

PRESERVE PROFILE

ROY E. LARSEN SANDYLAND SANCTUARY

651
SIZE: 5,593 acres

LOCATION: Sandyland Sanctuary, in Hardin County, is located in the heart of the Big Thicket region of Southeast Texas, about 20 miles north of Beaumont.

GENERAL INFORMATION: 70 million acres of majestic longleaf pine forest once stretched from Virginia to Texas. Only 6 percent of this biologically rich region survives today. Remaining acreage is lost each year to agriculture and commercial development. The longleaf pine forests are one of the most rapidly disappearing ecosystems in the Southeast U.S. In order to abate this trend, the Texas and Louisiana chapters of The Nature Conservancy, in cooperation with public and private partners, established the Pineywoods Conservation Initiative in 1990.

This comprehensive plan for protection and restoration of the longleaf pine ecosystem on the West Gulf Coastal Plain was designed to preserve core natural areas within the ecosystem and to encourage compatible land-use practices in surrounding areas. The Roy E. Larsen Sandyland Sanctuary is the Texas core for this expansive project.

The preserve protects unique and ecologically significant areas within the Big Thicket region. It harbors a variety of plant communities including one of the last remaining drought-resistant longleaf pine communities in Texas. Village Creek, a major tributary of the Neches River, meanders through the Sanctuary's closed-canopy floodplain forest. A rare combination of swamp, open-floor forest, and southern pinelands create a sanctuary with remarkable diversity sustaining 800 plant species and numerous animal species.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: During the early 1900s, the Pineywood forests, including the land on which the preserve is located, were heavily logged. Virtually all virgin timber in the area was cut by 1930. The second-growth forests which emerged often were replaced by human development or converted into commercial pine plantations. Also detrimental to the area's native species was the human suppression of wildfires. These fires once played an important role in the region's ecology by maintaining an open woodland and limiting hardwood encroachment.

An initiative to conserve parts of the Pineywood forests of Texas began in 1977, when Time Inc. and Temple-Eastex Inc. donated 2,138 acres of land to protect one of the Big Thicket's most unique natural areas. A preserve was established and named in honor of the late vice-chairman of

Time, Inc. and life-long conservationist, Roy E. Larsen. In 1978, Gulf States Utilities Company added to the property with a 40-acre gift.

In July 1994, the Sanctuary doubled in size due to a 3,158-acre donation from Temple-Inland, Inc. A portion of this gift included 380 acres of bottomland hardwood forests along the west bank of Village Creek, giving The Conservancy ownership of both sides of the tributary. The remainder of the donation was a 2,778-acre conservation easement. The easement prohibits commercial and residential development and cutting of bottomland hardwoods.

FAUNA: The Roy E. Larsen Sandyland Sanctuary provides habitat for a variety of animals typical of the Big Thicket Region. Vertebrate surveys conducted prior to the 1994 additions identified 18 species of amphibians, 107 bird species, 27 species of reptiles, and 22 mammal species.

FLORA: The ecological value of this site is based on its rare plants and unique botanical assemblages. Four globally endangered species, and 12 species that are uncommon to southeastern Texas inhabit the preserve.

The globally endangered Texas trailing phlox flowers in early spring on the property's upland sandhill communities. Found on similar habitats is the white fire-wheel, which is currently known worldwide from one other population also in Hardin County. A southeast Texas rarity is the tiny, carnivorous purple bladderwort, which floats on some of the preserve's ponds.

Several distinct communities intermingle throughout the Sanctuary: arid sandylands, beech-magnolia forests, baygalls, and floodplain forests. Perhaps the most famous community is the one for which the preserve is named, the arid sandylands. These deep, porous, sandy hills formed by ancient river deposits maintain a desert-like habitat on the upper terraces of the Village Creek floodplain. An arid landscape supports one of the last remaining stands of open, xerophytic longleaf pines in Texas. Various pines, oaks, and hickories along with prickly pear cactus, yucca, and over 340 species of wildflowers comprise one of the most diverse communities in the Big Thicket region.

Occupying the transitional slopes between the high sandy terraces and the floodplain below are hillside forests dominated by beech trees, southern magnolias, and loblolly pines. The understory, partially comprised of American holly and sweetleaf, is highlighted in the spring by flowering azaleas and dogwoods.

Baygall and bog communities thrive where rivers once formed sloughs and channels. Now seepages and springs provide moisture to these acidic areas which abound with wetland vegetation. Lush growth of ferns and sphagnum moss grow below blackgum, gallberry holly, and white bay magnolia trees. Closely associated with these communities are successional ponds with acidic water and soils. Plants, such as fragrant water-lily and floating heart, dominate the surface of these lakes.

Surrounding these ponds and baygalls is swamp-like lower floodplain forests stretching out from the creek banks. Huge water oaks and sweetgums create a closed canopy which prevents much undergrowth. Willows and river birch grow along the stream banks of this hardwood ecosystem.

PRESERVE MANAGEMENT: Pursuant to the stated goals of the Pineywoods Conservation Initiative, the various management programs at the preserve are designed to protect and sustain the biological diversity of the Pineywoods ecosystem. The Pineywoods restoration efforts at Sandylands include prescribed burning, reforestation, non-native species removal, and selective management of slash pine.

After some initial experiments with fire management at the site, The Conservancy initiated a regime of burns to ensure a healthy longleaf pine savannah at Sandylands. These fires are primarily used to clear germination sites for longleaf seedlings and to reduce competition from hardwoods and other pines detrimental to longleaf pine populations.

Selective logging is being used to restore longleaf pine areas that were logged and then replanted with slash pine. Removal of slash pine, a species not native to Texas, will facilitate longleaf regeneration.

Plant and animal surveys are also part of the property's management programs. Extensive inventories of vascular plants and various vertebrates have been completed. Biologists are currently conducting a fish survey. These studies are invaluable measures of diversity and abundance of species. Biological surveys also serve as a future reference for monitoring the long term health of the Sanctuary's inhabitants.

The Conservancy's commitment to education, not just conservation, is evident in the guided nature hikes and informative presentations periodically offered at the site. Furthermore, several academic institutions have utilized this unique natural area for scientific research and experiments which resulted in numerous publications. Some of the most important on-going research includes monitoring the response of the Texas trailing phlox and the longleaf pine stands to fire regimes at Sandylands.

The latest management program implemented at the preserve involves the recent 2,800-acre easement. In accordance with a management plan developed by The Conservancy with Temple-Inland, some pine timbering will be conducted. The purpose of this program is to utilize

sustainable forestry practices conducive to both the long-term viability of native organisms and the biological processes that allow this ecosystem to thrive. This type of management approach is an important aspect of the Pineywoods Conservation Initiative's goal of combining longleaf pine restoration with ecologically compatible human and economic uses.

ACCESS: The Sandyland Sanctuary is open to the public during daylight hours. Six miles of nature trails and a beautiful canoe trip down eight miles of Village Creek attract hundreds of visitors annually. Guided tours on the nature trails are available upon request. For more information contact the East Texas Field Office:

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