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# Big Birch at Banana Bend

*East of Houston, a mammoth tree serves as the centerpiece for a new nature preserve.*



**In the small town of Highlands,** just 20 minutes east of downtown Houston, a massive river birch tree — thought to be largest of its kind in Texas — was recently named a regional champion by the Harris County Tree Registry. It is 67 feet high, 73 inches in circumference, and has an average crown spread of about 68 feet.

**This regional champion river birch, located in a curve of the San Jacinto River called Banana Bend, will be protected by a new conservation easement that is designed to protect the surrounding land.**

Highlands sits quietly on the banks of the San Jacinto River in a boomerang curve aptly named Banana Bend. The land is owned by the Port of Houston Authority (PHA). In December 2004, fulfilling part of PHA's commitment under its Bayport Container and Cruise Terminal project permit, PHA and the Legacy Land Trust signed the Banana Bend Conservation Easement. This means PHA has agreed to help maintain the conservation values of this land and permanently forego intensive development.

The land, now known as the Banana Bend Nature Preserve, serves as a stop-over and wintering area for migratory waterfowl, shorebirds and songbirds, and includes forested riparian areas. Along with the champion river birch, Banana Bend hosts 39 species of trees, including southern red oak, blackgum and sassafras. The land is also home to 71 species of forbs (broad-leaved flowering plants), 15 species of vines, 18 species of grasses, five species of shrubs and eight-species of fungi. The site is a prime habitat for 60 species of birds as well as several rare species.

Since signing the easement, PHA has been working with Harris County Commissioner's Precinct 2 to ensure that the long-term use for the land includes a county park, so that area residents can enjoy the Banana Bend preserve for generations. In the near future, the rest of Highlands could well be swallowed by Houston's ever expanding borders. But, in the midst of all this growth, the champion river birch — and all of the other plants and animals thriving in the natural habitat surrounding it — will remain safely protected. ☆

—Aston Hinds