



Beware of

# Big Thicket

An appraisal tale

BY DONALD J. SHERWOOD, MAI, SR/WA, R/W-AC



As a young appraiser, one of my first right of way jobs included the appraisal of lands for the Big Thicket National Preserve. Established in 1974, the preserve consists of up to 11 distinct ecosystems located in southeast Texas comprising nine separate land units and six water corridors. Today, the preserve includes 113,122 acres of land.

The Big Thicket is known for its thick, dense woodlands and waterways along the Neches River and its tributaries. While the area was hunted by Native American tribes (such as the Caddo, Alabama and Coushatta tribes), the dense undergrowth was not conducive to permanent settlement. During the Civil War, the thicket was known as a refuge for those seeking to avoid service in the Confederate army. In the Bonanza era (1880-1930),



logging became a major industry for the area. Cypress trees were highly sought after for their durability, as well as pine, for construction. In January 1901, oil was discovered at Spindletop, just south of the Big Thicket. By 1927, damage to the various ecosystems led to a 50-year struggle to protect this fragile area.

In 1978, my boss, James (Jim) K. Norwood, MAI, ARA, was asked to appraise various properties in conjunction with the establishment of the natural preserve. One of the properties we were tasked to appraise was part of an island in the middle of the Neches River. As part of the appraisal, we conducted a timber cruise, a scientific method of calculating the volume of timber within a specific percentage of land area based on the type of timber (hardwood v. softwood) and diameter of the trees. In this case, we used a compass and pacing to measure the amount of marketable timber. As I was fresh out of the U.S. Marines, my job was to run the compass line and tally the tree count. This entailed crossing upland as well as swampy areas.



In order to reach the island, every morning we would four-wheel drive to the banks of the Neches River to an elderly couple's cabin. A humble abode that ran on no electricity or plumbing, I was fascinated by their ingenuity. For instance, during mosquito season, the couple would create a pile of pine needles on the upwind side of the house and let the smoke blow through the cabin to keep the mosquitoes at bay. We became fast friends, and the wife even gifted us a jar of her homemade may haw jelly (may haw is a native grape). We hired her husband take us by boat over to the island, with the understanding that he would pick us up later in the afternoon.

As most appraisers know, there are just some circumstances you can't predict or prepare for. Such was the case when Jim and I discovered we had no choice but to swim to cross a particularly low area. With the waterway well over our heads and the shallowest areas being about chest-deep at best, we managed to navigate through the water — unfortunately, Jim wasn't the

strongest swimmer, and there were several times where I had pull him to the surface.

So there we were, doing our best to do our appraisal work effectively without drowning in the process. The cypress trees had been logged in the 1920s, leaving the knees just above the water line and forcing us to remain submerged while we worked.

I was slightly bent over when I heard a distinct rattle near my head by one of the cypress knees. I froze. Ssssss... There's nothing quite like the chilling sensation that comes with realizing you could be mere seconds from a very painful, slow death. Instincts kicking in, Jim and I slowly backed away until we were at a safe distance and could see what we were up against.

Sure enough, two gleaming eyes watched us closely from just above the water. The Eastern Timber rattlesnake (*cortalus horridus*) had an unusual red mark near its head, and it was a wonder that I hadn't noticed the glaring scarlet warning on the cypress knee before. Jim and I let out a collective sigh of relief at our narrow escape, grateful for our good sense and fortune.

Later that afternoon at our arranged pickup time, I recanted our rattlesnake encounter to the elderly gentleman. He informed us that we had seen a pilot rattlesnake. If the viper had chosen to strike, we likely would not have made it out of the woods.

Years later, I was at the Fort Worth Zoo and asked the herpetologist if he had ever heard of such a snake. Sure enough, he confirmed that the pilot snake was indeed a rare species, equipped with deadly venom.

During that week at Big Thicket, we battled the elements, including several encounters with deer, feral hogs, nutrias and massive spiders. And of course, the rattlesnake had friends who continued to show up in unlikely places — in another instance, an aggravated cottonmouth chased me over 100 feet, white mouth flashing with every attempted strike.

Some may read this and call it a thrilling and somewhat horrifying adventure in the Big Thicket... but as for me? I just chalk it up to another day in the field. But I will leave you with this invaluable advice for appraisers who may be seeking it: work hard, stay diligent and most importantly, keep an eye out for deadly snakes. 🐍



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