

Big Thicket



Green tree frog



Roadrunner



Painted bunting



Flowering dogwood

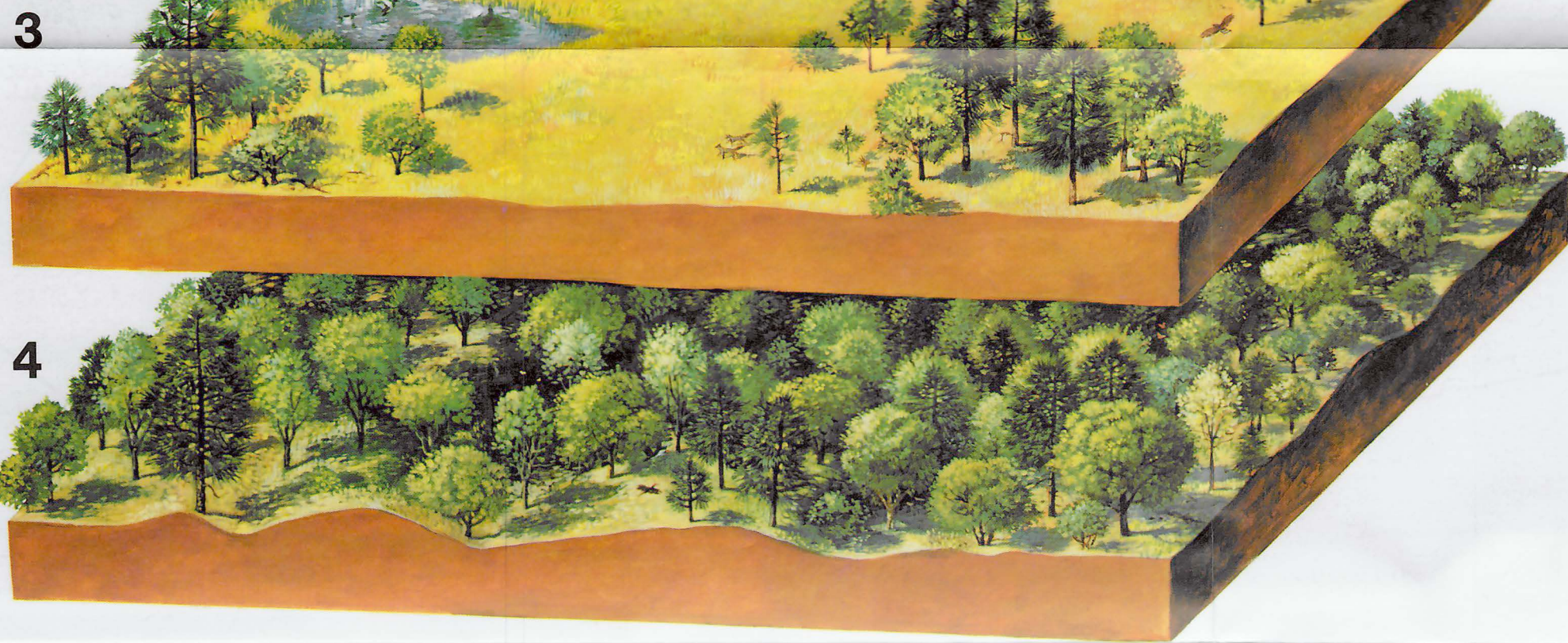
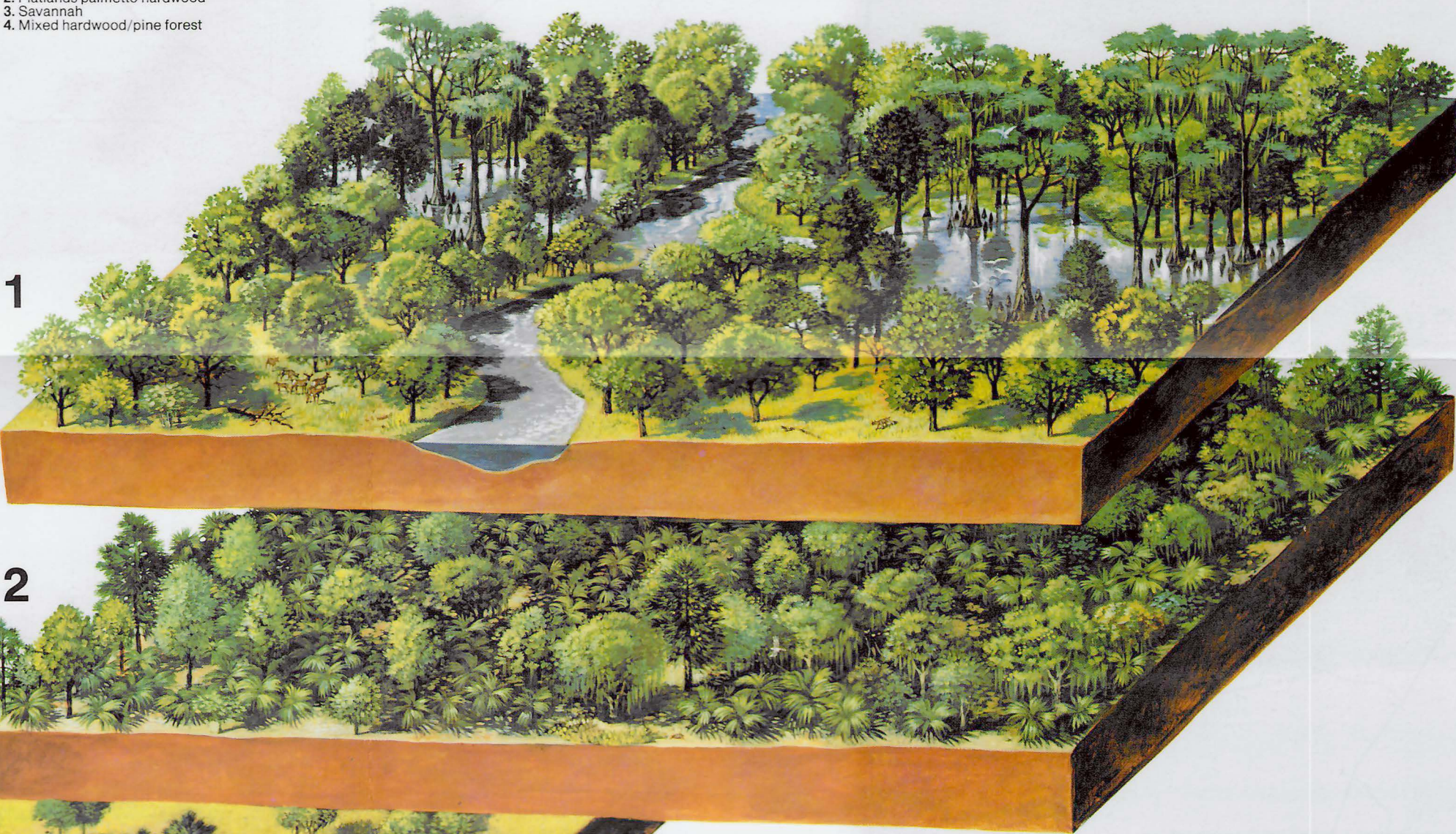
Unusual Combinations of the Ordinary

Attempting to describe the Big Thicket, people call it "an American ark," "the biological crossroads of North America," and "North America's best-equipped ecological laboratory." The preserve was established to protect the remnants of this complex biological diversity. What is extraordinary is not the rarity or abundance of life forms, but how many species coexist in this shrinking remnant of a once vast combination of virgin pine and cypress forest, hardwood forest, meadow, and blackwater swamp. With such varied habitats, the name Big Thicket is a misnomer. Still, the name seems appropriate, as 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 and elements from southeastern swamps, Appalachians, eastern forests, central plains, and southwest deserts can all be found. Bogs sit near arid sandhills that support cactus and yucca. Eastern bluebirds may 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. Upon this rich plant life base, a wealth of animal species thrives. They are usually secretive and many are seen, if at all, only at night. Nearly 300 kinds of birds either live here or migrate through. Past inhabitants now gone, or all but gone, are black bears, cougars, and red wolves. Fifty reptile species include a small, rarely seen population of alligators. Amphibious frogs and toads abound.

The temperate climate and an average annual rainfall of about 140 centimeters (55 inches) promote lush growth. There are immense tupelo and cypress trees, but where ancient waterways deposited hills of sand, the rain percolates through so fast that some desert vegetation grows. 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 and the ancient forests were felled. Later lumbermen poisoned the land and then replanted it with fast growing pine. Nearby rice farming flooded some forests; others fell before bulldozers for housing developments. Oil strikes around 1900 brought renewed encroachment, and drilling continues within the Preserve today. The Big Thicket National Preserve includes 12 units—eight tracts and four corridors—comprising 34,200 hectares (84,550 acres). 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 sun-

dew's sticky globules, looking like dew drops, attract and hold insects the plant then digests.

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, to avoid conscription, went deeper into the woods. 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 1.4 million hectares (3.5 million acres), is now less than 120,000 hectares (300,000 acres), with some 34,200 hectares (84,550 acres) authorized for protection in the Preserve. The Big Thicket lifestyle is passing, but its flavor persists in legends and lore.



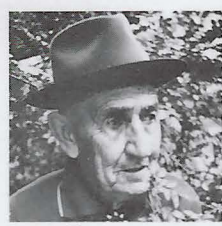
A pre-Civil War log house



Early oil field days



Martha Sultana Jacobsen



Lance Rosier

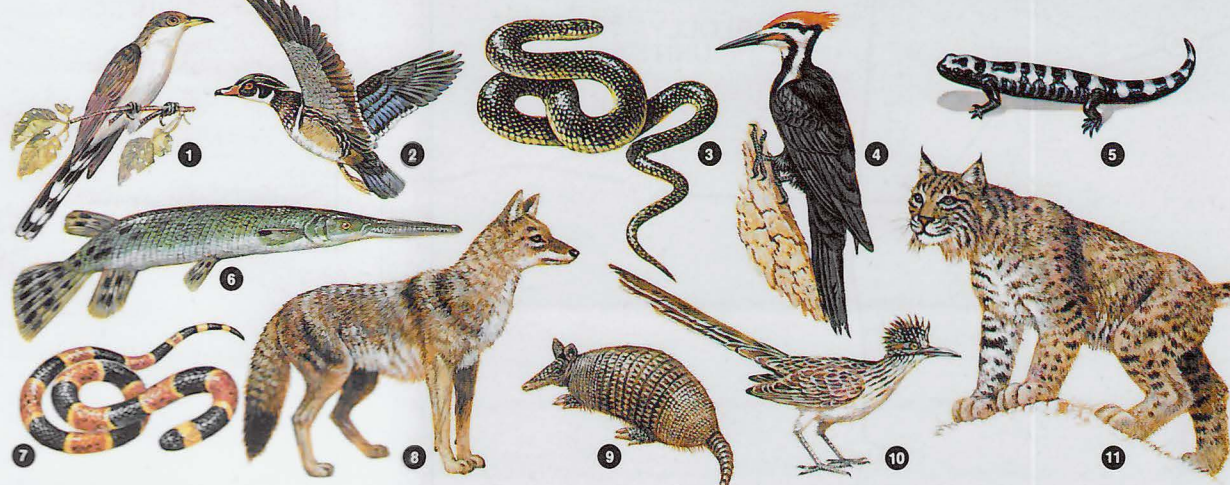


Brunce Jordan logging

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 at 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.



What is there to see?

The Preserve information station lies south of the Turkey Creek Unit (see map). It is open daily except in winter, when it is closed Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Naturalist activities are listed here and on area bulletin boards. Four Preserve units now have developed facilities.

Turkey Creek Unit. This area displays great plant diversity. A trail leads 24.5 kilometers (15 miles) north-south. On the north-east a handicapped-access boardwalk explores the carnivorous pitcher plant area. Kirby Nature Trail introduces many plants and explores Village Creek's floodplain.

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 1.5-kilometer (1-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 1.5-kilometer (1-mile) loop trail through the area's eastern part. The handicapped-access boardwalk is 0.6 kilometers (0.5-mile) long.

Signs are few and facilities limited now; consult your map for guidance in the Preserve. Please be careful not to trespass on adjacent private lands.

Nature Study. Look, listen, and enjoy. The Preserve contains a great diversity of plant and animal life. It 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.

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 the maximum depth of field.

And Do?

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.

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.

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

Naturalist Activities. A variety of free guided walks and other activities is given throughout the year on weekends. Check bulletin boards, or write for a schedule. Arrangements for organized group activities may be made by calling the Naturalist Division.

Management Concerns

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, 8185 Eastex Freeway, Beaumont, TX 77708, (409) 839-2669.

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 the roadsides and smaller towns.

Camping. Backcountry camping only 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.

Weather. Rain, heat, and humidity are parts of the Big Thicket experience. It usually rains every month of the year, with 140 centimeters (55 inches) the yearly average. Summer daytime temperatures of about 30°C (the mid-80s F) to 37°C (the mid-90s F) produce, with the rain, a humid climate. Winter, daytime temperatures average 13°C (mid-50s F), 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 here 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 resources. 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.

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

Using the Map

The map also shows nearby attractions. The non-profit Big Thicket Association operates a private museum at Saratoga, where you can learn about the Big Thicket's natural and cultural history, legends and lore. It is open daily except Mondays.

The Alabama-Coushatta Indian Reservation is open daily except in January and February. There you can see craft and cultural exhibitions and camp in a modern campground.

The Nature Conservancy, Inc., operates the Roy E. Larsen Sandhills Sanctuary, whose sandylands exemplify 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) 385-4135.

The John K. Kirby State Forest has picnic grounds and a self-guiding nature trail through upland pine woods.

Big Thicket
National Preserve

