



# ROY E. LARSEN SANDYLAND SANCTUARY

## *Saving the Big Thicket of East Texas*

### conservation profile

**Ecoregion:** West Gulf Coastal Plain.

**Conservation Elements:** Red-cockaded woodpecker, Bachman's sparrow, Southeastern myotis, Rafinesque's big-eared bat, freshwater mussels, Texas trailing phlox, white firewheel, scarlet catchfly, dry and wet longleaf pine woodlands, American beech-southern magnolia forests, hardwood bottomlands, bald cypress-water tupelo swamps, freshwater ponds and river/creek drainages.

**Stresses:** Fire suppression and altered fire regime, incompatible forestry practices, incompatible development, non-native and invasive flora and fauna, roads, trails and rights of way.

**Strategies:** Big Thicket Conservation Initiative with regional conservation partners, conservation agreements, restoration and management of longleaf pine and associated ecosystems, compatible forestry operations, fire-management program, and education and outreach programs.

**Partners:** Temple-Inland Inc., National Park Service (Big Thicket National Preserve), U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Texas Parks & Wildlife Department, USDA Forest Service and its Southern Research Station, Big Thicket Association, Big Thicket Natural Heritage Trust, Natural Areas Preservation Association, The Conservation Fund, and industrial and non-industrial private landowners.

Top photo: Trailing Phlox (© Harold E. Malde)



Sandyland Sanctuary (© Lynn McBride)

**N**orth of Beaumont, Texas, lies a region that early travelers named the "Big Thicket" because of its dense, lush vegetation. From its mysterious, swampy waterways with huge bald cypress trees to its open meadows, the thicket teems with rare plants and unique botanical assemblages. Here, Midwestern prairies intermingle with Eastern hardwood forests and gulf coastal plains.

Formed by ancient seas and retreating glaciers, less than 300,000 acres of the once 3.5-million-acre Big Thicket

still remains. The 15-county region is the site of various conservation efforts, including the more than 97,000-acre Big Thicket National Preserve.

Amid the impenetrably dense forests of the Big Thicket lies one of Texas' last remaining longleaf pine communities, which now forms the heart of The Nature Conservancy's Roy E. Larsen Sandyland Sanctuary, named in honor of the late vice-chairman of Time, Inc., a lifelong conservationist. The more than 5,600-acre preserve is the site of a comprehensive effort to protect



Sandyland Sanctuary (© Lynn McBride)

and restore the longleaf pine ecosystem within the West Gulf Coastal Plain. It also includes interpretive programs and trails and is used by several academic institutions for field labs and research.

Sandyland Sanctuary is home to four globally endangered species and 12 species uncommon to southeast Texas, including the federally endangered Texas trailing phlox. Several distinct plant communities intermingle throughout the preserve: arid sandylands; wet pine savannas; beech-magnolia forests; ponds and low-lying baygalls; hardwood bottom-land forests; and bald cypress-water tupelo forests. Both Mill and Cypress creeks flow into Village Creek as it winds its way through the high sand bluffs and lowlands of the preserve.



Red-cockaded woodpecker (© TNC)

### Creating a Landscape-Scale Project

During the early 1900s, the Big Thicket, including Sandyland Sanctuary, was heavily logged. Virtually all virgin timber in the area was cut by 1930. The second- and third-growth forests that emerged often were displaced by human development or converted into commercial pine plantations. Over time, longleaf pines – which once extended from southeastern Virginia to central Florida and west to East Texas – were removed, fire was suppressed, and slash pine (a non-native tree) was introduced. These changes forever altered the forest's composition, allowing shrubs to pervade the landscape.

The quality of native species and habitat landscape was also hurt by the spread of harmful, non-native species, such as Chinese tallow, Japanese climbing fern, zebra mussels, fire ants and feral hogs.

Since Sandyland Sanctuary was established in 1977, the Conservancy has worked to protect and sustain species, communities and natural processes. The preserve provided a valuable place where the

Conservancy could demonstrate how to restore the longleaf pine ecosystem. These efforts included the use of prescribed burning, selective timber harvesting, reforestation, right-of-way management and controlling the harmful spread of non-native species. Fire is crucial for maintaining longleaf pine ecosystems, which historically were subject to lightning-induced fires.

Expertise gained at Sandyland Sanctuary prepared the Conservancy to assist the National Park Service in restoring parts of the Big Thicket National Preserve. The park service also is in the process of adding 10,000 acres to its preserve. These new lands will connect with Sandyland Sanctuary, allowing conservation of this rare ecosystem to occur on a landscape scale. Research shows that large, protected landscapes can support the habitat needed by animals and plants in a healthy ecosystem.

The Big Thicket Initiative – consisting of the Conservancy and other public and private conservation partners – identified sites needing priority in protection efforts. The group supported the submission of a Forest Legacy proposal to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service through the Texas Forest Service. This project would place more than 12,600 acres adjacent to the Big Thicket National Preserve under a conservation agreement, providing further land connection between conservation sites.

### contact information

The Nature Conservancy of Texas  
P.O. Box 1440  
San Antonio, Texas 78295  
tel (210) 224-8774  
fax (210) 228-9805

[nature.org/texas](http://nature.org/texas)