



Green tree frog



Roadrunner



Painted bunting



Flowering dogwood

Unusual Combinations of the Ordinary

People have called the Big Thicket an American ark and the biological crossroads of North America. The preserve was established to protect the remnant of its complex biological diversity. What is extraordinary is not the rarity or abundance of its life forms, but how many species coexist here. Once vast, this combination of pine and cypress forest, hardwood forest, meadow, and blackwater swamp is but a remnant. With such varied habitats, "Big Thicket" is a misnomer, but it seems appropriate. An exhausted settler wrote in 1835: "This day passed through the thickest woods I ever saw. It... surpasses any country for brush."

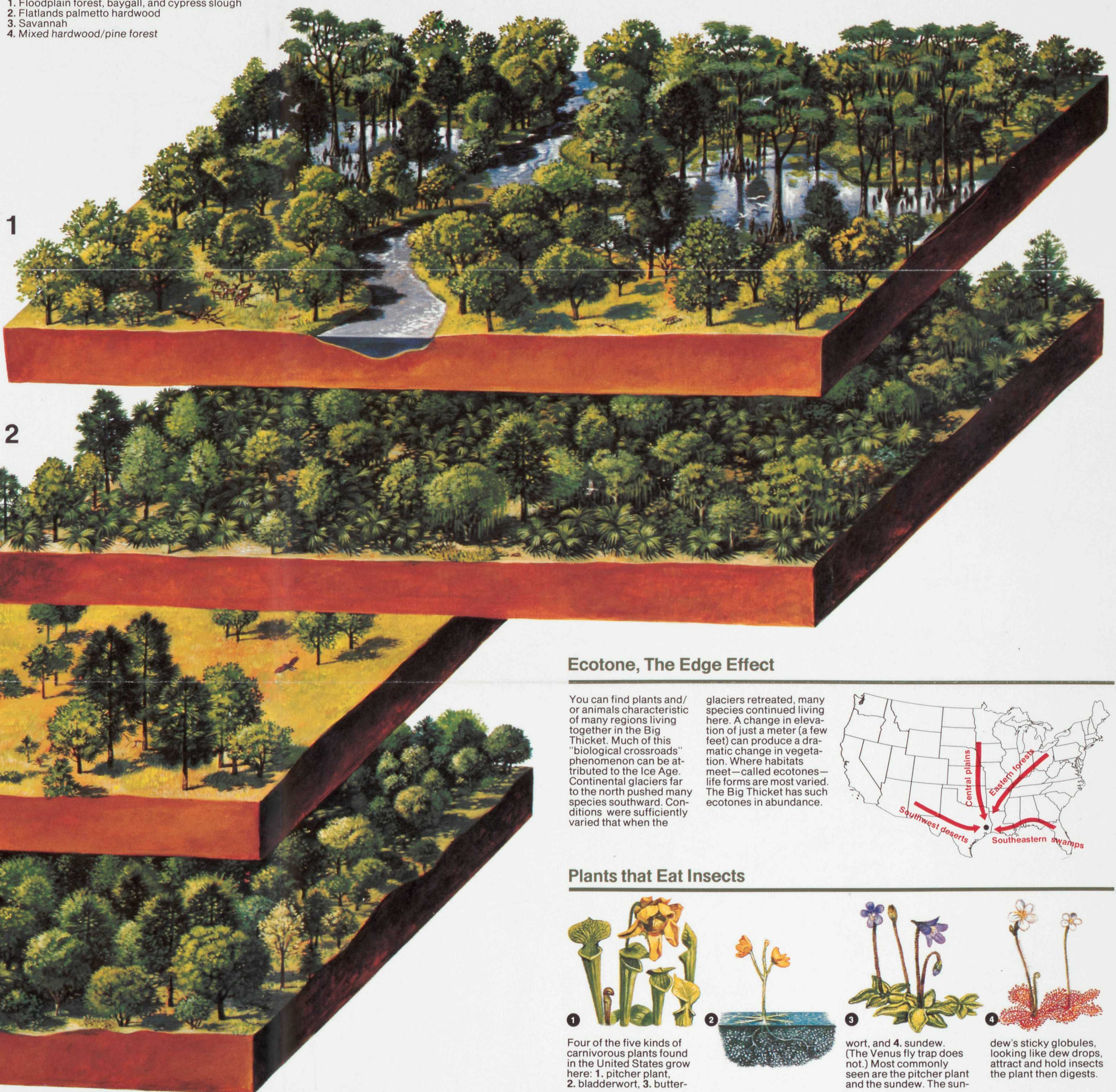
Major North American biological influences bump up against each other here: southeastern swamps, eastern forests, central plains, and southwest deserts. Bogs sit near arid sandhills. Eastern bluebirds nest near roadrunners. There are 85 tree species, more than 60 shrubs, and nearly 1,000 other flowering plants, including 26 ferns and allies, 20 orchids, and four of North America's five types of insect-eating plants. Nearly 186 kinds of birds live here or migrate through. Fifty reptile species include a small, rarely seen population of alligators. Amphibious frogs and toads abound.

Although Alabama-Coushatta Indians hunted the Big Thicket, they did not generally penetrate its deepest reaches, and the area was

settled by whites relatively late. In the 1850s economic exploitation began with the cutting of pine and cypress. Sawmills followed, using railroads to move out large volumes of wood. Ancient forests were felled and replanted with non-native slash pine. Oil strikes around 1900 brought further forest encroachment. Nearby rice farmers flooded some forests; others were cleared for housing developments.

Designation of Big Thicket as a national preserve created a new management concept for the National Park Service. Preserve status prevents further timber harvesting but allows oil and gas exploration, hunting, and trapping to continue. Only low-impact visitor facilities will be built. The preserve is composed of 12 units comprising 86,000 acres. It was designated an international Biosphere Reserve by the United Nations in 1981. The protected area will provide a standard for measuring human impact on the environment. Four major Big Thicket plant associations are illustrated at right.

1. Floodplain forest, baygall, and cypress slough
2. Flatlands palmetto hardwood
3. Savannah
4. Mixed hardwood/pine forest



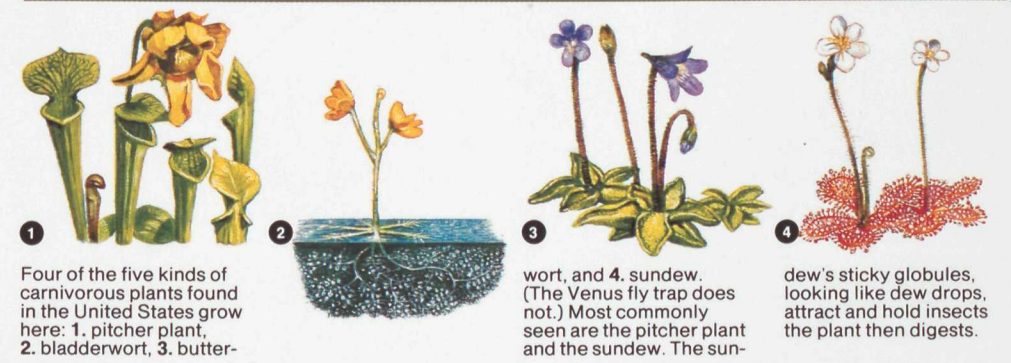
Ecotone, The Edge Effect

You can find plants and/or animals characteristic of many regions living together in the Big Thicket. Much of this "biological crossroads" phenomenon can be attributed to the Ice Age. Continental glaciers far to the north pushed many species southward. Conditions were sufficiently varied that when the

glaciers retreated, many species continued living here. A change in elevation of just a meter (a few feet) can produce a dramatic change in vegetation. Where habitats meet—called ecotones—life forms are most varied. The Big Thicket has such ecotones in abundance.



Plants that Eat Insects



Four of the five kinds of carnivorous plants found in the United States grow here: 1, pitcher plant, 2, bladderwort, 3, butter-

wort, and 4, sundew. (The Venus fly trap does not.) Most commonly seen are the pitcher plant and the sundew. The sundew's sticky globules, looking like dew drops, attract and hold insects. The plant then digests.

3

4

Big Thicket Legacies

As rich as its natural history is the Thicket's cultural history. Caddo Indians from the north and Atakapas to the south knew it as the Big Woods. Much later, Alabama and Coushatta Indians, pushed westward, found shelter here before they finally relocated to a reservation (see map). Early Spanish settlers avoided this "impenetrable woods," as did early Anglo-Americans who named it the Big Thicket before the 1820s, when farms appeared around its perimeter. Pioneers from Appalachia began to settle here in search of new land, and theirs is the Big Thicket legacy.

During the Civil War many Big Thicket citizens went deeper into the woods to avoid conscription. Lumbering, begun on a small scale in the 1850s, geared up when a narrow-gauge railroad was built in 1876. The original forest was doomed. The Big Thicket, which once spread over 3.5 million acres, is now less than 300,000 acres, with some 84,550 acres authorized for protection in the Preserve. The Big Thicket lifestyle is passing, but its flavor persists in legends and lore.



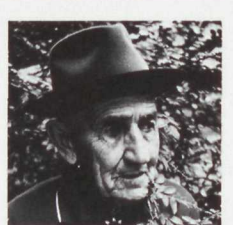
A pre-Civil War log house



Early oil field days



Martha Sultana Jacobsen



Lance Rosier

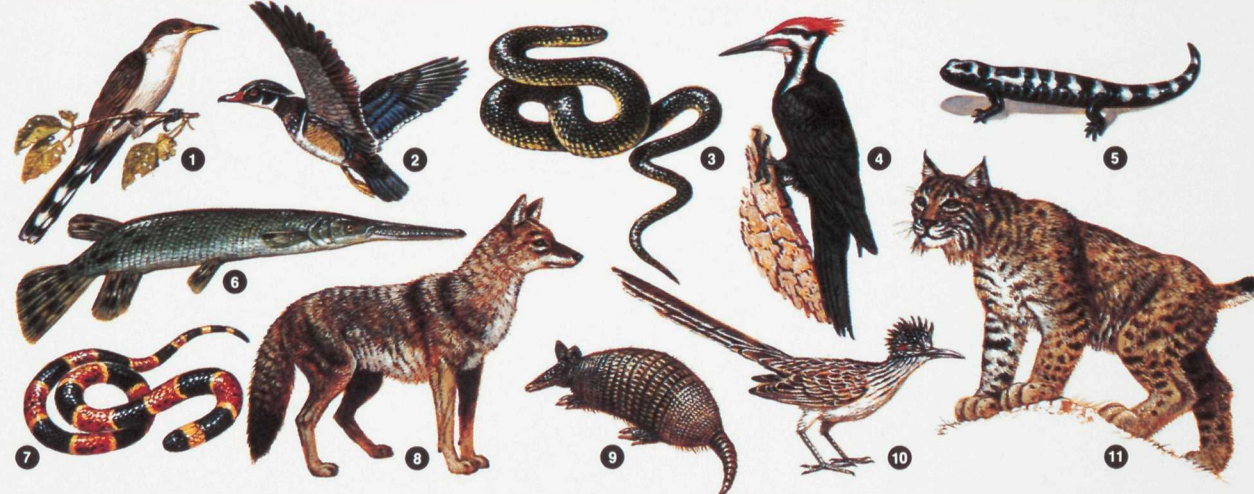


Bruce Jordan logging

An American Ark

The Big Thicket is not teeming with wildlife, but it boasts an incredible diversity of species. Many are most active at night. Ask an Information Station (see map) for plant and animal species lists.

Illustrated at right are: 1, yellow-billed cuckoo, 2, wood duck, 3, speckled king snake, 4, pileated woodpecker, 5, marbled salamander, 6, gar fish, 7, coral snake, 8, coyote, 9, armadillo, 10, roadrunner, and 11, bobcat.



Visiting the Preserve

Big Thicket National Preserve was established by Congress in 1974. It is managed by the National Park Service. For information write or call the Superintendent, Big Thicket National Preserve, 3785 Millam, Beaumont, TX 77701, (409) 839-2689. For program information and reservations, call (409) 246-2337.

There are no accommodations in the Preserve. Food and lodging are available in nearby communities—Woodville, Kountze, and Silsbee—and in Beaumont. Grocery stores dot roadsides and smaller towns.

Weather. Rain, heat, and humidity are parts of the Big Thicket experience. It usually rains every month of the year,

with 55 inches the yearly average. Summer daytime temperatures from the mid-80s to the mid-90s°F produce, with the rain, a humid climate. Winter daytime temperatures average in the mid-50s, with many overcast days to be expected.

Protect Yourself. Follow these tips to help make your trip safe: Register at the trailhead and stay on the trail. Detour around snakes because some are poisonous. Do not kill any snake; they are protected as part of the natural scene. Use insect repellent and avoid disturbing bee, wasp, or fire ant nests. Carry drinking water and do not drink from any creeks or ponds.

Protect the Preserve. Rules are designed to protect the natural re-

sources. Please obey them. All plants and animals are protected. Do not collect any specimens. Pack out whatever you pack in and do not litter. Fires, vehicles, and pets are not allowed in the backcountry. Horses and all-terrain bicycles are allowed only on the Big Sandy Horse Trail.

What is There to See and Do?

The Preserve information station is located in the southernmost portion of the Turkey Creek Unit (see map). It is open daily, except Christmas Day, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Here maps, literature, and program information can be obtained.

Turkey Creek Unit. This area displays great plant diversity. A trail leads 15 miles north-south. On the northeast a disabled-access boardwalk explores the unit's eastern part. The disabled-access boardwalk is 0.5 miles long.

Beech Creek Unit. A mid-1970s epidemic of southern pine beetles decimated loblolly pines here. How natural populations change because of this will be interesting

to watch. Take the one-mile loop trail here.

Hickory Creek Savannah Unit. Dry sandy uplands and wetter lowlands result in diverse flowers and grasses. Longleaf pine forest and wetlands mix here. Exposed to natural wildfires, this community will be largely a glade-like park. Without fire, dense shrubs will invade these grasslands. Take the one-mile loop trail through the unit's eastern part. The disabled-access boardwalk is 0.5 miles long.

Big Sandy Creek Unit. A sloping forest of beech, magnolia, and loblolly pine descends into dense stands of hardwoods in the Big Sandy Creek floodplain. Take the 5.4-mile loop trail and follow the sloping forest to the

creek. A second loop trail 1.5 miles long winds around a series of ponds formed by old beaver dams. This unit offers the only horse riding trail, 18 miles round trip, in the Preserve.

Nature Study. Look, listen, and enjoy. With its great diversity of plant and animal life the Preserve is the ideal outdoor laboratory for nature study. All you need do is observe. Birding is a favorite activity, especially during spring and fall. From late March to early May hundreds of bird species pass through on their way to northern nesting grounds. Fall migrations occur in October and November.

Naturalist Activities. All programs are by reservation only. Individuals

and groups can call (409) 246-2337 for information and reservations. Programs include guided hikes, talks, and guided boat tours and canoe trips.

Photography. Many Big Thicket photo subjects will be found in deep shade, such as the hundreds of colorful flowers, fungi, and insects. You will want a tripod and films rated to give your camera maximum depth of field.

Trail Hiking. There are hiking and nature trails in four Preserve units. There are no trails in the river corridors. Permits are not required for hiking but please register at the trailheads. Stay on the trails; it is easy to become lost. Be prepared for rain and wet trails. If you find a submerged

trail while streams are flooded, do not try to follow it; you could step into a deep waterhole. Pets and vehicles are not permitted on any trails. Horses and all-terrain bicycles are permitted only on the Big Sandy Horse Trail. No motorized vehicles are permitted on Preserve trails.

Boating and Canoeing. Small watercraft may be launched at locations along the Neches River, Pine Island Bayou, and along Village and Turkey creeks. Choose your waters: broad alluvial river, sluggish bayou, or free-flowing creeks. Water access points have not been developed on the creeks, but you can launch at most road crossings. Some boat ramps located on private property charge a launch fee.

Fishing. Fishing is allowed in all waters. A Texas fishing license is required and state laws apply. Ask at the information station about types of fish and fishing conditions to expect.

Camping. Backcountry camping is allowed by permit in certain parts of the Preserve. There are no developed campgrounds. Several private and public campgrounds nearby offer tent and recreational vehicle sites. Call the Preserve for permit information.

Picnicking. There are picnic sites in many of the units. Refer to the map for locations. Some sites have barbecue grills, contained charcoal grills (hibachi-type) are also allowed. Open fires

and the collecting of wood are prohibited.

Swimming. In the Neches River swim in quiet areas, away from strong currents. The Lakewood Sandbar area in the Beaumont Unit is a popular swimming spot. In summer it is designated a no-wake zone for boaters. Never dive unless you are certain of the depth of the water, and that there are no underwater obstacles.

Hunting and Trapping. Hunting and trapping are allowed only in specific areas at certain dates and times. A permit from the superintendent is required. Please write or call Preserve Headquarters for details.

Using the Map

The map on the back shows the eight land units and four water corridors that comprise the Preserve. It also shows nearby attractions and the vicinity of connecting roads, so that you may coordinate it with state or regional highway maps.

Big Thicket Association supports the goals of Big Thicket National Preserve. For membership information write: Box 199, Saratoga, TX 77585.

The Nature Conservancy, Inc., operates the Roy E. Larsen Sandbar Sanctuary, which exemplifies the patches of arid sandyland found in the Thicket. Guided hikes can be

scheduled. Write: P.O. Box 909, Silsbee, TX 77656, or call (409) 385-0445.

Alabama-Coushatta Indian Reservation is open daily except in January and February. Craft demonstrations, cultural exhibitions, and tours rides are available seasonally. Campgrounds are open year-round. Call 1-800-444-3507 for information.

Tyler County Heritage Society operates the Heritage Village Museum in Woodville. The museum is a collection of buildings and artifacts depicting pioneer life in the Big Thicket. For hours and tours write: Heritage Village Museum, P.O. Box 888, Woodville, TX 75979, or call (409) 283-2272.

Big Thicket

Big Thicket National Preserve
Texas

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

