

# On Getting Lost

## A JOURNEY THROUGH THE BIG THICKET

STORY AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY  
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# There is a lot of Texas in Texas.

It's enough to make a little islander like myself quite agoraphobic. I grew up in rural England and was sent away at the age of 7 to exist for long terms in large houses with many other boys. The best escape from those places was to wander the grounds and to imagine in some threadbare copse how being away from all of it might be. Then I went to London, where the landscape is mostly humans. Then I married an American. Then I moved to Texas.

I needed to change my definition of space.

I'm not very tall, and mostly I've felt shorter since coming here. While living in Texas, I've written three books set in Victorian London and one in French Revolutionary Paris. I illustrate the books I write mostly with black and white, somewhat Gothic images. I always draw the characters I write about because it's the best way of getting to know them. There's something about living far away from your home that makes it easier to write and draw about it. The distance is

freeing. I don't think I could have conceived of these books without being far away from Europe.

The book I've just finished is set entirely inside the belly of an enormous fish, where the protagonist finds himself unhappily, lost from mankind. I've spent a lot of time thinking about homeland and belonging, especially since finding

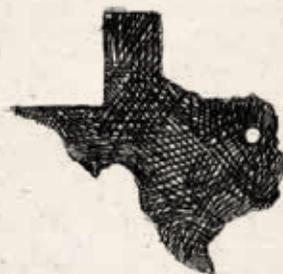


figure A: THE BIG THICKET AREA

myself in the Texas landscape. I've been out to see the rugged landscapes of West Texas, and there I could see for miles and could fit several Englands, it seemed to me, between myself and the horizon. But that was the desert Texas, and Texas is not singular.

Texas can be very green, too, as my wife, two children, and I were reminded on the journey eastwards from Austin. In the Big Thicket, my latest exploration of the state, you may see what the world could be without human interference. Here in this complicated knot, nature is telling you how it might look if you and your kind had never existed. The area is a product of the ice age. Glaciers shunted species southwards over huge distances, and when the ice retreated, it left behind an extraordinary confluence of environments.

The Big Thicket is one place, but also multiple—as if almost all nature rushed to this one spot. Here in a mere 113,000 acres are Eastern deciduous forests, Southwestern deserts, Southeastern swamps, and the landscape of the Central prairies. It's like Noah's ark, without Noah. The number of species of plants and animals in this limited region is dumbfounding. It is a place of multitudes, of astounding variety. One trek here will in no way resemble another trek just a

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figure B: STRANGE KNEES

handful of miles down the path. Scientists call it the "biological crossroads" of North America.

Who knows what is hiding in the great depths of the Thicket? Standing on a pathway, in a small safe part of it, you have the feeling that it would be easy to step into oblivion ... just close your eyes, reach out your foot, and get lost, so very lost.

It seems perfectly obvious that humans have for the most part kept the Big Thicket at a distance. Three groups of Native Americans skirted it but never fully lived here: the Atakapas, the Caddos, and the Alabama-Coushattas. Only in the 1800s did people really start to live in this unfathomable place, and these people were largely white Protestants called the Dog People

because they used a locally bred dog, called a cur, in their hunting.

Mostly people have chosen to leave the Big Thicket alone, until of course, inevitably, human industry attacked this wonderfully complicated oasis—for lumber, for gas, and for oil. Human activity, in pincer movements, chipped away at the Thicket until it reached the state it is in today, a mere 3.7% of its original size. It was 3 million acres large and now has shrunk to 113,000. And yet what remains continues to feel somewhat aloof from mankind.

There are 40 miles of trails and waterways, so there is still a Big Thicket to get utterly lost in. Lostness seems the main human chapter of this extraordinary place. The

humans who went into this unruly place wanted to be lost, and there seem to be few better hiding places. Convicts fleeing prison lost themselves here, and most famously, a group of some 75 deserters, called Jayhawkers, mostly avoided the Civil War deep inside the Thicket. For who would want to go in there after them all?

I am more used to negotiating the gloomy lanes of London, and felt somewhat ill-equipped to walk along the trails with my son. After an hour of wandering around Turkey Creek admiring the cypress trees and the strange "knees" of their roots that rise above the ground and look like ancient teeth or sitting rabbits, I suddenly realized that we had got lost, that we



figure C: THE GIANT SLOTH



figure D: THE LEGEND OF THE SPLIT BONNET



figure E: THE SNOWY EGRET

were somehow off the path and going in circles. Only by the sensible direction of my 12-year-old was the path found again. During those few, brief minutes, this European urbanite felt the great immenseness, the great non-human presence of this place. I was not home; I was far from home.

Even in Texas this was an unfamiliar place to me. Deeper and darker, bigger and thicker. It was in those moments, both bewildering and liberating, that the Big Thicket seemed to reveal itself. The moment you stop and keep still, the life starts to buzz and hum, tweet and rustle and caw about you. The Big Thicket is an excellent place to leave everything behind, to be reminded of what life might be like without human beings.

Is it any wonder then that this magnificent confluence of nature, thick and dense and ancient, should seem to humans a place of mystery? Don't go into the woods, the fairy tales tell us. Don't go into the woods, don't ever go into the woods. Terrible, dangerous things live there. Yes, yes, they did. The giant sloth was here 10,000 years ago; so were saber-toothed tigers; so were dire wolves. Tapirs once upon a time. Human legends are here, too. Human ghosts are said to be in the Big Thicket. Having misplaced the path a little, I'd be inclined to believe the stories.

There's a remarkable local

legend of a man lost in the woods who came across an old woman whose face was concealed by a split bonnet who gave him some rancid water before disappearing. There are perhaps spent conquistadors inside the Thicket still looking for treasure. But most legendarily, the Big Thicket may contain a Bigfoot. It has been sighted many times, but as is the nature of this famously shy creature, none of these have been definitively corroborated. The Big Thicket also reportedly used to have, perhaps to balance out its hirsute occupant, a Nude Man—some sort of hermit who lived in the Thicket for nine years, surviving on wild fruit and armadillo. But facts again are a little hard to come by.

Factually, the Big Thicket includes in its great variance some 60 different species of mammals (this does not include Bigfoot), 86 species of reptiles and amphibians, and 97 species of fish. Of plants, it boasts some 1,300 species of trees, shrubs, vines, and grasses. It is a staggering checklist.

And yet, despite all that it's known for and all that it holds, I had never heard of the Big Thicket before this trip. It does not announce itself like some theme park attraction. It has none of that crassness—there are no huge signs, there's no Ripley's Believe It or Not! nearby. It does not make any great discernible boasting of its potentially lofty, hairy, upright, peram-

bulating individual, but rather its presence creeps into you. It takes a few steps and if you then keep still, the Big Thicket opens itself up to you. It cannot help itself; it is so full of life.

Jason Ginder, chief of interpretation at the Big Thicket National Preserve, describes the area with studied eloquence: "For the visitor, there are so many different ways to explore the Big Thicket. Everyone can find a different piece of it. There's no one way to visit it, unlike some other parks. Here you can create your own adventure."

Why are you here?

To see a snowy egret?

To visit with the four different types of carnivorous plants?

To see the 2,000-year-old cypress trees?

In conversation, Ginder does not favor one particular animal or plant. Rather, he says so insightfully, "The power is in the small things, sitting down and giving the environment the opportunity to reveal itself. Stop and sit for a moment. Give the wildlife a chance to return to normal. And it very quickly comes to life."

That was precisely my experience. Joined by my wife and daughter, our family walked around the Big Thicket for a few hours and gradually, just as Ginder suggested, we succumbed to its sounds, letting its conversation take us over. This was different from the other ver-

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figure F: CARNIVOROUS PLANTS



figure G: THE GHOST ROAD

sions of Texas we knew. We'd seen the Hill Country and Big Bend; we'd been to Corpus Christi and Galveston Island. But this was something else. We stayed in a perfectly equipped log cabin on the edge of McNeely Lake, where cypress trees with their extraordinary roots emerged out of the water just by us, as if they were wading toward land, something like Tolkien's ents. All felt very alive, and all was kind to us.

Though there is not, perhaps, an enormous amount of human life and business to get stuck into around the Thicket, we can boast two exceptional meals. The first was at Caroline's Quality and Quantity, where in a modest clapboard house excellent barbecue is served. Caroline's sausage is as good as any I've eaten

elsewhere in Texas or England or Germany.

The other was at The Pickett House, in a large dining hall decorated by vintage circus posters, where only one meal is ever on the menu, and all is dealt with in an arrangement called boarding house service. (There are no menus; big bowls arrive and are replenished; you eat until you're full; you clear your own plates away.) We ate biscuits and corn bread, black-eyed peas, collard greens, chicken and dumplings, and the best fried chicken I have ever eaten.

Coming back from The Pickett House, which closes its doors at

worker who is trying to find his lost head; or the light is from conquistadors searching for treasure in the dark; or it is the light of the fire still burning from The Kaiser Burnout, when a Confederate officer tried to use flame to route out those Jayhawkers. A more scientific approach names the phenomenon as gas from the swamps, or least spectacularly of all, as reflected car lights from the town of Saratoga.

Whatever the cause, we thought we'd better see for ourselves.

It was twilight when we turned the car off the highway and entered the path. How to describe it?

It was like journeying in a card-

something. Twice. Three times. I'm not exactly sure now. They looked like headlights coming toward us but then veered off suddenly and disappeared. When we got to the place they were last seen, nothing was there. And still that lit O—O of our sweet relief, O of our hopes and rescue—was still far away, and still the spectacular light show, though dimming, was switched, ever changing before us. Finally, as the O, or the eye of the road, blinked shut to show that night had fallen, we reached the end and were back in civilization.

Whatever it was that we saw down that long path was

DID WE SEE THE STRANGE LIGHTS OF THE SARATOGA GHOST ROAD? WE SAW SOMETHING. TWICE. THREE TIMES. I'M NOT EXACTLY SURE NOW. WHATEVER IT WAS THAT WE SAW DOWN THAT LONG PATH WAS VERY BEAUTIFUL.

6 p.m. on the weekend, we decided we'd better try one of the Big Thicket's most famous locations: the ghost road.

On Farm-to-Market Road 1293, between the community of Saratoga and the forgotten town of Bragg Station, is a 7-mile track surrounded by woodland. Oaks, pines, sweet gums, wax myrtles, arrowwoods, and hollies form an impressive green tunnel, through which the only escape appears to be the other end. The branches on both sides link limbs and canopies to form a very long holloway.

The ghost road—we'd read about it beforehand—reveals in the night mysterious lights that many believe to be a spectral presence. The lights have been variously explained as the lamp of a decapitated railroad

board theater's concertina walls, or inside a child's kaleidoscope, or the beautifully painted backdrops of a Victorian theater, flat on flat of changing landscape, the scenery continually changing like cards in a deck being swapped over and over and over again, greens on blues and browns. Always when you thought the road might end, another stretch of the tunnel, another card, another theatrical flat revealed itself. All the while, the light was going out, the day was giving up. At the end of the road, at the furthest end of the road, way in the distance, was a little "O" of light from the street lamps along the highway on the other side, which we bumped toward and never seemed to reach.

Did we see the strange lights of the Saratoga ghost road? We saw

very beautiful.

The children, behind us, were uncharacteristically silent.

It felt like we'd got lost again.

The next morning it was time to leave the Big Thicket, which seemed more than a weekend visit out of our daily urban existence in Austin. Rather it felt like a step out of Texas, as if we'd traveled much further away. We reset ourselves by returning to a path that we had used many times before. We took the Galveston-Port Bolivar ferry because we wanted to feel we were found again and to see dolphins and pelicans. From there we wound our way back home, having got, very wonderfully, lost.

Do go into the woods. Do go into the woods. 🌲