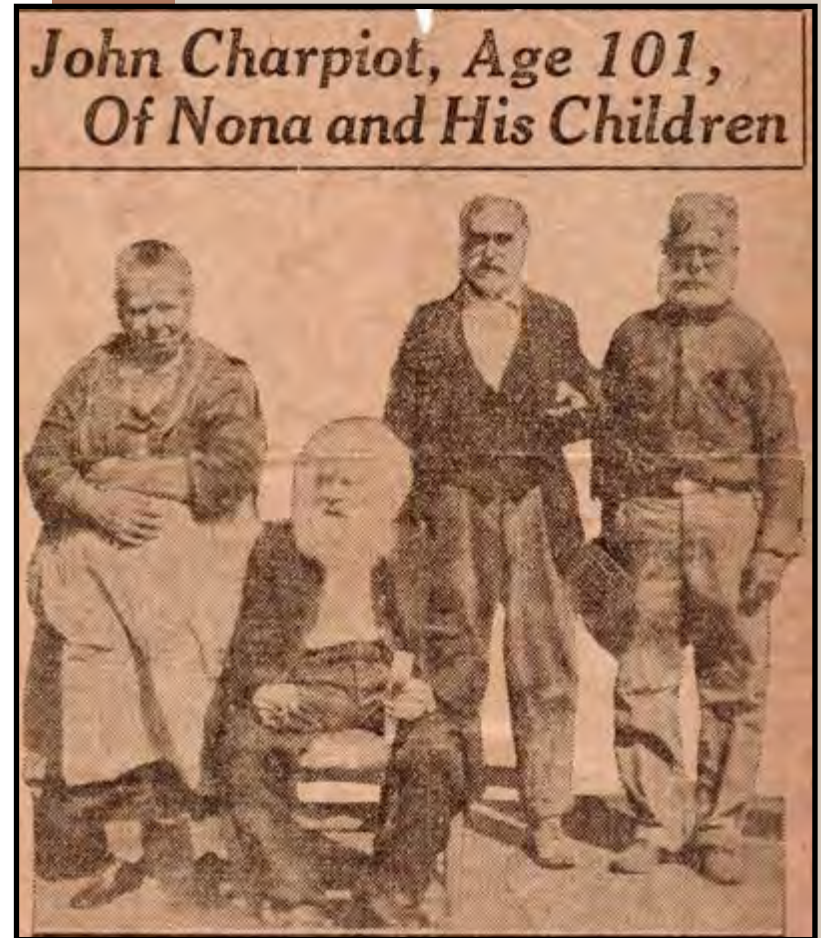
Following his release, Charpiot emigrated to the United States in 1854 and settled in Sabine Pass. He recalled Beaumont in its early days when it only had four stores and the wild forests of the Big Thicket, then teeming with bears. Charpiot joined Ragsdale's Battalion, Texas Cavalry during the Civil War and by all accounts was a scrappy fighter.

Following the war Charpiot and his wife settled in the Pine Island Settlement of Jefferson County before he became a widower. He was a farmer and logger as well as a blacksmith and could wield an ax with tremendous strength. One of the first to farm at Pine Island, Charpiot was proud to claim that he could "make a straight row."

At the age of ninety Charpiot's children made their father give up his plow. They settled him in a comfortable armchair by the family fireside with two of his children near Nona where they could keep an eye on him, and ensured his ever-present briar pipe was well stocked with tobacco. As he aged, the well-beloved, courtly old gentleman with a shock of white hair lost his vision entirely, but his gentle eyes still sparkled with life. He had a habit of slipping into his native French when he spoke.

Charpiot heard the radio for the first time on his 100th birthday in 1925. "Yes, Sir, That's My Baby" was his favorite tune in 1927. When music finally lagged between the radio and the willing fiddlers who attended his day-long birthday festivities that year, Charpiot pitched in with his own rousing rendition of "La Marseillaise."

Charpiot died on September 15, 1928, his three surviving children by his side. The Frenchman was described at the time as the "oldest man in the southwest."



John Charpiot at age 101, with his then-surviving children Katherine Bozeman, Vincent Frederick Charpiot and John Baptiste Charpiot / Beaumont Enterprise, February 28, 1926



Left to right: Mary Catherine Johnston, Sharon Odegar, Sharon's son. Image credit - Diane Thompson



Grahame Jones. Image credit – Mary Catherine Johnston



Elizabeth Waddill. Image credit – Mary Catherine Johnston

Big Thicket Day Success

Mary Catherine Johnston, BTA Director, Thicket of Diversity Chair

Big Thicket Day on the Neches was a beautiful outdoor event hosted on October 11 at Collier’s Ferry Park. It featured family-friendly exhibits, free boat rides on the *Ivory Bill*, kayak play, and live musical entertainment with John Cessac and fiddler David Varnado. Guest speaker Grahame Jones, Executive Director of the Texas Conservation Alliance, offered a message of hope for preservation efforts. The Big Thicket Association and Richard Kratzer provided free food.

The highlight of the day was the presentation of prestigious environmental awards. Sharon Odegar, Texas Master Naturalist and former officer of the Native Plant Society, received the Maxine Johnston Distinguished Service Award. Elizabeth Waddill, Founder and Board member of the Edaren Foundation, earned the R.E. Jackson Conservation Award. Waddill’s extensive advocacy and educational outreach through the National Park Conservation Association to protect and enhance America’s National Park System has never been more timely or needed. Big Thicket National Preserve’s Max Harper was recognized with the R.E. Lubbert Achievement Award. According to Superintendent Wayne Prokopetz, Ranger Harper represents the best of the National Park Service. Unfortunately, he was unable to attend due to the federal government shutdown.

Special thanks go to Big Thicket Day Event Co-Chairs, Bart Gaskin and Katy Hambricht. Big Thicket Day was an ideal celebration for the 61st anniversary of the non-profit. It certainly provided an avenue to echo Big Thicket Association’s urgent message to preserve the unique national treasure of the Big Thicket of Southeast Texas.

Big Thicket Day on the Neches 2025

Katy Hambright, BTA Director, Big Thicket Day Co-Chair

Big Thicket Day on the Neches 2025 on October 11 at Collier's Ferry Park was a rousing success. A hearty thank you to volunteers who arrived early and pitched in with enthusiasm to ready the park for an onslaught of guests, aided by a glorious sunrise sparkling on the Neches River!

This year's annual Big Thicket Association program was enhanced by an intriguing and informative talk on "The Future of Conservation in Texas" by keynote speaker Grahame Jones, Executive Director of the Texas Conservation Alliance. The BTA was also honored to present three very special awards during this year's meeting; details may be found elsewhere in this bulletin.

Following our program, our 300-plus park guests enjoyed mouthwatering links and hotdogs prepared by Richard Kratzer. Musicians John Cessac and David Varnado filled the fall air with lively toe tapping tunes. Visitors enjoyed petting and grooming Stable-Spirit's beautiful horses, chatting with Big Thicket authors Ernest Brown and David Lewis, and learning fascinating information about our region while participating in various craft activities at the booths of the Thicket of Diversity; Sabine-Neches Chapter, Texas Master Naturalists; Lamar University Special Collections; Friends of the RAW Outdoors of Greater SETX; Top Shots 4-H Club; Texas Conservation Alliance; Golden Triangle Sierra Club Group;

and Big Thicket Association. Katy Nelligan and her team presented hands-on demonstrations of canoes and kayaks to excited park patrons. Lamar State College Orange offered tours aboard its training trailer and Gator Country's collection of creeping and slithering creatures was a huge hit with young and old alike. Our own popular *Ivory Bill* offered free, docent-led cruises on the Neches River throughout the event.

The day closed with dinner at Ethridge Farm B&B in Kountze for BTA board members and invited guests on Ann Ethridge's outside deck, under starry skies.

This year's Big Thicket Day was further enhanced by a memorable board members' October 10 evening cruise aboard the *Ivory Bill* to welcome keynote speaker Grahame Jones.

Big Thicket Day is free and is open to the public. The event is held annually to celebrate the establishment of the BTA in 1964 and the Big Thicket National Preserve in 1974. BTA members helped with financial support.

A very special thank you to our major sponsors for underwriting this free event: Beaumont Convention and Visitors Bureau, Big Thicket Plumbing, Coburn's, Monument Roofing Systems, Port of Beaumont, Rave Financial, Read Ice, Sabine Neches Navigation District and TotalEnergies.



Image credit – Katy Hambright



Image credit - Katy Hambricht

Big Thicket Association Hosts Science Café

Amy Pramuk

It was an extraordinary evening at the Big Thicket Association Thicket of Diversity's Science Café!

We were privileged to welcome Randolph and Jean Watson from the Houston SPCA's Wildlife Center of Texas—one of the largest wildlife rehabilitation centers in our nation. The scope of their compassionate work is breathtaking: caring for over 12,000 wild animals annually, with 2024 alone seeing more than 16,000 mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and invertebrates receive expert treatment.

Randolph and Jean delivered a passionate and comprehensive presentation that opened our eyes to the delicate art of wildlife rehabilitation and release. They shared invaluable insights about distinguishing truly injured or orphaned animals from those simply learning to navigate their world independently—knowledge that could save countless wild lives.

We learned about the center's remarkable Wildlife Emergency Response program—how their dedicated staff and volunteers stand ready to mobilize during natural disasters and man-made emergencies involving wildlife. From hurricanes and droughts to wildfires and oil spills, they respond with state-of-the-art facilities and expertise, even collaborating with International Bird Rescue during Gulf Coast emergencies. Their heroic 2022 rescue of 71 young herons and egrets from a destroyed nesting site exemplifies

their unwavering commitment to wildlife in crisis.

But the true stars of the evening? The remarkable Animal Ambassadors!

We met a magnificent Great Horned Owl, brought to the center with a congenital condition affecting one eye, who has found purpose as an educational ambassador. An absolutely striking female American Kestrel—these small raptors are nothing short of incredible and fascinating in their beauty and adaptability. And the grand finale: a spectacularly chatty and undeniably handsome Crested Caracara, also known as the Mexican Eagle! Hatched from an egg at the center and unable to return to the wild due to a talon defect, this charismatic bird has truly embraced his role as an educator—and seems to absolutely love his job!

Tonight reminded us that we are not merely inhabitants of this world, but stewards entrusted with the sacred responsibility of protecting the wild creatures who share our home. Through conservation efforts and compassionate care, we honor the intricate web of life that sustains us all. The dedication of the Houston SPCA's Wildlife Center of Texas stands as a beacon of hope—demonstrating that when we approach wildlife with respect, knowledge, and love, we create a world where both human communities and wild neighbors can flourish together.



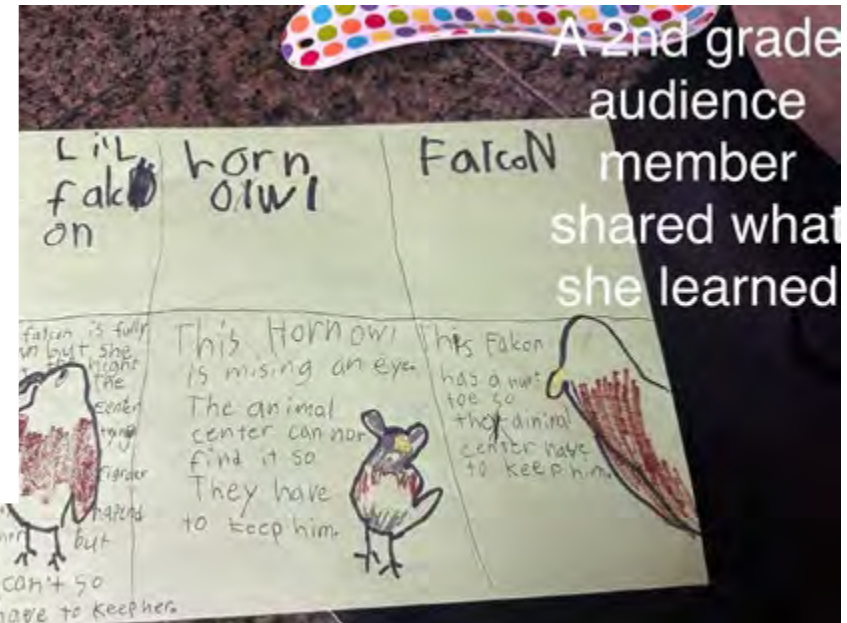
Great horned owl. Image credit – Diane Thompson.



American kestrel
Image credits - Diane Thompson



Crested caracara



Summary by a second-grader attending the café

Sour Lake Lion's Legacy Oak Project

Mary Catherine Johnston, BTA director

Lions Club Park is the site of the old Sour Lake schools. A beautification project approximately 100 years ago resulted in the planting of live oak trees. The buildings were razed, and a park was dedicated through an initiative by the Lions Club of Sour Lake, a community service organization. Today, majestic giants line the park's walkways.

A Lion Legacy Tree Project was envisioned and implemented. A member recalled,

"And the Trees! They were always there - in every memory of that wonderful campus where our childhood was formed. They were planted as a civic group project shortly after the Old School was built in 1917, and long after Oil and the Sink Hole were reduced to the background as historical memories, the Trees breathed new life into our community with the formation of Lions Park. The TREES survived it all... They are the longest standing historic element in this wonderful town: 105 years old. I will gather their acorns...plant their offspring...and give them to other generations of schools and students in our district."

A Sour Lake Lion patiently nurtured acorns collected from the park, and this Fall potted trees were shared with Hardin Jefferson ISD's Director of Maintenance, Fritz Deckard. A new generation of live oak trees will soon be relocated at Hardin Jefferson High School!



Fritz Deckard. Image credit - Peggy O'Leary

Peggy O'Leary. Image credit - MC Johnston

Clipping from The Oil City Visitor (semiweekly newspaper published in Sour Lake, Texas, from around 1908 to unknown end date)

Big Thicket Day Annual Meeting Invocation

October 11, 2025

Phoebe H. Dishman, BTA Director, Bulletin Editor

When I lay me down to sleep
 I smile with gratitude most deep
 That near the Thicket I do dwell
 Birdsong ringing like a bell
 Pine trees whispering in the breeze
 Creeks and rivers if you please
 Lichens, mussels, bugs abound
 Snakes a-snaking on the ground
 Bears and bobcats, so they say
 And ivory bills, back in the day
 And as I lay me down to sleep
 I pray these treasures we may keep
 That we may keep our Thicket grand
 The best Preserve in all the land
 This jewel for every generation
 Demands we practice education
 Look back with deep appreciation
 Remain on guard against predation
 By word and action show we care
 And so I make my little prayer. Amen.



Spider Lilies and Spanish Moss, oil painting by Vanessa LeVine from a photo she took aboard the Ivory Bill, 2025

FALL 2025 planting day

Plant native grasses and trees with us! You can help restore longleaf pine forest habitat for Big Thicket's endangered species.

Saturday, December 13, 2025
9:00 am to 12:00 pm

Big Sandy Creek Unit • Dallardsville, TX

Visit [Volunteer.gov](https://www.volunteer.gov) and search for "Big Thicket" to register.

All equipment will be provided. ASL interpreters available. All ages welcome!

Check with park by Dec. 11 to confirm program status: Call 409-951-6700 or visit [NPS.gov/bith](https://www.nps.gov/bith) or Facebook @BigThicketNPS



Our Partners





SAVE THE DATES

Eco-Art Boat: Sunday December 7th, 4p-6p

Sunset Holiday Tour into the Big Thicket with Captain Saint Nick. Departing at Collier's Ferry Park. Enjoy: Reindeer Games, Edible Craft, Music, Pictures with Santa, Story Time, & Prizes. Pre-registration is required. Seating is limited to 28 passengers. Fees apply: \$25 per person.

Register here: [Sunset Christmas Holiday Tour Registration](#)

Volunteer Day: Plant Native Plants – December 13th, 9a-12noon

Big Thicket National Preserve Event: Spend a morning planting longleaf pines and native plants with rangers as we continue to restore the longleaf pine savanna ecosystem. All equipment is provided. All ages are welcome.

Location: Big Sandy Creek Unit - [register here for more details](#).

Questions? Call 409-951-6700.

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 21st (fees apply). Environmental Education Field Trips resume in March (free to all qualifying area schools).

Register here: [Neches River Adventures](#)



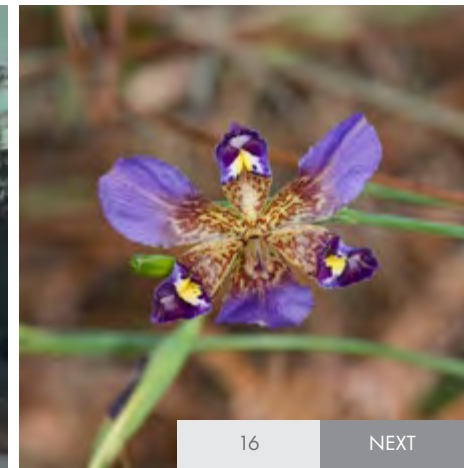
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Big Thicket Association
700 North Street, Suite 79
Beaumont, Texas 77701

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Web Sites

- Big Thicket Association
www.bigthicket.org
- Big Thicket Natural Heritage Trust
www.bigthickettrust.org
- Big Thicket National Preserve
www.nps.gov/biith
- Conservation Fund
www.conservationfund.org
- Gulf States Mycological Society
www.gsmyc.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.