

Reporter

January–March 2014
Issue #121

B.T.A. Ages



The Big Thicket Association will reach the venerable age of 50 years in

October, 2014. It began when some local citizens met in the Saratoga Methodist Church on October 4, 1964, to form a Big Thicket Historical Society with the intent of establishing a local history museum. Lance Rosier (“Mr. Big Thicket”) presided. In two subsequent meetings, others joined the group, and the name was changed to Big Thicket Association with expanded goals as stated in the Articles of Incorporation: “To maintain and perpetuate so far as possible the many types and species of trees, plants and animals found in the Big Thicket area of Southeast Texas, 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.” For the following ten years, BTA networked with other conservation groups to pass legislation for a national park.

On October 11, 1974, President Gerald Ford signed into law PL 93-439 establishing a Big Thicket National Preserve of 84,550 acres. To that was added in July 1, 1993, an Addition Act with 10,766 acres (PL 103-46). BTA further provided field

work and recommendations for park boundaries.

Concurrently, BTA supported state parks, wildlife refuges, and private land protection projects. Issues addressed through the years included flooding, Southern pine beetles, reservoirs, highway projects, oil and gas, and Ghost Road.

From 1969 through 1994, the Big Thicket Museum served to inform visitors about our natural treasures and rich cultural history. The Museum became a gathering place for conservation groups with periodic pilgrimages, retreats and walkfests to explore and to learn about the Big Thicket region. In 1994, the Association donated lands and assets to the Big Thicket National Preserve, including the Museum, and the BTA reorganized.

Eventually, the Preserve decided to use the former Museum as a Field Research Station, and the BTA worked with them to acquire funding for renovation. The Association agreed to operate the Station for the Preserve under a Memorandum of Understanding. The facility has hosted many university groups and scientists, as well as volunteer groups.

In 2006, in cooperation with the Preserve, we initiated a project called Thicket of Diversity (an All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory). Again funding was supplied by numerous foundations—notably

Brown Foundation, T.L.L. Temple Foundation, Meadows Foundation, Stark Foundation, et al. Taxa Working Groups are actively identifying taxa new to the park, to the state, and to science.

What’s ahead? More forest protected? Support for regional parks and refuges? Accelerated taxa inventory? Environmental education? Stay tuned.

BIG THICKET NATIONAL PRESERVE AT 40 YEARS

The first superintendent, Thomas E. Lubbert, probably set a record by rapid filing of park boundaries in the *Federal Register* in March 1975. An Environmental Impact Statement was published in 1976 and planning studies were completed between 1977-80 for Visitor Use, Resource Management, Southern Pine Beetle Management, Minerals Management Regulations, Wilderness recommendations, Fire Management, General Management Plan and an Interpretive Prospectus. Studies were commissioned to guide development planning. Lacking development funding, Lubbert met challenges by borrowing equipment from other parks and working with volunteer groups supported by a remarkable team of employees.

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CONSERVATION OUTLOOK

CONSERVATION FUND BUYS LAND ON BOLIVAR PENINSULA

The Conservation Fund for Texas on Friday completed the purchase on Bolivar Peninsula of 1,350 acres of beach front, preserving one of the last remaining large tracts of undeveloped land in the area and expanding a haven for migrating birds and other wildlife in Southeast Texas, the *Houston Chronicle* reported.

The seller was PNL Companies, a Dallas-based real estate investment firm, in a \$3.8 million deal, according to the Galveston County Daily News. The land, formerly part of the Cade Ranch planned development, will be transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The spread will become part of the Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge, a vast area of coastal marsh and prairie bordering Galveston Bay.

The Texas General Land Office used royalties from offshore drilling to help buy 350 of the acres, habitat including wetlands, tidal flats, ponds and Gulf coast beachfront, said Jim Suydam, a spokesman for the agency, told the *Houston Chronicle*.

The Conservation Fund next year plans to acquire additional Cade Ranch land as funding allows, said Andy Jones, director of the Fund's Texas office. The group hopes to use money available through the Natural Resource Damage Assessment program set up after the April 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

BIG THICKET NATURAL HERITAGE: BTNHT directors met January 12 at the Field Research Station with Pres. Ellen Buchanan presiding.

After the minutes and financial reports were considered, directors discussed the status of properties conveyed to the Preserve or pending. A proposed easement in cooperation with The Conservation Fund was reviewed.

N.P.C.A. REFORESTATION PROJECT: Once again, National Parks and Conservation Association sponsored a longleaf pine restoration project on January 20. The Texas Office reports that about 50 signed up. Participants assembled at 9:30 at the Visitor Center for a brief orientation then drove to the site selected. NPCA provided water, snacks and lunch.

DAVIS HILL STATE PARK WORKDAY: Texas Parks & Wildlife and the Houston Sierra Group have scheduled another workday February 27 at Davis Hill State Park to remove invasive vegetation. Two previous workdays made good progress removing tallow along Davis Bayou as well as shrubs on the "pocket" prairie.

EAST TEXAS BLACK BEAR TASK FORCE: The next meeting of the East Texas Black Bear Task Force is scheduled Wednesday, February 26th, 2014. The meeting will be held at the Texas A&M Forest Service office, Lufkin.

BTNP 40 Years

(continued from page 1)

The Staley Cabin on FM 420 was used as an Information Station; trails were opened in Turkey Creek, including the Kirby Nature Trail and Pitcher Plant Trail. Trails were opened in Beech Creek, Hickory Creek Savannah, and Big Sandy Creek Unit.

Following superintendents offered additional skills and values. Ronald Switzer determined to change the "best kept secret in Texas" to a tourist destination with wide local support. The Maintenance Facility became a reality on his watch. Richard

Peterson further advanced research and environmental education through the Field Research Station, while updating management plans and working with NPS and local groups to construct a Visitor Center.

Later superintendents followed who maintained and expanded programs with staff support to develop new and to sustain existing initiatives. Under Todd Brindle's administration the new projects included a partnership with BTA for the Thicket of Diversity (ATBI), as

well as conversion of the Maintenance Facility building to include an administrative headquarters – ending years of temporary housing in five different locations.

Unfortunately, recent lack of adequate funding has severely impacted progress. Thanks to Supt. Douglas Neighbor (former Resource Manager at Big Thicket and superintendent at other NPS parks) the Preserve functions capably with a drastically reduced staff.

EAST TEXAS MISCELLANY

ALABAMA COUSHATTA INAUGURATE CHIEF COLABE

On January 1st, 2014, the Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas inaugurated the Principal Chief and Second Chief at the Veterans Pavilion on reservation.

Principal Chief Mikko Colabe III was born on November 4, 1927, on the Alabama-Coushatta Indian Reservation and is of the Granddaddy Long Legs Clan. He is the son of the late Bronson Cooper Sylestine, who served as Principal Chief from 1936 until 1969. Second Chief Herbert Johnson, Sr. is a member of the Beaver Clan. He retired in 2012 as Tribal Security Director.

Chief Oscola Clayton Sylestine who served from 1993-2013 died January 31, 2013.



H.C.H.C. ANNUAL AWARDS LUNCHEON

On November 21, the Hardin County Historical Commission held its annual luncheon. The program featured a report on items in the Museum collection presented by Renee and Cecil Wells. Chairman Jimmy McKim pre-

sented awards to Catherine Merchant and the Radley family of Sour Lake for digitizing the Oil City Visitor, plus awards to Billy Tomlinson and James Skinner for securing the historical marker for the Oil Field Cemetery at

Saratoga. Recognized for their work on renovating the bank building and on installing historical exhibits were Leroy Anderson, Floyd Boyett, Glen Cook, Ralph Kittenbeil, Dexter Silvernail, Cecil and Renee Wells.

DIVERSITY DISPATCH

“Capturing the Big Thicket Digitally” is Dr. Jeff Pittman’s topic for the Thicket of Diversity Science Café on April 17, 2014, 6:00 PM, Logon Café, 3805 Calder Ave., Beaumont. Pittman’s research

includes audio recordings of birds combined with nature photography. Pittman made weekly visits to seven specific spots along the Neches River in the Big Thicket National Preserve. Data was

collected with a Sony minidisc recorder and a Sennheiser ME67 long shotgun microphone. His work recording audio combined with photo images provides a spectacular scenario.

BOGGY SLOUGH PROTECTED!

Lufkin, Texas (December 23, 2013)

In a landmark deal for forest conservation, T.L.L. Temple Foundation, International Paper and The Conservation Fund announced today the completion of an effort to protect more than 19,000 acres of hardwood forest and wetlands in East Texas, known as Boggy Slough. The T.L.L. Temple Foundation purchased the property in fee from International Paper and agreed to donate a conservation easement over the entire property to The Conservation Fund. Located west of Lufkin, Boggy Slough contains some of the oldest and most

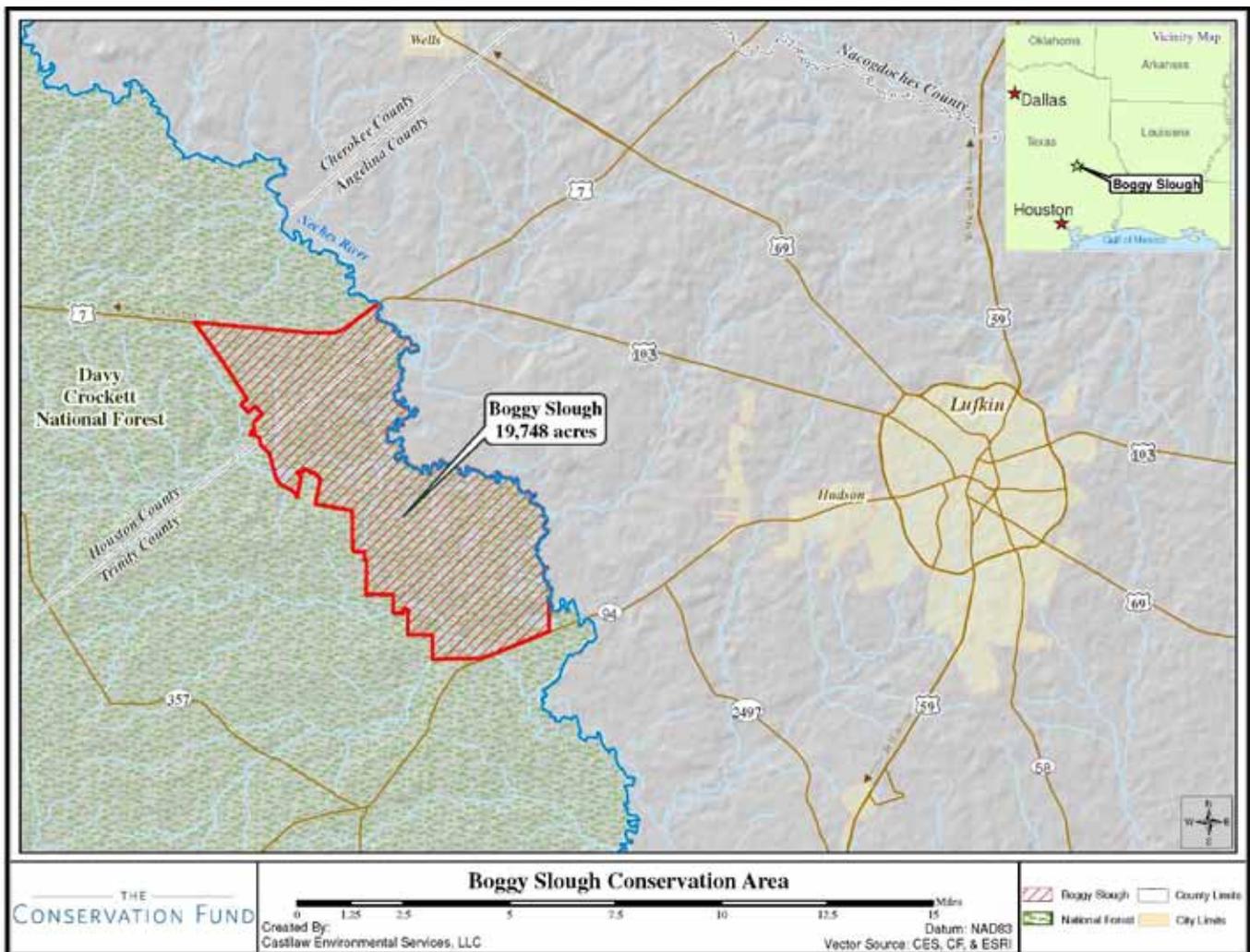
ecologically significant hardwood forest habitat in East Texas and spans 18 miles of river frontage along the Neches River. The former Temple-Inland property includes 4,500 acres of riverside forestland that has remained virtually untouched for decades.

“With this historic agreement to conserve Boggy Slough, one of the most unique and beautiful places on the Neches River in East Texas, I want to thank The Conservation Fund, the board of trustees of the T.L.L. Temple Foundation and John Faraci, Chairman and CEO of International

Paper Company, for their unwavering commitment to the conservation of Boggy Slough,” said Buddy Temple, Chairman, T.L.L. Temple Foundation...

Often called Texas’ last “wild” river, the 416-mile Neches River is truly one of the state’s least discovered natural resources. The river’s slow moving water along with its pine and bottomland hardwood forests has been a part of eastern Texas’ history and culture for thousands of years, dating back to when Native Americans and early European settlers depended on the river and its forests for food and shelter.

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BOGGY SLOUGH (continued from page 4)

Healthy forestlands across east Texas, including Boggy Slough, are important habitat for white-tailed deer and eastern turkey as well as numerous ducks, songbirds and fish. Its sloughs and oxbows host two sites home to the threatened Neches River rose-mallow...

Earlier this year, International Paper committed \$7.5 million over five years to the Forestland Stewards

Initiative, a partnership with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF). This effort will restore native forests, strengthen important fish and wildlife populations and protect watersheds in eight states across the Southeastern United States, including east Texas. NFWF will leverage the IP contribution for a total program impact of \$30 million.

Nationally, 75 million acres of

forestland changed hands over the past decade, including 4 million acres in Texas alone. The protection of Boggy Slough builds on a conservation corridor of linked lands along the river, including the Neches River National Wildlife Refuge, Davy Crockett and Angelina National Forests and the Big Thicket National Preserve. [For full text of news release, check the website.]

UPCOMING EVENTS

February 1

Marysee Prairie Workday, 9:00-2:00, SH 105, CR 1077

February 13

Kountze Chamber of Commerce Banquet

February 15

Kayaking/birding and wildlife observation tour of Texas Point National Wildlife Refuge near Sabine Pass, Texas, led by Capt. Josh Davis—subject to weather conditions. Cost is \$60 per kayak, limit eight kayaks per tour. E-mail John Paul at jp46832@gmail.com, and include cell phone number.

February 26

East Texas Black Bear Task Force, at Texas A&M Forest Service office, Lufkin. Contact Christopher E Comer commerce@sfasu.edu.

February 27

Davis Hill State Park Workday; contact Evelyn Merz at elmerz@hal-pc.org for instructions.

March 1

Neches River Adventures begins its second season with boat tours leaving from River Front Park in Beaumont, on Saturday's 10 to 12. Call 409-651-5326 for reservations or go to www.nechesriveradventures.org for more information

March 9

Roy E. Larsen Sandylands Sanctuary hike led by Phil Rogers, 1:00 PM, meet at parking lot on SH 327. For more information contact Rogers at 409-543-4616 or philarogers@gmail.com.

April 5-6

Houston Sierran group, Big Thicket Weekend, contact Brandt Mannchen at brandtshnfbt@juno.com

April 12

BTA Board of Directors quarterly meeting, FRS, 9:30 a.m.

KOUNTZE ISD SCHEDULES EVENTS

Mary Catherine Johnston, former BTA president and Kountze ISD teacher, has arranged a schedule of events with Big Thicket roots. Programs are made possible in part by a grant from Humanities Texas, the State Affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. An additional program is scheduled in October.

February 6, 2014

"Big Thicket Memories through Folk Art," Hardin County Commissioner Ken Pelt (former BTA President), 2:00 PM, Kountze High School Gym

April, 22, 2014

KHS King's Regiment Band and the Alabama Coushatta Tribe Dancers, 7 PM, Kountze Lion's Den.

April 22-25, 2014

KHS Lepidoptera and Noctuidae Art and Multimedia Exhibit, April 22, from 4:00-5:00, April 23-25 from 9:00-5:00, Kountze Public Library, 800 South Redwood, Kountze, 77625

2013 ANNUAL REPORT

Only a few items have been excerpted here from the Preserve's annual report.

★ **ADMINISTRATION** dealt with budget shortfalls and coped with changes in software programs. Sequestration caused problems in staffing and budgeting. New organization charts were submitted to Santa Fe. New E-bird kiosks were installed in the Visitor Center.

★ **FACILITIES** personnel restriped parking lots, installed new carpet in the Visitor Center theater, replaced decking on two Turkey Creek bridges, graded and cleared two roads in the Lance Rosier Unit, removed 80 yards of trash dumped, implemented new signage to replace signs removed, repaired damages to East Side Day Use Areas and on the Beech Woods Trail, installed 1,956 linear feet of boardwalk on the Kirby Nature Trail, and removed hazard trees on trails.

★ **FIRE MANAGEMENT** performed four prescribed burns on 1,923 acres and used mechanical treatments on five sites of 141 acres. Fire effects monitoring included 322 plots.

★ **INTERPRETATION, EDUCATION AND PARTNERSHIPS** presented environmental education programs to approximately 10,000 students for the JASON project, presented 133 programs to approximately 4,776 people, worked with the Golden Triangle Audubon Society to update the bird checklist, submitted photo that was selected for the region's 2014 Passport Stamp Collection, recorded data for 84 volunteers who donated over 2,300 hours, and led nature walks for the Heritage Village festival in Woodville. Talks and PowerPoint shows were presented at Willard Library in Beaumont, Camp Niwana program near Woodville, the Escapees RV resort near Livingston, and at numerous schools.

★ **VISITOR PROTECTION SERVICES** completed eight training programs involving assorted threats, managed the hunting and trapping programs issuing 2,025 permits with harvest cards reporting 96 bucks, 82 does, 3,225 squirrels, 404 hogs, 100 rabbits, and 146 waterfowls, and taught six First Aid classes. General agreements were signed with five county sheriffs, and surveillance cameras were installed at several sites. Case incidents reported 120, including disorderly conduct, larceny, permit violation, resource damage, refuse dumping, vandalism, weapons violation, etc.

★ **RESOURCE MANAGEMENT** developed freshwater flow recommendations, worked on restoration projects, monitored the Thicket of Diversity (ATBI) to coordinate research and analyze data, drafted Feral Hog Implementation Plan and Environmental Assessment, and awarded contract for Pitcher Plant Bog Survey. Oil and Gas program management involved production in 15 units, proposed revisions of existing regulations, pipeline removal/replacement, monitoring

Climax Energy 3D Seismic Survey of 17,411 acres within several units, and cooperating with Caskids and Unit Petroleum on reclamation of well sites, and completing work on NEPA/106 compliance for five projects.

ST. MICHAEL'S VOLUNTEERS RETURN

From January 5-11, another group of St. Michael's College (Vermont) volunteers arrived to continue their remarkable services to BTNP—now spanning at least 16 years! During those years, student volunteers have worked on removal of invasives, restoration of longleaf and other species, trail maintenance, and numerous other services. The commitment of these students to such service projects is not only mind-boggling but also inspirational. Ditto the continuing support of St. Michael's College for their Mobilization of Volunteer Efforts (MOVE).

This year students began with maintenance of the area surrounding the Lance Rosier birthplace in the Rosier Unit followed by projects in the Big Sandy Creek Unit. Typically, one night includes a visit to Ghost Road.



Volunteers from St. Michael's College (Vermont) returned to BTNP January 5-11 to continue their services, now spanning 16 years..



B.T.A. NEWS

The Board of Directors met January 11 at the Field Research Station in Saratoga. New officers and directors, Betty Grimes, Leslie Dubey, and Idolina Gonzalez were welcomed.

Lengthy review of the financial report and proposed budgets for 2014 involved BTA operating account, Thicket of Diversity, Neches Adventures (including outdoor education classes), and a proposed Neches River Rally.

Directors appointed the Nominating Committee for 2015 including Dr. Bruce Drury, Dale Parish, and John Stafford. The committee selects its chair and reports at the July meeting. The nomination of Kathy Smartt, daughter of the late Rose Ann Jordan, was approved to complete Rose Ann's term.

Pres. Jan Ruppel discussed plans for 2014 that included celebration of BTA's 50th anniversary and the proposed Rally. Her recent activity included participation in Dinosaur Days, Shangri-La Christmas tree,

fundraising, and work with several committees.

Executive Director Bruce Walker's report echoed plans for Neches Adventures, the Neches River Rally and 50th anniversary. He reported on grants and sponsorships pending and received, local outreach to increase BTA exposure, attendance at Discover Life in America Conference and at Houston Wilderness, and a wide variety of activities. Michael Hoke provided details of the curricula and activities for the Outdoor Classroom program.

Supt. Doug Neighbor presented a report for the Big Thicket National Preserve (see Preserve Overview). The final General Management Plan should be published soon.

After lunch, Dr. Jeff Pittman reviewed plans to restructure the Association Website.

LNVA SUPPORTS NECHES RIVER ADVENTURES

The LNVA recently presented the Big Thicket Association a check for \$25,000 to support BTA's Neches

River Adventures Environmental Education Classrooms. The program is conducted on the Cardinal, a 45-foot Coast Guard approved pontoon boat, staffed with a Coast Guard certified captain and a first mate.

Curriculum and classes are under the direction of Michael Hoke, recently retired from Shangri La Botanical Gardens & Nature Center in Orange. The classes are conducted by curriculum trained instructors.

Jan Ruppel, Big Thicket Association President, says that "We are very pleased to have Lower Neches Valley Authority as a partner in this environmental education program. With funding from the LNVA and other sponsors, the BTA plans to provide free outdoor classes to 6,000 students in 2014."

Scott Hall, General Manager of LNVA, says that "the LNVA's goal is to assist in providing area students the opportunity to learn more about the Neches River and its vital relationship with Southeast Texas communities, businesses, and industries."



LNVA presents a check to BTA. Pictured left to right: Bruce Walker, Michael Hoke, Kathleen Jackson, Jan Ruppel, Scott Hall



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WEB SITES

Big Thicket Association
www.bigthicket.org

Big Thicket National Preserve
www.nps.gov/bith

East Texas Black Bear Task Force
www.bbcc.org

Conservation Fund
www.conservationfund.org

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

National Parks Conserv. Assoc.
www.npca.org

Native Plant Society of Texas
www.npsot.org

Nature Conservancy
www.nature.org/texas

Outdoor Nature Club, Houston
www.outdoornatureclub.org

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

Texas Conservation Alliance
www.TCAtexas.org

Village Creek State Park
www.tpwd.state.tx.us.park

“DIBBLING” WITH N.P.C.A.

Once again, National Parks and Conservation Association sponsored a longleaf pine restoration project—this year on January 20. NPCA and BTNP with the help of approximately 50 volunteers planted 5,000 longleaf pine seedlings in the Hickory Creek Savannah Unit, helping to restore areas that did not have an established overstory tree canopy. The site of activity was near a powerline.

Volunteers included folks from Beaumont, Houston and surrounding areas and represented several conservation groups.

From the Texas office, Erika Pelletier and Suzanne Dixon (pictured below) and Liz Borg were busy overseeing the action, as well as Craig Obey from the Washington Office. Deanna Boensch and Ryan Desliu of BTNP welcomed the dibblers and instructed them on planting technique and safety.

