

BIG THICKET BULLETIN



ISSUE 169



BIG THICKET
ASSOCIATION

PARTNER IN PRESERVATION

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Big Thicket National Preserve's Milestones: Restoring the Longleaf Pine Savanna

Captain Bruce Walker, BTA President

Because the Big Thicket Association is an official Friends Group of the National Preserve, it's important for us to recognize these milestones and to celebrate these historic achievements.

The Big Thicket National Preserve is continuing its efforts to restore the Thicket's historic Longleaf Pine Forest. Since 2003 the Preserve has planted over 300,000 longleaf pines across various units of the Big Thicket. During each planting season (December-February), our Southeast Texas communities come together as volunteers from garden clubs, civic organizations, universities, high schools, and other conservation minded associations dig in with their dibble bars to plant trees. Volunteers from Houston, Austin, and Dallas also participate during these annual plantings.

The National Park Service has chosen the longleaf because two centuries ago the longleaf pine forest stretched across the southeastern United States from east Texas to Virginia. Longleaf pines were the dominant tree species on an estimated 60 million acres. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

has identified more than 30 plants and animals dependent on the longleaf ecosystems, including the red-cockaded woodpecker, Texas trailing phlox, Louisiana pine snake, and gopher tortoises. All these species are considered threatened or endangered. Today, longleaf ecosystems are found on just over 3 million acres, or just three percent of its historic range. This loss of habitat is due to logging, fire suppression, and development.

In 2015 Congress passed the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law – Ecosystem Restoration. The Big Thicket National Preserve contains the largest historic tracts of longleaf pine savanna in the National Park System. This law is crucial to the Preserve's ability to increase the capacity of its existing longleaf pines. It also enabled the park's efforts to reintroduce the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker. The NPS partners with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Forest Service as well as the state of Louisiana Department of Fisheries to coordinate planning, permitting, and monitoring the park's Longleaf Pine Savanna Ecosystem Restoration Project.

Sources: National Park Service, BITH, US Forest Service



The Longleaf Pine Trail viewing platform. Dr. Ted Campbell: Keynote speaker at "Voices for the Big Thicket". Image credit - Bruce Walker

In 2016 the Big Thicket Preserve designated the “Centennial Forest” in the Big Sandy Creek Unit to honor the National Park Service’s 100th anniversary. NPS staff, volunteers, students, and partner organizations successfully planted over 100,000 longleaf pine seedlings. The Centennial Forest remains an ongoing project to restore a healthy, thriving longleaf pine savanna habitat.

In 2024, the Big Thicket Preserve opened the Longleaf Pine Trail in the Turkey Creek Unit. This is an “out-and-back” from the Preserve’s Visitors Center. The trail follows a winding path through shady forest, over small bridges, and eventually to a sunny, open longleaf pine forest with a newly constructed observation platform.

The Big Thicket Association is proud to be included with the many other like-minded conservation and preservation organizations that have made this project so successful for so many years.

Sources: National Park Service, BITH, US Forest Service



Texas Trailing Phlox. Image credit - NPS/Herbert Young



Red-Cockaded Woodpecker. Image credit - eBird stock photo

A Breath of Fresh Air

Diane Thompson, BTA Executive Director

Super Bowl Hike Attracts Record Numbers

The Big Thicket Association hosted its annual Super Bowl Hike February 7, 2026, bringing together nature lovers from across Southeast Texas for a day of exploration, community, and celebration in the great outdoors.

Held in partnership with the Golden Triangle Sierra Club Group; Sabine Neches Chapter, Texas Master Naturalist; Big Thicket Natural Heritage Trust; and the Big Thicket Biosphere Reserve, the event drew more than 80 community members to the trails of the Big Thicket National Preserve.

Participants enjoyed a beautiful day in one of the most biologically diverse regions in North America. The Preserve's unique blend of ecosystems, ranging from longleaf pine forests to cypress-lined bayous, provided the perfect backdrop for hikers of all ages and experience levels. The annual Super Bowl Hike has become a beloved tradition, offering an opportunity to swap game-day screens for scenic trails and fresh air.

Volunteers and leaders from each partnering organization shared insights about the region's ecology, conservation efforts, and the importance of protecting the natural heritage of the Big Thicket. The collaborative spirit of the event reflected a shared commitment to stewardship, education, and community engagement.

Events like the Super Bowl Hike highlight the power of partnerships in advancing conservation and fostering appreciation for public lands. By working together, local organizations continue to create meaningful outdoor experiences that connect people to nature and to one another.

With sunshine overhead and more than 80 hikers on the trail, this year's Super Bowl Hike was a clear reminder that some of the best ways to celebrate are found outside surrounded by towering trees, winding trails, and a community united in its love for the Big Thicket. **#bettertogether**



Image credits – Diane Thompson and Amy Pramuk

Neches River Adventures Opening Day

Neches River Adventures will launch its 2026 public tour season, inviting the community to explore the natural beauty and rich history of the Neches River.

Neches River Adventures offers guided excursions aboard the *Ivory Bill*, a 45-foot covered boat captained by a U.S. Coast Guard licensed captain. Tours travel along the scenic Neches River and into the backwaters of Ten Mile Bayou, a cypress-tupelo swamp within the renowned Big Thicket National Preserve.

The two-hour interpretive tour highlights the region's ecology, wildlife, conservation efforts, and cultural history. BTA looks forward to welcoming families, students, and visitors to experience the beauty, history, and ecological importance of this unique Southeast Texas waterway.

Public tours are offered on most Saturdays from March through November. Private charters and educational tours are available year-round for schools, civic groups, and special occasions.

*Reservations required:

www.nechesriveradventures.org.



Image credits - BTA archives

Bringing Big Thicket to the Classroom

Nathan Pattee, Big Thicket National Preserve Interpretive Park Ranger, Education Program Coordinator

Big Thicket is excited to announce a new series of education programs! After a very successful and engaging pilot program last year, the Preserve is now facilitating elementary classroom programs for 1st-5th graders at any surrounding school interested in supporting their science teaching.

Many transportation and logistical barriers continue to exist for schools of all sizes to visit the Preserve, despite great interest from educators in the free, curriculum-based field trips rangers lead throughout the school year. Seeing an opportunity to further support the schools and educators in the Preserve's surrounding communities, Big Thicket secured grant funding and a partnership with Beaumont ISD to create a new set of free programs to be given not on the trail, but in the classroom.

New classroom programs were developed over the course of many weeks in the spring of 2025 by Big Thicket's Education Program Coordinator and three Texas Conservation Corps Education Interns. Programs were then facilitated at each of the twelve public elementary schools in the Beaumont School

District. By testing different techniques as well as implementing teacher feedback, Big Thicket's education team designed unique experiences for students in each grade level that support and expand on what they are learning in the classroom. The immediate impact of this new type of program has been easy to see, as over 1,800 students were presented to in the pilot phase alone.

These new curriculum-based offerings allow educators to bring the Thicket to their school with the help of a ranger, whether it be for a small class or an entire grade level. Student engagement is at the heart of every lesson by utilizing many different animal artifacts and activities. The preserve's classroom programs are complementary but not the same as existing field trip programs, meaning classes headed to the Preserve can enrich their field trip with a program from a ranger before or after their visit. For groups that can't go on a field trip, these new classroom programs will inspire students who may never have learned about the National Preserve.

There is still availability for schools to request a classroom program this spring! Educators interested in learning more or reserving a Big Thicket program can do so at the National Preserve's education website:

www.nps.gov/bith/learn/education

or by contacting Big Thicket's Education Program Coordinator, Nathan Pattee: nathan.pattee@nps.gov or (409)-554-9027



Classroom programs teach about a diversity of topics, including Big Thicket's wildlife.

"The program was very interactive, and my students couldn't stop talking about it!" – Caldwell Elementary 4th grade teacher.

Student engagement is at the heart of every classroom program activity.

Image credits - NPS



Photo from Dr. Scott Solomon

Thicket of Diversity Researcher Authors New Book!

Mary Catherine Johnston, BTA Director and ToD chair, and Natalia Doiron, ToD intern

From Big Thicket ants to outer space, our Thicket of Diversity (ToD) researcher and current ToD committee member, Dr. Scott Solomon of Rice University, has expanded his field of study. He is over the moon excited with the publication of his next book, *Becoming Martian: How Living in Space Will Change Our Bodies and Minds*.

Researching and writing this book were quite a journey. He became interested in the science of human spaceflight soon after his first book, *Future Humans*, was published. The last chapter considered what the ultimate fate of our species might be, and Solomon suggested a scenario that was far-fetched, yet intriguing: What if some people left Earth to live somewhere else? He knew from his training as an evolutionary biologist that organisms stranded on islands often evolve into new forms, and aren't planets much like islands, just on a much larger scale?

But then something happened that the researcher did not expect. The idea of creating permanent settlements in space started to be taken seriously, and he learned about a variety of different efforts to actually make it happen— and not just by billionaires. The more he learned, the more he wondered what would actually happen if these efforts were successful? He decided to do a deep dive to find out as much as he could. He visited research labs so secure they needed iris scanners, watched astronauts train underwater, and even tried on a spacesuit. Dr. Solomon read hundreds of research papers and dozens of books. He sat in on a college astronomy course and met with nuclear physicists, microbiologists, philosophers, rocket engineers, historians, geologists, space medicine doctors, anthropologists, geneticists, sociologists, and quite a few other fascinating experts.

Solomon states, “There were so many people who helped me along the way. They listened to my ideas and gave me feedback. They read draft chapters and even the entire manuscript. Some even went on record to say kind things about the book, which will appear as blurbs on the back cover, and former NASA astronaut Scott Kelly contributed the Foreword!”

The Big Thicket Association congratulates Dr. Scott Solomon for this endeavor and wishes him much success!

Science Café Series: Prescribed Fires

Natalia Doiron, Thicket of Diversity Intern

Ecosystem management? The prescription is fire.

The Big Thicket is burning, but fear not, this is intentional. If you've noticed smoke in the air, that would be from a prescribed fire.

Mike Thompson of The Nature Conservancy spoke at the Big Thicket Association's Science Café about "Prescribed Fire" on February 23rd at the Logon Cafe. Thompson is the new East Texas Project Director and is a fire management expert. To simulate an ecosystem's natural processes, prescribed fires are managed by specialists to burn areas of land for the wildlife and to enhance biodiversity. Precise planning ensures success and prevents the fire from getting out of hand. One must be pro-active and flexible as no two fires are ever the same. Thompson has done 800 fires throughout his 20-year career in prescribed fires, and Monday night he shared his experience.

Burning forested areas may seem detrimental or counterintuitive to some, yet many ecosystems have evolved to rely on fire as part of their lives. Plants and trees need the ground cleared so that they can grow, animals need a clear path to walk on the ground floor, and fires also control some invasive species. Fires clear away fallen leaves

and overgrown shrubs to make space for "groceries on the ground," as Thompson called it, like grasses, wildflowers, and other food sources. Clearing the ground level also protects areas from accidentally having a much hotter and dangerous fire that can get out of control. If not burned, all the undergrowth could build up and provide the fire with much more fuel, causing more extreme burning to the area.

Some assume that prescribed fire and controlled burning are the same thing, yet Thompson argues that instead of controlling a fire, you can only manage and moderate it. Extensive planning is done before the burn and during to mitigate risk of the fire getting out of control. Concerns such as smoke delineation, fire temperature and height, wind, and weather conditions like temperature and humidity all need to be closely watched. These conditions vary greatly depending on what the "perfect fire" needs to be for the area. A contingency plan for everything that could go wrong is always discussed ahead of time so that any possible changes in the planned burn can be reacted to and altered accordingly.

Handled by professionals, fires are an important part of life and the health of these ecosystems.



Left to right: Mary Catherine Johnston, Diane Thompson, Mike Thompson, Captain Bruce Walker. Image credit – Johnny Thompson



Image credits – Natalia Doiron

Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Service

Mary Catherine Johnston, BTA director, Thicket of Diversity chair

The Big Thicket National Preserve Visitor Center was the site of a Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Service Workday on January 19. Approximately 25 volunteers from various environmental organizations were on hand to cut yaupon trees and feed a chipper.

It was refreshing to note the presence of a few young adults. Three Youth Leader Council members of the National Park Conservation Association participated. Alexander Ivey and Joseph Dilley both attend the University of Texas - San Antonio. Arianna Medina, also of San Antonio, is enrolled at Trinity University. Audrey Kirby lives in Beaumont and is an education major. Dr. Zhongqian Cheng, a Postdoctoral research associate in forest ecology and management from Stephen F. Austin State University, and her young son helped clean underbrush.

Says Superintendent Wayne Prokopetz, “Volunteers play increasingly important roles with the U.S. National Park Service (NPS) and are much needed.” To explore park service opportunities and support the NPS in its mission to preserve and protect our national parks, go to [Volunteer.gov](https://www.volunteer.gov).

Food for the event was provided by the Big Thicket Natural Heritage Trust.



Alexander Ivey, Arianna Medina, Joseph Dilley.
Image credit – Mary Catherine Johnston



Audrey Kirby, Mary Catherine Johnston.
Image credit – Diane Thompson

Forgotten Big Thicket Activist: Larry Jene Fisher's Contributions to the East Texas Big Thicket Association

Penny L. Clark, BTA director, retired Associate Professor/Special Collections Librarian, Lamar University

The East Texas Big Thicket Association began in the 1930s with the goal of working for a Big Thicket National Park, 435,000 acres in size. Historians credit ETBTA's president R.E. Jackson "and others." But Larry Jene Fisher was playing a key role.

- Used photography skills in exhibits, programs, and publications.
- Wrote articles for prominent newspapers including Dallas Morning News, Houston Chronicle, and Beaumont Enterprise, discussing fascinating people and biodiversity of the Big Thicket.
- Having worked in vaudeville, he was experienced at performing before audiences, also in public relations and writing releases.

Born Lawrence Orsino Fisher in 1902 in Wichita Falls, he was raised in Dallas. Graduating from high school at 15, he became an organist at silent movie theaters. In 1931 he was hired to play the amazing Wonder Organ at the Jefferson Theater in Beaumont.

He began to photograph the Big Thicket and advocate for its preservation. He and R.E. Jackson offered to show photos and speak for free to any interested organization. Jackson was often the speaker and Fisher showed slides. Civic organizations included Daughters of the American Revolution, Exchange Club, East Texas Nature Club, and Texas Federation of Women's Clubs.

Fisher wrote and produced a play, "Keyser Burnout," about an incident in the Big Thicket during the Civil War.

Fisher's photos sold citizens on the importance of the Big Thicket.

The organization needed the support of scientists and politicians. In 1938, Fisher and Jackson gave a tour of the Big Thicket to 25 attendees of the Texas Academy of Science, held that year at Huntsville. Fisher exhibited photos and was made a member of the Academy.

Traveling to the East Coast in August, 1938, Fisher lobbied Life Magazine, met with officials of the World's Fair, talked to Audubon Society's executive director John H. Baker, and lobbied politicians in D.C.

For various reasons including large oil deposits discovered in Polk County, the outbreak of World War II with its desperate need for wood, and the Federal Government's expenditures on four existing national forests in the area, the formation of the Big Thicket National Preserve did not happen until 1974.

But much groundwork had been done. At Lamar University you can see the Larry Jene Fisher photograph collection, which includes fauna and flora, folklife, history, courthouses, portraits, and images of the lumber and oil industries.



R.E. Jackson and Larry J. Fisher giving a presentation to a standing room only crowd

An exhibit of Larry Fisher's photographs and newspaper articles on the Big Thicket

New Intern for the Thicket of Diversity

Mary Catherine Johnston, BTA Director, Thicket of Diversity Chair

The Big Thicket Association (BTA) is excited to announce our new intern, Natalia Doiron. She will be working with the Thicket of Diversity in its taxonomic efforts, as well as using her business background to help with other activities and projects for the organization.

Natalia is from Beaumont, TX. She has a BBA in Marketing and Management from Lamar University and is currently working on her MS in Management in France at the Rennes School of Business. Her masters program focuses on Environmental Sustainability for Business.

She will apply her knowledge and skills to impact the goals of the Thicket of Diversity. She started working on February 2nd and will be helping the organization for the next 4 months. She is excited to work with the BTA and further the mission to protect the Big Thicket!

“I’m looking forward to learning more about this treasure that is located right up the road from Beaumont. It’s going to be exciting to help ToD and put my academic skills to practical use!” said Natalia.



Editor's Corner: The Game is Afoot!

Phoebe H. Dishman, BTA Director, Bulletin Editor

On the first Sunday of 2026, in the late-afternoon woods near Beech Creek, my sisters and brother-in-law encountered a bird they'd never seen before. They didn't get a picture. But they sent me a text with the facts: This bird is big, kind of chunky. It walks funny. It has a long bill, and not much neck. It's brownish, streaky, with robin-reddish underparts. It's poking around in the leaf litter. On seeing people, it runs away on foot, then erupts in flight, producing a noise like a white-winged dove taking off. By return text I gave two closely related possibilities: Wilson's snipe, or American woodcock. We'll never know for sure, but the robin-red inclines me to woodcock, probing the forest floor for earthworms, its favorite food. Often described as a football with wings, with big dark eyes almost on top of its head, the better to scan for predators above, it's also known as the timberdoodle, the bog-sucker, the hokum-poke, and the Labrador twister. (Why??) Each breeding season the male takes several mates, but zero interest in his offspring. During woodcock hunting season the bag limit is three per day. Thus ends my testimony.



*American woodcock, Kirby Nature Trail, Hardin County, 2019.
Image credit - Michael Cooper*

American woodcock. Painting by Isabelle Scurry Chapman

Save the Date:

13th Annual

Neches River Rally

September 12, 2026

Join us for a fun-filled adventure
Kayak & Canoe Paddle

**Early Bird Registration Opens
July 1, 2026**
Salt Water Barrier Boat Ramp
6795 Bigner Road
Beaumont, TX 77708

www.bigthicket.org





SAVE THE DATES

Neches River Adventures

Tour the Neches River's backwater channels into the Big Thicket National Preserve and the Port of Beaumont aboard the *Ivory Bill*. **Private Charters** continue year-round and **Saturday Public Tours** resume March 21st (fees apply). **Environmental Education Field Trips** resume in March (free to all qualifying area schools).

Register here: [Neches River Adventures](#)

13th Annual Neches River Rally

September 12th - Cooks Lake to Scatterman Paddling Trail - LNVA Saltwater Barrier Boat Ramp - 6790 Bigner Road - Beaumont, TX 77708 (Fees apply). Registration for this event is currently not open.

Big Thicket Day on the Neches

October 10th - Collier's Ferry Park on the Neches - Free family friendly event - Exhibitors and vendors, activities for children, live musical entertainment, a keynote speaker, and lunch. Plus, free *Ivory Bill* boat tours. No registration required.

Big Thicket National Preserve Events

Find more events here:

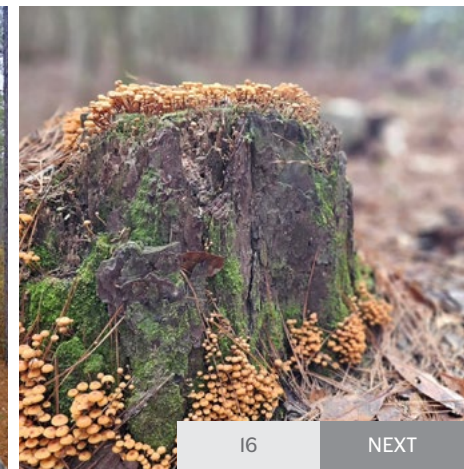
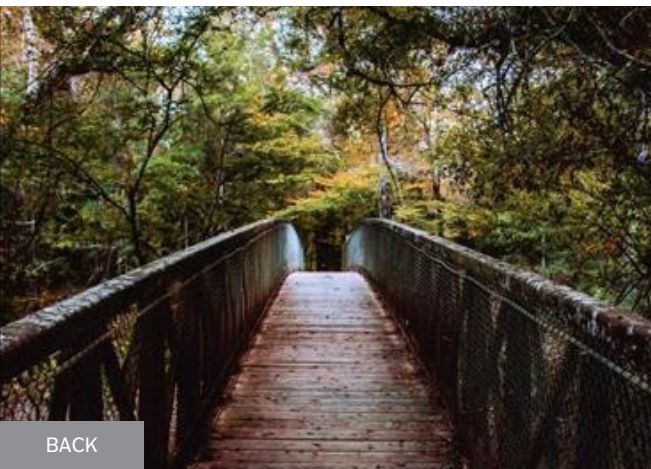
<https://www.nps.gov/bith/planyourvisit/calendar.htm>



BIG THICKET ASSOCIATION

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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.gsmyco.org

National Audubon Society
www.goldentriangleaudubon.org
www.houstonaudubon.org

National Parks Conservation Association
www.npca.org

Native Plant Society of Texas
www.npsot.org

Nature Conservancy
www.nature.org/texas

Neches River Flood Planning Group
www.nechesfloodplanning.org

Outdoor Nature Club, Houston
www.outdoornatureclub.org

The Portal to Texas History
www.texashistory.unt.edu

Sierra Club Golden Triangle Group
www.sierraclub.org/texas/golden-triangle

Texas Black Bear Alliance
texasblackbear.weebly.com

Texas Conservation Alliance
www.TCAtexas.org

Texas Master Naturalist Association,
Sabine Neches Chapter
www.txmn.org/sabine

Village Creek State Park
tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/village-creek

Big Thicket Association Mission

The purposes for which the Big Thicket Association is organized are

- » To work for the preservation of the flora, fauna and historical culture of the Big Thicket area
- » To promote the conservation of natural resources and natural history of the Big Thicket area, and education for same
- » To maintain and perpetuate, so far as possible, the many species of trees, plants and animals found in the Big Thicket area, and to do whatever else may be done to preserve for posterity the abundance of flora and fauna and natural beauty with which this area has been endowed
- » To promote and to fund research contributing to knowledge of the Big Thicket area
- » To publish or support publication of cultural and scientific Big Thicket literature
- » To promote the welfare of the Big Thicket National Preserve

For more information about the Big Thicket Association and upcoming events, please click here to visit us online.

Follow Us



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