



Friends of Congaree Swamp News

www.friendsofcongarree.org

Winter 2018

Save the date

Visit a champion

A hike to visit the state champion cherrybark oak is scheduled **Saturday, March 24.**

The Cherrybark Oak is, in size and grandeur, the most spectacular of all of Congaree's many hardwood species. Their enormous buttresses, soaring columnar trunks, and huge crown spread make them a standout in a forest of standouts.

One Congaree Cherrybark Oak, now dead and on the ground on the Oak Ridge Trail was, at 160 feet, the tallest oak tree ever measured in North America.

For this outing we will visit the state champion, only a short distance off the River Trail. It will be a six-mile round trip and we will stop along the way to see some other interesting trees.

Meet at the Visitor Center at 9 a.m. and plan on getting back at 1 p.m. Snacks and beverages are recommended

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Champion trees icons of floodplain ecosystem

By John Kupfer

Champion trees, those individuals judged to be the largest of their species, are icons of the floodplain forest ecosystem protected by Congaree National Park.

The park is home to numerous national and state champions as well as many other non-champion 'big trees' that serve as keystone natural resources and provide scientists and park managers with unique and critical insights into the ecological functioning of old-growth bottomland ecosystems.

Big trees were, in fact, a major driver for the creation of Congaree Swamp National Monument, the forerunner of the current national park, and are increasingly sought out by many of the park's more than 125,000 annual visitors.

Designation as a champion is based on a formula that includes a tree's measured circumference, height, and crown spread. American Forests, a non-profit conservation organization dedicated to protecting and restoring healthy forest ecosystems, maintains the National Champion Trees Register (www.americanforests.org/explore-forests/americas-biggest-trees/champion-trees-national-register/) while Dr. Vic Shelburne of Clemson University maintains the South Carolina State Champions Register (www.clemson.edu/public/champ/tree/index.html).

No other area in North America has a larger documented concentration of champion trees than Congaree, something that can be attributed to three factors. First, the park boasts exceptional

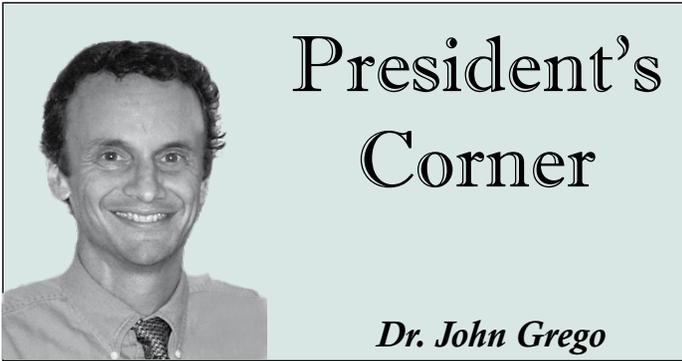


The state champion Cherrybark Oak dwarfs John Kupfer.

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President's Corner

Dr. John Grego

Sims Trail Guide

We recently posted a guide for the Sims Trail on our website. This is our sixth trail guide, with three of them completed by USC students as service projects. With the participation of students in an Honors College service course this upcoming fall, we should finish guides for all the park's surface trails this year.

This familiar trail was always a favorite of my children, attracted by the pothole puddles on the old road and all the butterflies, dragonflies and bathing birds attracted to them. And Moccasin Alley remains one of the best places in the park to see a Red-shouldered Hawk or Barred Owl waiting to ambush a crayfish or salamander.

NEEF Grant

In our last newsletter, I promised photos from student field trips to the park funded by our NEEF (National Environmental Education Fund) Every Day Event grant. I don't have photos to share, but we received many wonderful thank-you notes from grant recipients that I would like to share.

Fourth-grade teachers and their students from R.E. Davis Elementary School, Manchester Elementary School, and Cherryvale Elementary School in Sumter County participated in December field trips and shared their thoughts on the experience. The grant funded lunch for the students in addition to transportation to the park, and Golden Corral made quite an impression

on the students ("This place is like heaven!")

I wish I could include the entire letter from the Manchester Elementary teachers, but will instead share these lovely sentiments:

"Teaching children of poverty is very rewarding, but it can also be heartbreaking. Many are unable to attend camps, school trips, and other activities simply because they can't afford it...As (students) realized that (the trip) was free to them, their little faces just lit up. Many had never visited a national park nor eaten at a Golden Corral. Thank you again for giving back and making a difference in the life of a child."

--4th Grade Team
Manchester Elementary

Students' impressions included:

"What I learned when I asked did the park used to be a national park back when war was around: she said that it wasn't a national park back then. Here is a fun fact. The park became a national park in October 18, 1976"

"We learned that pigs waller (sic) in the ground messing it up. We appreciate ya'll for providing this field trip for Cherryvale's great fourth graders."

"I really enjoyed the nature and being reconnected with nature. I loved hearing the birds chirp and I loved seeing the squirrels run around."

"It is good to know that those trees are protected and that people are welcome to visit and camp."

"I had a great time being there and learning about nature. That's why I'm writing a thank you letter to you, that you paid for about 50-60 of us. We thank you."

"We went to some park. It was really fun—we really don't get to do this stuff. We got to explore in the woods. We got to learn one tree could live up to 1000 years or more."

"Thank you for letting me come and look at the biggest trees. And I learned a lot—these are some things I learned. That it is a quiet place, people don't cut down the trees; they let them grow and die on their own."

"3 reasons I loved the trip! #1: The wilderness was so relaxing and quiet and the environment was beautiful. #2: I thank you for the food that we ate and the cotton candy. I really appreciate that so much. #3: And last

Friends of Congaree Swamp News is published quarterly by Friends of Congaree Swamp, P.O. Box 7746. Columbia, SC 29202-7746. It is distributed free by mail to Friends members and other interested parties.

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Friends of Congaree Swamp advocates for Congaree National Park and its unique environment.

Dr. John Grego, President

Sharon H. Kelly, Editor

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Bird counters spot 96 species, 8700 birds

The 25th Congaree Swamp Christmas Bird Count was held on Sunday, Dec. 17, under ideal weather conditions and low water levels at the park.

We had a total of 96 species this year, which is quite high considering Two Rivers Farm was unable to participate this year and contribute its amazing waterfowl counts.

We had 15 parties in the field, including nine in the park, two in Richland County and four in Calhoun County. Dick Watkins continues to reach out to property owners in

Calhoun County and a couple of them offered informal, but important observations of signature species such as Bald Eagle and Wild Turkey.

Owling was reasonably good this year, and enough additional Barred Owls were seen during the day for a new count record of 48. Pileated Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Northern (Yellow-shafted) Flicker, and Winter Wren were other strong counts that should be among the highest in the country, though we will have no species count this year that is tops.

In general, it was a good year for many of the park's signature species. The morning boardwalk party saw one of the largest and most persistent mixed flocks that party has

ever seen at the park.

No new species were added, but we either tied or exceeded high counts for Anhinga, Great Blue Heron, Barred Owl, Blue-headed Vireo, House Wren, and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. Single Osprey and Yellow-throated Warbler tied for high counts as well.



White-throated Sparrow

Our boat party, piloted by chief interpretive ranger Scott Teodorski, helped account for a couple of those records. It was a frosty day to be out on the river at daybreak!

We would like to acknowledge the absence

of a couple long-time participants, perennial park volunteer Miriam Oudejans and Warren Steckle, who have moved to Canada.

Here is our list of 34 participants, several of whom have participated in the count since its start in 1993: Ron Ahle, Sam Arant, Andy Brady, Mary Bull, John Cely, Alice Clark, Blaney Coskrey, Brad Dalton, Steve Dennis, Caroline Eastman, Hilda Flamholtz, Jon Flamholtz, Dennis Forsythe.

Also, Lex Glover, John Grego, Jerry Griggs, Carol Jaworski, George McCoy, Steve McInnis, Susan McInnis, Carl Miller, Cathy Miller, Julie Mobley, Ann Nolte, Kathleen O'Grady, Matt Prioleau, Jean Prothro, Richard Sasnett, Dave Schuetrum, Alice

Steinke, Scott Teodorski, Dick Watkins, Bob Worthington and Cynthia Worthington.

Species

Pied-billed Grebe	3
Double-crested Cormorant	2
Anhinga	16
Great Blue Heron	24
Great Egret	2
White Ibis	9
Black Vulture	92
Turkey Vulture	117
Wood Duck	176
American Black Duck	1
Mallard	3
Ring-necked Duck	2
Hooded Merganser	12
Osprey	1
Bald Eagle	2
Northern Harrier	4
Sharp-shinned Hawk	1
Cooper's Hawk	4
Red-shouldered Hawk	25
Red-tailed Hawk	12
American Kestrel	7
Wild Turkey	22
Killdeer	113
Wilson's Snipe	2
American Woodcock	3
Ring-billed Gull	6
Rock Pigeon	4
Eurasian Collared-Dove	3
Mourning Dove	88
Eastern Screech-Owl	4
Barred Owl	48
Great Horned Owl	9
Belted Kingfisher	7
Red-headed Woodpecker	86
Red-bellied Woodpecker	179
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	92
Downy Woodpecker	66
Hairy Woodpecker	13
Northern Flicker	220
Pileated Woodpecker	121
Eastern Phoebe	125
Loggerhead Shrike	5
White-eyed Vireo	6
Blue-headed Vireo	30
Blue Jay	9
American Crow	179

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Champions

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environmental conditions for tree growth, including a long and warm growing season coupled with moisture, sediment, and nutrients that are provided by flooding from the Congaree and Wateree Rivers. The combination of these factors gives Congaree one of the tallest temperate, hardwood forests in the world, with interspersed Loblolly Pines that exceed 160 feet in height.

Second, while some parts of the park have been subjected to logging, other areas have experienced little or no human disturbance over the past several centuries, resulting in an extensive old-growth bottomland forest. Even in places where the forest has been affected by natural disturbances and human activities, the growing conditions provide opportunities for less shade-tolerant species to reach champion size.

The final reason for the high concentration of champion trees at Congaree National Park is the concerted efforts to locate big trees that have taken place over the past four decades. Such efforts first took place in the 1960's when the area was being considered for preservation and protection as part of the National Park System.

Following its creation in 1976, Congaree Swamp National Monument was surveyed for champion trees more systematically by Dr. Chick Gaddy in 1977, and later between 1993-95 by Dr. Robert Jones, who documented 29

state and national champions. Visiting researchers and big tree hunters have continued to search for, identify, and measure potential champions, but the distribution and status of the park's champion trees have not been systematically surveyed since the Jones survey.

Several considerations underscored the need for updated work. Dr. Jones, who is now executive vice president for academic affairs and provost at Clemson, acknowledged that less than 50 percent of potential champions were surveyed, and observations by park staff, naturalists and visitors indicate potentially significant changes in big tree populations and status due to storms, disease, and forest succession. Further, the eastern boundary of the park has been expanded twice since the last champion tree inventory, and little of the new area had been assessed for champion trees.

Therefore, beginning in 2013, faculty and students from the University of South Carolina along with Park Service personnel and a number of private citizens began resurveying old champions, compiling and collating records of recent big tree 'hunts,' and searching for new champions.

As of 2009, Congaree was home to 25 listed champions or co-champions representing 23 species on the South Carolina Champion Tree Register, of

which six were listed as national champions. The champion loblolly pine was remeasured as part of this project and is listed on the national American Forests register. That tree is now 170 feet in height and 183 inches in circumference.

Several of the previous



John Cely leads a big tree hike.

national champions (Laurel Oak, Deciduous Holly, Water Hickory) have either suffered damage or been killed in the intervening decade, and the champion Swamp Tupelo has been surpassed in size by another tree. We were unable to reach the champion Sweetgum but will be making a trip out to remeasure it in the spring. In good news, a recent remeasurement of the state champion Cherrybark Oak brought it to within a few points of the current national champion and qualified it for status as national co-champion. That nomination is pending.

On the state list, Congaree retained the state champions for 13 species, including Green Ash, Bald Cypress, Water Tupelo, Pawpaw, Sugarberry,

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Champions

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and Box Elder. There were also eight species for which the previous champion tree was either confirmed to be dead or not relocated but for which a new state champion tree was identified within the park.

These included Red Maple, Water Hickory, Swamp Tupelo, Laurel Oak, and American Elm. There was also one species, Bitternut Hickory, where a new Congaree champion displaced a reigning Congaree champion.

There was only one species, Shumard Oak, where a previous champion had been damaged or died and a new champion had not been measured within the park.

Finally, state champions were identified within Congaree and confirmed for twelve new species, including Ironwood, Carolina Ash, Swamp Cottonwood, Black Willow, and Red Bay.

Pending approvals of newly nominated individuals, a total

of 34 individual trees representing 32 species at Congaree will now be state champions, with two species being listed on the national list. Species on the list included not only large, canopy-dominant trees (e.g., Green Ash, Bald Cypress, American Elm, Loblolly Pine and several oak, hickory and tupelo species), but also prominent mid-canopy species such as Red Maple, Box Elder, and Ironwood, as well as understory species such as Pawpaw and Buttonbush.

A number of disturbance-adapted species such as Black Willow, Devil's Walking Stick, and Swamp Cottonwood are included.

While our project funding has officially ended, we will continue the search for new champions, and John Cely continues to offer highly popular big tree walks on a regular basis. If you are

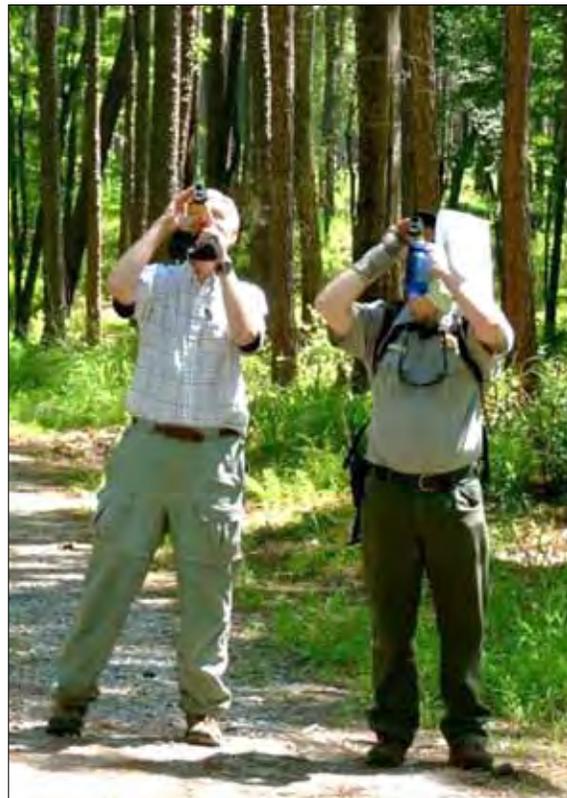


Photo by John Kupfer

Vic Shelburne and David Shelley practice using Nikon Forestry Pro Laser Rangefinders to measure tree height.

interested in assisting with future big tree searches, please feel free to contact me or John Grego.

Dr. Kupfer is a professor of geography at the University of South Carolina.

Bird count

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Horned Lark 4
 Carolina Chickadee 105
 Tufted Titmouse 132
 White-breasted Nuthatch 31
 Brown-headed Nuthatch 30
 Brown Creeper 4
 Carolina Wren 209
 House Wren 32
 Winter Wren 62
 Marsh Wren 1
 Sedge Wren 2
 Golden-crowned Kinglet 130
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet 346
 Blue-gray Gnatcatcher 10
 Eastern Bluebird 80

Hermit Thrush 87
 American Robin 307
 Gray Catbird 5
 Northern Mockingbird 50
 Brown Thrasher 19
 European Starling 15
 American Pipit 18
 Cedar Waxwing 170
 Orange-crowned Warbler 1
 Yellow-rumped Warbler 235
 Yellow-throated Warbler 1
 Pine Warbler 62
 Palm Warbler 14
 Black-and-white Warbler 13
 Common Yellowthroat 9
 Eastern Towhee 113
 Chipping Sparrow 145
 Field Sparrow 7
 Vesper Sparrow 3

Savannah Sparrow 29
 Fox Sparrow 4
 Song Sparrow 142
 Swamp Sparrow 62
 White-throated Sparrow 456
 Dark-eyed Junco 33
 Northern Cardinal 293
 Red-winged Blackbird 2669
 Eastern Meadowlark 31
 Rusty Blackbird 6
 Common Grackle 613
 Brown-headed Cowbird 3
 Baltimore Oriole 4
 House Finch 18
 American Goldfinch 149
 House Sparrow 16
Total Species 96
Total Count 8700

Save the date

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Contact John Cely at (803) 782-7450 or cowasee@gmail.com to register. Preference will be given to members of Friends of Congaree Swamp.

Botany hike

Join us **Sunday, April 15** for a botany hike along the park's newest trail, the Fork Swamp Trail, on the eastern end of the park.

The hike, from 9 a.m. until noon, is in appreciation of the park's spring flora—this can be one of the sites where butterweed grows in profusion.

We will walk the short loop of the Fork Swamp Trail, visit a slough and a wet meadow and explore open areas that were formerly food plots for the Kingville Hunt Club, which used to lease the property.

There will be an opportunity after the hike to look for alligators and wading birds in the sloughs along U.S. 601.

Prof. John Nelson, chief curator of the University of South Carolina's A.C. Moore



Swamp Leatherflower



Blue-eyed Grass

Herbarium, will lead the hike. Participants should be in moderate physical shape with a tolerance for sunshine. Bring water and insect repellent; long pants are recommended. Jogging shoes or light hiking boots are appropriate. We will meet at the parking lot for the Fork Swamp Trail off U.S.

601. To register, contact John Grego, (803) 331-3366 or friendsofcongareeswamp@gmail.com.

Dawn Chorus Walk

Friends will hold its Robin Carter Dawn Chorus Walk on **Sunday, May 6**.

Robin, who passed away in 2008, started the event at Congaree National Park in 2005. The Dawn Chorus was one of many birding events that Robin originated at the park and that we work to continue through the present day.

We will meet at the Visitor Center at 5:30 a.m.

Led by Jerry Griggs, we will listen for the pre-dawn sounds of owls, chuck will's widows or whippoorwills, and migrating thrushes. We can reasonably expect to hear as many as 40 species of birds.

Bird song experts will be on hand to help you identify what you hear, or you can just listen and take in the experience. Birds observed during the Dawn Chorus will be included as part of the North American Spring Migration Count Day

at the park. Stick around if you would like to help out!

The hike will be followed by a free breakfast at 7:30 a.m., organized and prepared by Friends members. The breakfast menu changes slightly from year to year, but could include shrimp and creamy grits, scones, biscuits, a breakfast strata, fresh fruit, juice and coffee.

If interested, contact John Grego, (803) 331-3366 or friendsofcongareeswamp@gmail.com.

Aquatic Critters event

Dr. Jim Bulak will lead an aquatic critters appreciation event **Saturday, May 19**.

Congaree National Park hosts a wide variety of aquatic life that most visitors never see or experience. Jim is researcher coordinator at S.C. Department of Natural Resources Freshwater Fisheries Research lab in Eastover. He will organize a team to electrofish Toms Creek near Kingville, which supports a different aquatic community from those we have visited along Cedar Creek and Dry Branch.

We will bring along nets to collect and discuss the fish, crayfish, beetles, dragonfly and damselfly larvae, salamanders and other critters that we catch. Jim will arrange to have a macroinvertebrate specialist along to sample and assist with IDs. This will still be breeding season, so the fish should be

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Save the date

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more colorful than we saw on our October trip to Dry Branch.

We will hike along Toms Creek and perhaps McKenzie Creek, sampling along the way. Discussion of the specimens collected by Jim and his crew will take about an hour.

Participants should be in moderate physical shape. Bring water and insect repellent; long pants are recommended. Jogging shoes or light hiking



Warmouth Sunfish

boots are appropriate.

If participants wish to assist with sampling, wading shoes

or boots would be helpful. This hike is limited to the first 25 people to sign up.

We will meet at 8:30 a.m. at the Visitor Center parking lot, then carpool to Toms Creek off Red Bluff Road. We plan to return at 12:30 p.m.

To register, contact John

Grego, (803) 331-3366 or friendsofcongareeswamp@gmail.com.

Grego

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I thank you for the badges and the booklets.”

“You have an amazing natural habitat. I saw so many different trees. I wish I could learn them all. But the cypress was really cool. I can’t believe it can be between 250-1000 years old! Hopefully next time I get there I could learn about more trees.”

“It was really cool to see the oldest cypress tree in you guy’s park. I love trees, so I like that a lot. I also liked the badges that you gave us. They are very cool. My whole family said that they liked my badge.”

“I was so happy to go on the field trip. The first reason is because I learned something. I learned that trees can be over 1000 years old. The second reason I thought the field trip was awesome is because we got to be outside. I love playing outside.”

Superintendent departure

Superintendent Tracy Stakely accepted a position as Superintendent of Fort Sumter National Monument and began his new position on February 5. In addition, he appointed Chief of Interpretation Scott Teodorski to a 4-month term as interim superintendent of the newly established Reconstruction Era National Monument, leaving Congaree National Park with a void in leadership at its busiest time of the year.

The transition to a new superintendent can be protracted, with appointment of current staff to interim appointments alternating with interim appointments of staff from other park units. In addition to leaving the park short-handed, the park does not have its usual place at the table when important local and regional policy decisions are being made.

The Friends of Congaree

Swamp board wrote to the director of the Southeast Region of the National Park Service to request a speedy appointment of a permanent replacement.

The letter noted that the park’s busiest season was under way, and that the park would be without its chief interpreter officer for the shoulder-to-shoulder crowds on the boardwalk for the synchronous firefly display in May.

The board also took the opportunity to note the park’s efforts at outreach across a wide range of activities over time. This momentum could be slowed during the upcoming period of temporary leadership.

We shared our letter with the S.C. Congressional Delegation and the Richland County Legislative Delegation, and received a supportive response almost immediately from Senator Lindsey Graham’s office.



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Yes, I want to support conservation of Congaree Swamp for future generations. Enclosed is my tax-deductible contribution of \$ _____ . (Please make checks payable to Friends of Congaree Swamp.)

_____ Individual \$15 Name(s) _____
_____ Family \$35 * Mailing address _____
_____ Advocate \$50 City _____ State _____ Zip _____
_____ Partner \$100 ** Phone _____ Email _____
_____ Benefactor \$500
_____ Patron \$1000
_____ Nonprofit \$50
_____ Corporate \$1000

Please keep your information current to receive special notices about field trips, events, scheduling changes and acknowledgements in addition to a quarterly newsletter.

*For a contribution of \$35 or more, you may choose one:

- Baseball cap maroon _____ tan _____
- Tan visor _____
- Bandana with map of Congaree National Park gold _____ blue _____ red _____

**For a contribution of \$100 or more you will receive a copy of "The Natural History of Congaree Swamp."

In addition, I would like to donate \$ _____ as a gift.

Thank you for supporting Friends of Congaree Swamp!

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