

BIG THICKET BULLETIN



ISSUE 170



BIG THICKET
ASSOCIATION

PARTNER IN PRESERVATION

START >

INSIDE
THIS
ISSUE

2026

APRIL
MAY
JUNE

3
*Building Stronger Communities
Through Connection and Outreach »*



4
*Is Marysee Prairie relevant to the Big
Thicket National Preserve? »*



6
Michelle Esclovon's Photography »



8
*Thicket of Diversity Accomplishments
(2024-2026) »*



9
Meet the Captain: Louis Novak »



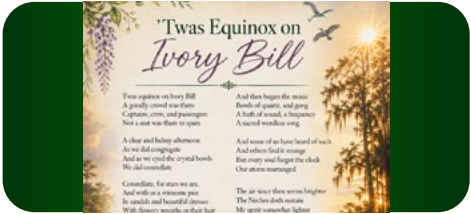
10
Champions for Nature »



11
Volunteers-In-Parks at Big Thicket »



12
*Eco-Art Excursion: Forest Therapy, Sound
and the Arrival of Spring aboard the Ivory Bill »*



13
*Editor's Corner: Morning Devotions on
Holy Ground »*



14
*Save the date: 13th Annual Neches River Rally
September 12, 2026 »*



15
Save the Dates »



16
Remembering: Sharon Savoie Odegar »



Building Stronger Communities Through Connection and Outreach

Diane Thompson, BTA Executive Director

The Big Thicket Association continues to make a meaningful impact across Southeast Texas by creating opportunities for education, wellness, and community engagement. Through partnerships with local organizations, schools, and businesses, the association has focused on strengthening relationships and supporting the people who make our communities thrive.

One of the organization’s recent outreach efforts took place at Lamar State College Orange, where members of the Big Thicket Association connected with students and faculty to encourage involvement, conservation, mentorship, and community awareness. By engaging directly with young adults, the association continues to invest in the future of Southeast Texas.

The Big Thicket Association also participated in Health and Wellness Days hosted by ExxonMobil and TotalEnergies, bringing together employees and community members to promote healthier lifestyles, positive well-being, and awareness of the Big Thicket National Preserve. The event highlighted the importance of physical health, mental wellness, and community support systems while creating an environment where people

could connect outside of the workplace. Through conversations, outreach materials, and community interaction, the Association reinforced its mission of preservation and protection of the Big Thicket National Preserve and encouraged visits to the Preserve.

In addition to educational and wellness outreach, the Big Thicket Association proudly joined Champions for Nature during the South Texas State Fair in Beaumont. The fair provided an exciting opportunity to engage with thousands of community members from across Southeast Texas. Working alongside Champions for Nature allowed the Association to support environmental awareness, youth engagement, and family-centered activities while sharing BTA’s projects which promote the Big Thicket region.

These additional outreach efforts reflect the Big Thicket Association’s ongoing commitment to building relationships and making a positive difference throughout Southeast Texas. Whether connecting with college students, supporting wellness initiatives, or participating in community events, the association continues to demonstrate the power of partnership, leadership, and service.



BTA Exhibit at ExxonMobil Health and Wellness Day. Image credit – Diane Thompson

BTA Director of Environmental Education Jennie Knapp, right, at ExxonMobil Health and Wellness Day. Image credit – Diane Thompson

Cindy Black and Diane Thompson at Total Energies Mental Health Awareness Day. Image credit – a passerby

Is Marysee Prairie relevant to the Big Thicket National Preserve?

Captain Bruce Walker, BTA President

Marysee Prairie is a 13-acre Texas Land Conservancy (TLC)-protected preserve located in Liberty County. It is an ecological rarity because it is the only protected native tallgrass prairie remnant in the Big Thicket area. The property is a crossroads of coastal prairie grasses and western vegetation. This preserve has a rich diversity of native grasses. It also features vibrant wildflowers as well as unique plants. The prairie would naturally be overgrown by forests without the intervention of resolute volunteers who actively maintain the ecosystem through routine mowing and prescribed burns.

In 1973, Billy Hallmon led a committee to draft boundary recommendations for preserving proposed Big Thicket units, which incorporated data on ecosystems and proposals for development. NPS followed those recommendations and published final boundaries in the Federal Register, March 1975.

The following letter, **The Missing Costal Prairie**, was recently submitted by Billy Hallmon, former BTA board member, current Advisory Board member, and 2006 R.E. Jackson Conservation Award Recipient.



Longtime Marysee Prairie volunteers Thomas Maddux, Glenn Merkord, Ellen Buchanan, Brandt Mannchen, and Maxine Johnston. Image credit – The Texas Land Conservancy

Marysee Prairie in bloom. Image credit – the Texas Land Conservancy

NEXT

Michelle Esclovon's Photography

Natalia Doiron, BTA intern; and Mary C. Johnston, BTA director and Thicket of Diversity chair



The main subject for photographer Michelle Esclovon is the Big Thicket. Her goal is to share the same sense of awe and wonder she experiences while walking out of doors to those that see her photography.

The Big Thicket is known to many, yet not all have seen it as something marvelous. Through Esclovon's camera lens, a whole new view is captured. From the looming cypress knees, to the tiniest wildflowers, to the animals hiding in plain sight, life surrounds her in the Big Thicket. "The cycle of life is constant in the Thicket," she says. If you stay still enough, you'll hear and see it all around.

Trees are a main theme in her work, as well as capturing light and mist. "Sometimes when I look at the trees, I think, these are old friends that I go and visit." Michelle says, "Each time I go, I find they'll tell me a new secret. By visiting a place over and over, one is bound to see something new." She describes the light of fall and winter in its softer quality or how the light through the clouds can be a spotlight on a subject. By the light in these photographs, one can feel the winter wind or the humid air of summer.

Esclovon always takes a journal with her on these trips. She likes to write about the experience, how it made her feel, the tiny details that are easily forgotten. To her, every outing takes on an experience like no other. And thanks to her photography, we can share in that awe and wonder.

Michelle is a valued member of the ToD Committee and a BTA Director.



"Starry Nights in the Big Thicket." Image credit – Michelle Esclovon



“Sunrise Over the Bog.” Image credit – Michelle Esclovon



Researcher David Lewis, and Natalia Doiron.
Image credit – Mary Catherine Johnston

2026 TAXA TALLY

Thicket of Diversity								
Kingdom	Research Group	Description	Species Count	Collected Observed	New to Science	New to Preserve	New to State	New to US
Animalia	Acrididae	Grasshoppers	23	47				
Animalia	Alligatoridae	American Alligators	1	66				
Animalia	Annelids	Leeches	2	8				
Animalia	Apoidea	Bees	127	9,190		94	2	
Animalia	Astacidae	Crayfish	13	664	1			
Animalia	Cicindelidae	Tiger Beetles	5	12				
Animalia	Formicidae	Ants	60	3,152+			13	
Animalia	Gastropoda	Land Snails	31	n/a				
Animalia	Coleoptera	Waterbeetles (excluding Gyrinidae)	54	375			21	
	Gyrinidae	Whirligig Beetles	8	789		8		
Animalia	Herpetofauna	Amphibians & Reptiles	66	250				
Animalia	Heteroptera	Aquatic True Bugs-water striders/scorpions, etc.	75	1,712			16	
Animalia	Ichthyofauna	Freshwater Fish	70	89,572				
Animalia	Lepidoptera	Butterflies, Moths (moth data under Noctuidae)	134	623+				
	Noctuidae	Owllet Moths	53	292				
Animalia	Mordellidae	Tumbling Flower Beetles	17	108				
Animalia	Nematode	Roundworms, Free-living & Plant Parasitic	335	139+	2	166		
Animalia	Odonata	Dragonflies & Damselflies	34	9,843				
Animalia	Tardigrada	Waterbears, Moss Piglets	8	15				
Animalia	Platyhelminthes	Trematoda & Parasites of Aquatic Ectotherms	76	236+	11			
Animalia	Unionoida	Freshwater Mussels	32	11,804				
Fungi	Lichens	Dual Organism - fungus & algae	139	1,089			2	
Fungi	Macro Fungi	Mushrooms	1,433	2,118+	27	234	285	3
Fungi	Pyrenomycetes	Fungi with tough texture	74	260	6	14		3
Plantae	Bryophyta	Mosses, Hornworts, Liverworts	179	2,081				
Plantae	Orchidaceae	Orchids	43	489				
Plantae	Tracheophytes	Vascular Plants	2,423	6,079			4	
Protozoa	Myxomycetes	Slime Molds	101	858		47	6	
			5,616	135,603	47	563	349	6

Prepared by Natalia Doiron and Mary Catherine Johnston, June 2026

2026 Taxa Tally



Natalia Doiron at the Field Research Station. Image credit – Mary Catherine Johnston

Thicket of Diversity Accomplishments (2024-2026)

Mary C. Johnston, BTA director, Thicket of Diversity chair

Priorities emerged on reflection on the Thicket of Diversity (ToD) after 20 years of operation. The science arm of the Big Thicket Association (BTA) had amassed mountains of data under five directors, and materials were scattered. Efforts were made to consolidate data and researcher information, but everything needed to be reanalyzed.

Volunteers have sustained ToD since 2017. Texas Commission on Environmental Quality enforcement actions have funded projects. In 2024, projects included Robert Laroche of Rice University and Daniel Bennett of Stephen F. Austin University, and later Paul Tinerella with the North Dakota State Insect Reference Collection and JoVonn Hill of Mississippi State University.

In 2026, an exciting development occurred with the hiring of a graduate of Lamar University pursuing a master's at the Rennes School of Business in France, Natalia Doiron. She was tasked with an internship addressing environmental sustainability to ensure the non-profit's future success.

The primary mission of the ToD is the collection of inventory data. Natalia analyzed all research and compiled lists of species names verified by the National Park Service collecting standards. The updated 2026 Taxa Tally was a monumental accomplishment.

Doiron and ToD Chair, Mary C. Johnston, brainstormed ways to enhance efficiency with better management of assets. The Field

Research Station, originally owned by the BTA, was donated to the National Park Service and is now managed by the BTA under a formal agreement. It is underutilized. To enhance appreciation and use, the two compiled a history of the building that, interestingly, is intertwined with the BTA's roots. A list of posters displayed in the Field Research Station was compiled. Forgotten posters discovered in files were printed and hung.

The final task for Doiron was development of a marketing plan. A new brochure was designed and the ToD website was reviewed page by page.

The support of intern Natalia Doiron significantly benefited the Thicket of Diversity. Her focus on environmental sustainability with an international perspective was most timely. Funding cuts to government agencies with a climate change focus, such as the National Park Service, have been disastrous. Reduced capacity is critically impacting viability. Non-profits such as the Big Thicket Association must increase efforts. Stronger networking partnerships and encouragement of activities and research beyond the borders of the Preserve throughout the region will help ensure its future.

Analysis of the ToD from a business perspective not only celebrates the amazing accomplishments of the organization, but also outlines a blueprint for success. Thank you, Natalia, and the Rennes School of Business.

Meet the Captain: Louis Novak

Captain Bruce Walker, BTA President

Louis Novak recently joined our crew as a volunteer Captain while splitting his time with other non-profit organizations, and his full-time job with the MARAD Reserve Fleet. His title is Marine Surveyor, Division of Gulf Operations, Maritime Administration, U.S. DOT.

Captain Novak was born in Alsace-Lorraine, France while his father was an US Air Force officer stationed there. Lou says, “I spent my formative years living with my mother and grandparents, I spoke French before speaking English.”

Novak is a 1989 Graduate of the US Maritime Academy and achieved the rank of Lieutenant in the Navy/NOAA Corps where he “flew and drove ships.” He worked as a Coast Guard civilian at the National Maritime Center and USCG Headquarters for 15 years.

He is a recipient of the Bronze President’s Volunteer Service Award and the Meehan Humanitarian Service Award for his 25+ years of volunteer service. He has dedicated his time, maritime and leadership skills to many worthy humanitarian causes. I am listing just a small sample of his maritime volunteer experiences. There are lots more!

Captain Novak served aboard the M/V *Caribbean Mercy* in 1996, 1998, and 2000. The Mercy Ships provide medical care and equipment to those in need worldwide. The ships are run by volunteers. His ports of call were in Norfolk, Savannah, Jacksonville, Astoria in the US and to Honduras, Nicaragua,

El Salvador, and Mexico. In 1999 and 2005, he volunteered aboard the M/V *Anastasis* a second *Mercy Ship* around Africa to Tema, Ghana, and Cape Town.

In 2005, 2006, 2008, Novak served with the all-volunteer crew aboard the *Pacific Link* for “Youth with a Mission” (YWAM) Medical Ships/Marine Reach to the South Pacific. Her voyages shuttled between New Zealand, Fiji, Australia, and Papua New Guinea.

From 2008-2024, he volunteered with the Boy Scouts of America with the *Sea Scout Ships*. He coached at-risk youth rowing and carpentry skills for the Alexandria Seaport Foundation (ASF) 2009-2016. These youth were able to build a whaling boat and row it in New Bedford’s Harbor to present it as a gift to New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park.

Novak served on the M/V *Pacific Hope* 2011, 2014, 2017. He was aboard her maiden voyage from Hakodate, Japan to Manilla, Philippines passing within sight of the Fukushima nuclear plant. He was on her last Pacific voyage from Lautoka, Fiji to Panama. He navigated by the glow of Ambrym’s volcano and piloted the ship between uncharted reefs by outrigger canoe. His missions while aboard the M/V *Pacific Hope* were medical, dental, drought relief, anti-human trafficking, and orphanage visitation.

More recently, Captain Novak sailed another unarmed medical service vessel M/V to Madagascar through the Gulf of Aden where “we were shadowed by Somali pirates.”



Captain Novak, as Skipper, wearing his kilt before attending the Highland Games in Beaumont.



Photos courtesy of Louis Novak



Champions for Nature

Natalia Doiron, BTA intern; and Mary C. Johnston, BTA director and Thicket of Diversity chair

Nancy Angell of the Sabine Neches Chapter of Texas Master Naturalist started Champions for Nature in 2021 after the realization that to grow the number of supporters for the Big Thicket, they needed to reach outside their usual audience. Instead of preaching to the choir, events needed to reach a new younger audience, one that could sustain their efforts into the future.

Angell gathered several local groups that worked with the Big Thicket for an event to share information that would be impactful to a younger audience. The first Champions for Nature was at a middle school Christmas market.

Early on, Master Naturalist decided that every table needed an activity to engage youth. With each event they participated in, the physical location, number of attendants, and the host's theme were all taken into consideration. This inspired ideas for activities to fit each event's theme.

Creating so many different activities spawned another angle of Champions for Nature. Angell created training videos on YouTube. This allowed the impact of the event to spread even farther, as others can replicate her program in their locale.

Awareness and appreciation are the first step for people to care for the environment and take action for its protection. Putting children at the forefront has helped many parents see the importance of the Big Thicket and its resources. When they find out that it can get kids interested in nature and go outside instead of being on screens, or that their future will be negatively impacted if it is not conserved, people listen. Many that would be willing to support and protect the Big Thicket are just unaware of what it offers.

Having this personal relationship with local natural areas and the environmental organizations committed to its care creates more responsibility, appreciation, and awareness of nature. This, in turn, leads to more support and help for the Big Thicket. Events like Champions for Nature do this by sharing a sense of wonder and genuine learning about the Big Thicket.

In 2026, Champions for Nature led by Sabine Neches Master Naturalist was hosted in the Ford Park Exhibit Hall at the YMBL South Texas State Fair. The venue had an outreach of over 2000! It benefitted not only the citizens of all ages who were engaged, but myriad groups who networked together to share their love of the Big Thicket.



YMBL South Texas State Fair at Ford Park.
Image credit - Sabine-Neches Chapter Texas Master Naturalist



Nancy the Bee.
Image credit – Mary Catherine Johnston



Nancy Angell at the Watson Preserve. Image credit – Natalia Doiron

Volunteers-In-Parks at Big Thicket

Megan Urban, Chief of Interpretation and Education, Public Information Officer, Big Thicket National Preserve; Kevin Goodwin, Volunteer Opportunities at Big Thicket program manager.

Volunteers are essential to the success and preservation of national parks across the country, including Big Thicket National Preserve. Their dedication supports restoration work with the longleaf planting events, helps maintain trails and facilities, and assists with welcoming visitors to the preserve. Volunteers from all over the country have donated their time and effort to help clean up trash on paddle trips, participated in public education, and have helped manage natural resources as a part of special events.

Long term and recurring local volunteers play a vital role in the protection and conservation of Big Thicket National Preserve. RV Volunteers have the opportunity to stay in the preserve for commitments of 3-6 months at a time. They contribute tremendously to the success of our ranger led programs and visitor center operations.

Volunteers protect natural landscapes and wildlife and foster a sense of community and stewardship among visitors. Over the past two years, the volunteer opportunities offered has expanded, due to the hard work of our volunteer program manager, Kevin Goodwin. We are sad to be saying good-bye to him in July, as he has accepted a permanent position with the NPS at the William Howard Taft National Historic Site in Ohio.

If you are interested in volunteering opportunities at Big Thicket, search for us on [volunteer.gov](https://www.volunteer.gov) or call our Visitor Center at 409-951-6700.



- 1. MLK brush-clearing volunteers.
 - 2. Planting demonstration and prep.
 - 3. Trash clean-up volunteers
- All images – National Park Service

Editor's Corner: Morning Devotions on Holy Ground

Phoebe H. Dishman, BTA Director, Bulletin Editor

A dozen years ago a stranger visited our son's house near the railroad tracks on Pinchback. Swooping in on giant wings, landing in a marshy part of the yard, it commenced a patient foot patrol, keenly studying the ground, occasionally freezing. For reasons unknown it suffered David to follow close on its heels, mimicking every move. Its forbearance was matched by David's delight. From his phone description and my bird guide, we concluded it was a yellow-crowned night-heron. Soon after, Dave entertained a family gathering with his heron-walk.

With a new bird on my radar I soon realized the terse squawk above my husband's and my own yard on West Evangeline was none other than a passing YCNH, announcing plans to colonize Beaumont.

Which they did. Soon I began to see them everywhere. They shape-shift, one moment upright and attenuated, then squashed-down—jug birds, my brother calls them. Whatever their format I rejoice in their violet-gray bodies, glossy black heads, ruby-red eyes, white cheeks, creamy crowns, heavy bills that mean business, all topped with a dashing plume. Tres chic!

One recent morning a person emerged from a pink people-church just in time for a close encounter with two yellow-crowns emerging from the dense wall of a green heron-church known as Gilbert Park. They were in their version of a hurry. But I know they saw me.

Whatever your species or denomination, here's to morning devotions on holy ground.



Drawing by David Dishman, BTA member and heron-walker

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 10, 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 downriver to the Port of Beaumont aboard the *Ivory Bill*. **Private Charters** continue year-round and **Saturday Public Tours** are offered March - November (fees apply). Fall semester **Environmental Education School Field Trips** are available **Free** to all qualifying area schools. Our “floating classroom” offers educational opportunities for teachers and students. The TEKS aligned curriculum includes a 2-hour Field Lab for 5th - 12th grades, as well as a 1-hour Habitat Lesson for pre-K - 4th grade.

Register here: [Neches River Adventures](#)

Eco-Art Boat: Sunset & Fireworks

July 4th - Sunset & Fireworks – Annual Eco-Art boat featuring the City of Beaumont fireworks display viewed from the *Ivory Bill*. The fee is \$40 per person, and seating is limited. Pre-registration is required. Music – Games – Prizes (8:30 – 9:30pm)

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). Early Bird Registration opens July 10th.

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 into the Big Thicket National Preserve. No registration required.

Big Thicket National Preserve Events

Join rangers for free programs and special events, including night hikes, nature walks, canoe trips, and much more!

Find more events here:

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

I N M E M O R Y



Sharon Savoie Odegar

Sharon Savoie Odegar, naturalist, died May 14, 2026.

Born December 1, 1942, in Lake Charles, Louisiana, she attended St. Charles Academy Catholic School, graduating in 1960, then attended McNeese State College. Sharon then went to work for Haxthausen CPA in Lake Charles until her marriage to David Odegar in 1963. They relocated to Baton Rouge where they started their family, and eventually relocated to Orange, Texas. Together they raised 5 children and numerous pets, both wild and domestic.

In the late 1970s, Sharon began teaching CCD Catholic Education at St Mary's. In the early 1980s, she became interested in Transcendental Meditation and spent a number of years volunteering and working for Renaissance Seminars. In 1984, she went to work for Gulf States Utilities (Entergy).

After her retirement in 1996, she began an active career in outdoor volunteerism. Always a passionate advocate of environmental issues, animal and plant life, she devoted her last 30 years to studying, teaching, and sharing her knowledge with anyone she encountered. The organizations she helped with included Native Plant Society of Texas, Beaumont Botanical Gardens, Orange County Master Gardeners, Shangri La, Texas Master Naturalist, Big Thicket Association, Thicket of Diversity, and the Big Thicket Natural Heritage Trust. Through countless tabling events, workshops, and presentations, Sharon worked tirelessly to educate the public.

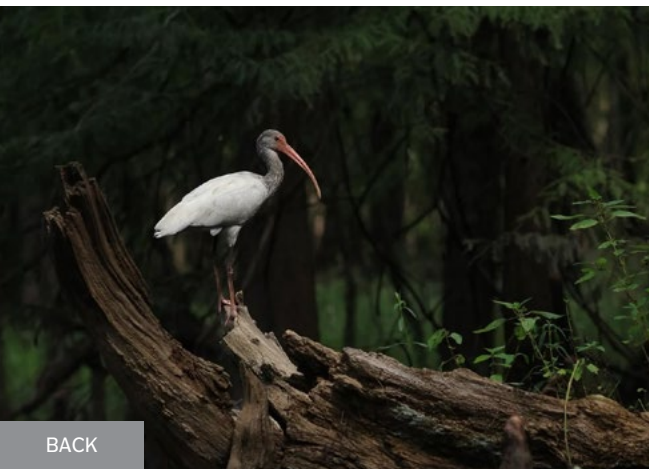
Sharon was the 2025 recipient of BTA's Maxine Johnston Distinguished Service award. BTA is grateful for Sharon's friendship and her decades of service.



BIG THICKET ASSOCIATION

Partner in Preservation

#BIGTHICKET



[BACK](#)



17

[NEXT](#)



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

BIG THICKET BULLETIN

*published quarterly by
Big Thicket Association
www.bigthicket.org*

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.