

# 3 Days in the Field / By Kathryn Hunter

DESTINATION: BIG THICKET

TRAVEL TIME FROM:

AUSTIN – 5 hours / BROWNSVILLE – 8.25 hours / DALLAS – 5 hours

HOUSTON – 2 hours / SAN ANTONIO – 5 hours / LUBBOCK – 10.5 hours / EL PASO – 14 hours

## In the Thick of It

*Treasures large and small await discovery in the mysterious Big Thicket.*

**On the Big Thicket National Preserve's Sundew Trail,** the four of us are crouching at the edge of the boardwalk, leaning out as far as gravity allows, our rear-ends in the air like a line of ducks dredging the bottom of a lake.

"What do you think people would say if they could see us right now?" I say.

Dad and his wife, Jeannie, laugh, and my fiancé, Jack, acknowledges the indignity of it, but no one budges. We're all staring at the same square inch or so of muddy ground, afraid that if we look away we're never going to find the little guys again.

Our eyes are trained on *Drosera annua*, one species of the carnivorous plants known as sundews. To find them you have to be blessed with superb eyesight and an even greater store of patience, because they're smaller than a dime and occur only in very specific environments. But finding them is also half the fun; we wouldn't be this excited, throwing pride and self-respect to the wind, if we hadn't already been looking for them for an hour.

"They're just so *small*," we take turns saying.

The sundews won't flower until spring, so what we're seeing are the reddish leaves of the plant, which looks something like a carnival ride studded with spikes. The spikes secrete a mucilage meant to attract, and then trap, tiny insects. But if our sundews are eating something, we can't tell the difference.

Sometimes you can live in a place your whole life and never see something like this. Though I grew up between Sour Lake and Batson, at the heart of the Big Thicket, like many locals I managed to miss the things that other people travel hundreds and



thousands of miles to see. And having moved away from the area eight years ago, I did, in fact, have to travel hundreds of miles for this trip to the Big Thicket.

My experience is humbling. The Big Thicket offers many opportunities — canoeing, hiking, pontoon boat cruises, visits to mysterious old cemeteries and ghost roads, birding and wildflower walks, and guided night hikes, just to name a few — and we have only three days to do what I could have done any day for 19 years.

Jack and I limit this trip to hiking. We stay at Ethridge Farm Log Cabin Bed and Breakfast, a far cry from tent camping in the cold. Our accommodation is a beautiful old barn converted into a bedroom. Outside, in addition to a half-acre of blueberry plants, there's a line of dark-leaved trees dripping with fruit. Owner Ann Ethridge tells us they're satsuma oranges, and we're to eat as many as we'd like, and take some lemons, too. Each morning we have breakfast in the main lodge, the first part of which was built in the late 1800s as a hunting cabin, and each morning we fight the urge, after eating so much, to sleep away the weekend in front of the electric stove.

**Left: A cypress slough along the Big Thicket's Kirby Nature Trail. Below: A carnivorous sundew plant.**



For two days, our fingers sticky with oranges, we hike the trails of the Big Thicket.

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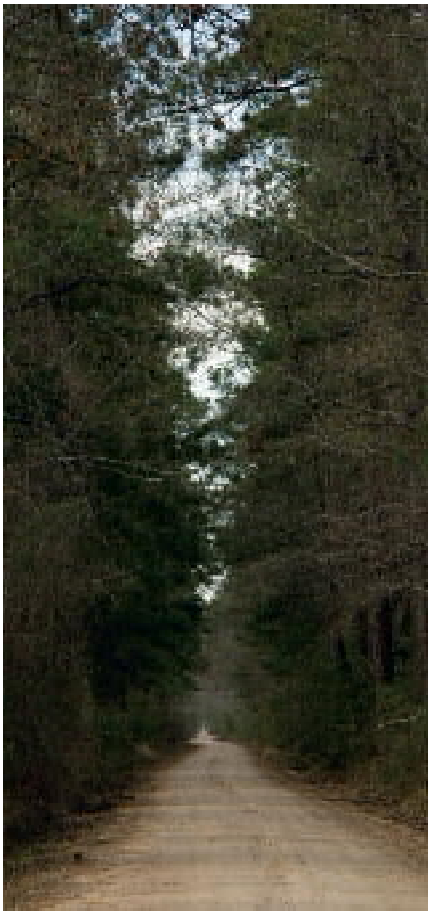
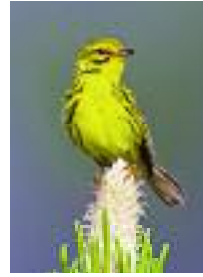
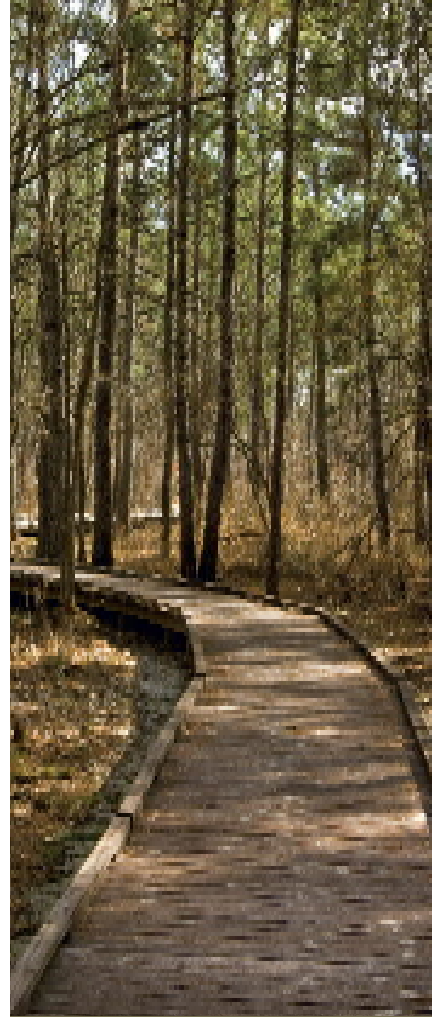
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Clockwise from top left: A boardwalk takes hikers through the woods on the Big Thicket's Sundew Trail; carnivorous pitcher plants trap bees, flies and ants; the prairie warbler is one of many bird species at the preserve; visitors can experience thrills and chills with a drive down the spooky "Ghost Road;" a "Ghost Road" sign points the way; a pileated woodpecker tends to its young.



Many of the areas we see are less familiar to me than the swamps around Pine Island Bayou, or at least less identifiable as "thicket." Baygalls, pine forests, savannahs, huge magnolias and rows of bloodthirsty carnivorous plants — the Big Thicket is unique because of this incredible diversity, each piece of it colonized by a distinct inventory of plants and animals that adapted to variable conditions such as soil type and competing species.

In recent history, humans have been the most significant competition, but a collaborative effort toward conservation has protected more than 100,000 acres of the Big Thicket. The Big Thicket National Preserve is the largest of these protected areas, made up of nine land units and six water corridors. Nearby are also Village Creek State Park and the Nature Conservancy's Roy E. Larsen Sandyland Sanctuary, which both offer hiking and canoe

trails, as well as excellent places to watch birds and view wildlife.

Protected areas in the Big Thicket continue to grow and be improved. In December 2009, the Texas Forest Service implemented its third Forest Legacy Project, preserving 10,000 acres of privately owned land in the form of a conservation easement. Other projects are under way, and it is gratifying to see the ongoing commitment to conservation.

On our hike at the northern end of the 15-mile Turkey Creek Trail, we see evidence of a project to re-establish longleaf pines, the trees that once dominated a large part of the Big Thicket. Early timber-cutting, replanting and fire suppression greatly changed their habitat, and the longleaf pine was replaced with non-native varieties like slash pine. Now, understanding the important role that fire plays in the life cycle of longleaf pines and other plant and animal species in the Big Thicket, the National Park Service uses prescribed burns, in addition to selective cutting, to re-create the natural environment that once existed here.

On our walk, Jack and I stop to admire the little ones. A young longleaf pine, without a trunk or branches, looks like a head of spidery grass poking out of the ground. During the tree's next stage of growth, its trunk will grow straight, without branching, still with that crown of unruly hair. Though at present I can only read about and imagine the old-growth pine forests of the past, I look forward to coming back here 50 or 60 years from now to see what these saplings have become.

Similarly, like the longleaf pine, black bears are expected to make a comeback in the Big Thicket. Once abundant in the area, the last was thought to have been extirpated in 1928. Now, protected by state and federal law, these animals are drifting in from Louisiana, and the Big Thicket, a natural island among wide swaths of human habitation, makes a good home for them. Big Thicket organizations are currently working on ways to prepare the public for their quiet, lumbering arrival.

The Big Thicket is an ecological treasure chest, home to many rare plants and animals. A good place to find out what it has to offer and how to go about visiting its various parts is the Big Thicket National Preserve Visitor Center just north of Kountze, which provides maps, exhibits and a short

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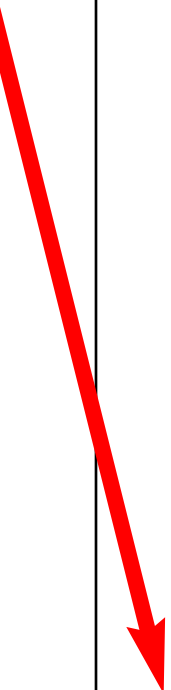
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video presentation. The nearby Kirby Nature Trail, three relatively short and easy loops, makes a good introductory hike. These loops also connect to the 15-mile Turkey Creek Trail. With a permit, you can backpack and camp anywhere along its length, and the trail has four main trailheads accessible by car, providing the option of a one-way hike. Village Creek State Park near Lumberton has an established campground, including campsites with water and electricity and walk-in sites.

Near Warren, at the northern end of the Turkey Creek Unit, the Pitcher Plant Trail is a setting where you can find carnivorous plants without much searching. Pitcher plants (*Sarracenia alata*) are something like a trap door — what goes in doesn't come out and is slowly digested by the plant's acidic juices. Jack and I compare notes on what we see down their spouts — the unfortunate bees and ants and flies making for a lurid but fascinating collection.

A drive to the Lance Rosier Unit is also worth the effort, though this section of the national preserve has no marked hiking trails. Here you will find what's known as the "Traditional Big Thicket," the thick

snarl of yaupon and titi, pine and palmetto, jungle-like forest and black-water bogs that surround Pine Island Bayou.

One of our last adventures before leaving the Big Thicket is a nighttime drive down Bragg Road, or the "Ghost Road," near Saratoga. In the early 1900s, the road was a nine-mile spur of the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe Railway. As one legend goes, there was a terrible train accident, and a brakeman died, his head severed from his body. Ever since, his ghost searches for it on dark nights, lighting his way with a lantern.

No doubt it looks much the same out here as it did when the railroad came through — no houses, just the dark swamps and the dirt track that goes from one abandoned town to another, the road signs riddled with bullet holes. It's the kind of woods with plenty of soft night sounds, where it's either too quiet or you're wondering what it is that's rustling the leaves just behind you.

Putting aside all skepticism — never mind why a headless, sightless ghost would have need for light, or the rational explanations for an intermittent gleam at the end of a straight, flat-as-a-pan-

cake dirt road abutting the smooth curve of an isolated highway — it's pretty spooky out here. And once we've turned off the headlights, we're rewarded with the sight of a distant, glowing orb.

Later, I will think of this instant of excitement and mystery, the two of us alone on the dark road and victim to the most irrational fears, as the event that captured the essence of what I had returned to the Big Thicket to find — not only a new appreciation for the remarkable place I had once called home, but also a deeper understanding of what had made it figure so large in my imagination. ★

**DETAILS:**

- **Big Thicket National Preserve Visitor Center, 409-951-6700, [www.nps.gov/bith](http://www.nps.gov/bith)**
- **Ethridge Farm Log Cabin Bed and Breakfast, 409-246-3978, [www.ethridgefarm.com](http://www.ethridgefarm.com)**
- **Village Creek State Park, 409-755-7322, [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/villagecreek](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/villagecreek)**
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