



Friends of Congaree Swamp News

www.friendsofcongarree.org

Winter 2020

Save the date

Adopt-a-Trail

The next Adopt-a-Trail Workday is scheduled for **Sunday, March 1**.

Trail clearing opportunities include the Sims Trail, the Boardwalk, the Weston Lake Loop Trail and the Oakridge Trail, or whichever of the park's trails needs the most attention.

While out on the trails, we should be able to hear our mascot for the winter trail clearings, the Yellow-throated Warbler, always the first migrant to return to the park.

We will meet at the Harry Hampton Visitor Center at 9 a.m. and finish in the early afternoon.

Work gloves, light hiking boots, plenty of water, and a snack are recommended. If you have loppers, long-handled shears or bow saws, bring them along. Park staff will

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It's been a soggy February

The Congaree River experienced the largest February flood in its history this year, with the possible exception of February 1865, reaching a peak gage height in downtown Columbia of 29.2 feet and a peak flow 148,000 cubic feet per second.

The flood was larger than recent significant floods in October 1990, January 1995, March 2003, and May 2013, and firmly between historical floods in April 1964 and October 1976, while still well below the October 2015 flood.

On a historical note, this flood would rank as the 15th largest for which reliable gage measurements are available. Effects on the park's natural resources and infrastructure are not yet known, though experience from the October 2015 flood suggests that damage will be modest.

Clockwise from top right, the Gervais Street bridge from the West Columbia side; Bates Ferry trailhead with submerged kiosk; the iron bridge at the Kingsnake trailhead is completely submerged; a copperhead looks for higher ground; the start of the Cedar Creek paddling trail.



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President's Corner

Dr. John Grego

Membership coordinator

I would like to thank Mary Beth Jeffords, who will be stepping down after many years as membership coordinator over two different tenures.

Mary brought a background in database management to the position, and we greatly appreciate her efforts as a volunteer in a position that requires week-in, week-out attention to detail.

Mary has instructed Herb Lord in the intricacies of Access databases and you can look for Herb to handle membership renewals in the future. Herb will work with Mary Bull, who collects membership renewals and mails acknowledgements and membership gifts.

Smithsonian Water/Ways

We continue arrangements for the Smithsonian Water/Ways exhibit Nov. 14, 2020, to Jan. 14, 2021, at Congaree National Park's Harry Hampton Visitor Center.

With the park's Chief Interpretive Ranger Gregory Cunningham and Friends board member Kate Hartley, we are crafting major events to accompany the exhibit and to ensure that many of the park's events this year have a water focus related to the exhibit's themes.

Recently, through a grant with Smithsonian's Museum on Main Street project, we have been working with Lower Richland High School principal Dr. Ericka

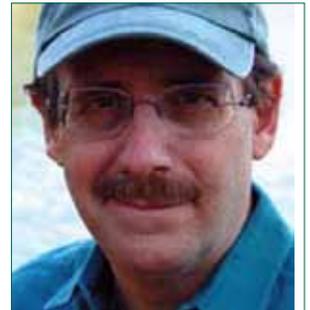
Hursey and teachers to organize student projects related to the exhibit's theme.

We have also arranged for Prof. David Stahle (University of Arkansas) to speak as part of a grand opening on Nov. 14. Prof. Stahle is best known for his work on the Ancient Bald Cypress Consortium, which has used tree-ring analysis to confirm the age of old-growth bald cypress in North Carolina's Black River, some of which are more than 2000 years old!

We will share events on social media and through the newsletter as plans develop.

Will Graf

We were saddened to learn of Prof. Will Graf's passing in December. Will researched river hydrology and morphology and studied environmental policy on public lands and waters.



Will Graf

He had a renowned reputation on the national and international stage, often serving on national panels studying the country's most sensitive watersheds, including the Klamath Basin, the Platte River, the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers and the Everglades.

After joining the University of South Carolina's Department of Geography in 2001, Will shared his expertise on behalf of Congaree National Park, most memorably during efforts in 2003 to redesignate Congaree Swamp National Monument as Congaree National Park and expand the park unit's boundary.

He was not well-known to the Friends of Congaree Swamp board at the time, and we were surprised and pleased by his cogent, thorough and eloquent Senate subcommittee testimony in support of the park's designation as a national park, an effort led by Sen. Ernest Hollings

His testimony supplemented testimony presented by LaBruce Alexander and Angela Viney presented on behalf of Friends of Congaree Swamp and South Carolina Wildlife Federation, and served as a counterweight to opposition testimony presented by the Lower Richland community.

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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

Christmas bird count nets 92 species

After last year's Christmas Bird Count was so strongly affected by flooding, we watched rising water levels with some trepidation this year.

All our floodplain parties were able to cover at least a portion of their routes this year, though modest flooding did impact an otherwise very successful count.

We were able to add a couple outstanding birders to our participants and we hope to see them back next year.

One of the floodplain parties had a close encounter with a panicked boar—we would share an account, but we have heard wildly different versions depending on who's telling the story.

Great Horned Owl were out in force during the morning—the most heard since 2012. Moon phases were nearly opposite for 2012 and 2019, so something else must be in play. As often happens, the early morning owling was rewarded by a beautiful display from the Geminid meteor shower.

The Congaree River Bluffs party, comprised of Cathy and Carl Miller, Matt Johnson and Dick Watkins added two new species to the count: Ash-throated Flycatcher and Peregrine Falcon! The Ash-throated Flycatcher is one of the very few records in South Carolina away from the coast. The falcon was observed hunting from the Congaree



Ash-throated Flycatcher

River Bluffs, a behavior occasionally seen during fall migration at Congaree Bluffs Heritage Preserve.

We ended the day with 92 species, with record counts for some of the more charismatic species: Orange-crowned Warbler, Great Horned Owl, White-eyed Vireo, Brown Thrasher, and Henslow's Sparrow.

We had near-record counts for several other species, including Barred Owl, Blue-headed Vireo, White-breasted Nuthatch, and Carolina Wren.

Looking at our individual species totals, we should be competitive nationwide on Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Pileated Woodpecker, Winter Wren and Barred Owl, though only Barred Owl is a possible competitor for highest count in the country.

Thanks to our volunteers Daniel Abrahams, Ron Ahle, Andy Brady, Mary Bull, John Cely, Blaney Coskrey, Brad Dalton, Bob Dellinger, Steve Dennis, Mary Desportes, Caroline Eastman, David Egleston, Hilda Flamholtz, Jon Flamholtz, Dennis Forsythe, Lex Glover, John Grego, Jerry Griggs, Mark Hopey, Matthew Johnson, Jon Manchester, Alex



Henslow's Sparrow

Marcotsis, George McCoy, Carl Miller, Cathy Miller, Ann Nolte, Graham Norman, Clay Parker, Irvin Pitts, Neal Polhemus, Don Robinson, Richard Sasnett, Dave Schuetrum, Alice Steinke, Julie Taylor, John Tjaarda, Patricia Voelker, Scott Warner, Dick Watkins, Cynthia Worthington.

Species

Pied-billed Grebe	4
Double-crested Cormorant	2
Anhinga	2
Great Blue Heron	6
Great Egret	1
Black Vulture	134
Turkey Vulture	116
Canada Goose	8
Wood Duck	118
Mallard	10
Hooded Merganser	12
Bald Eagle	1
Northern Harrier	2
Sharp-shinned Hawk	4
Cooper's Hawk	4
Red-shouldered Hawk	20
Red-tailed Hawk	17
American Kestrel	12
Peregrine Falcon	1
Wild Turkey	3
Virginia Rail	1
Killdeer	41
Wilson's Snipe	7
American Woodcock	2
Rock Pigeon	15
Mourning Dove	76
Common Ground Dove	1
Eastern Screech Owl	1
Barred Owl	46
Great Horned Owl	25
Belted Kingfisher	7
Red-headed Woodpecker	62
Red-bellied Woodpecker	140
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	89
Downy Woodpecker	79
Hairy Woodpecker	4
Northern Flicker	156
Pileated Woodpecker	90
Eastern Phoebe	74
Ash-throated Flycatcher	1
Loggerhead Shrike	8

See Birds, page 5

Westinghouse still poses serious concerns

Public comments on the reopened 2018 Environmental Assessment of Westinghouse's Nuclear Fuel Fabrication Facility have indicated serious concerns.

Friends of Congaree Swamp and other advocacy groups prepared comments for the draft assessment, conducted by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. A November 2019 article in The State newspaper also cited concerns by the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control.

The most important message we wanted to relay was to request that an Environmental Impact Statement be prepared rather than an Environmental Assessment, in part due to Westinghouse's poor record of notification and compliance and in part due to uncertainty arising from Westinghouse's February 2019 Consent Agreement with DHEC.

Given Westinghouse's long public record of problems, we also requested a license renewal for less than the preferred 40 years.

By the public hearing deadline, considerable testing as part of the Remedial Investigation under the Consent Agreement has been taking place at Westinghouse, but many of the most important test results are not yet available. Early results indicate more



The Westinghouse plant off Bluff Road with the Congaree River in the background

extensive contamination in floodplain water bodies than previously reported. Our comments focused on some of the most important ongoing investigations including:

- The uncertain scope of remediation of the East Lagoon (contaminated sediment has been detected above and below an aging liner that dates to the 1980s).
- The unknown source of contamination from radioactive isotope Technetium-99.
- The unknown sources of two CVOC (Chlorinated Volatile Organic Compounds) groundwater plumes.
- The possibility of CVOC, nitrate, fluoride and radionuclide groundwater contamination into the floodplain through yet-to-be-documented pathways.

These largely unresolved issues are strong arguments for an Environmental Impact Statement. With seven years till renewal, there is ample time

to conduct a more thorough environmental investigation. DHEC used similar arguments to request an extension of the assessment period so that a fuller accounting of environmental problems onsite could be made.

The draft environmental assessment rightly notes the history of incidents at Westinghouse, but de-emphasizes the troublesome handling of these incidents.

First, there is the context of the re-opened Environmental Assessment. Less than a month after issuing the draft Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact in June 2018, a leak at HF (Hydrofluoric Acid) Spiking Station #2 released uranyl nitrate and hydrofluoric acid into the soil, an incident that further raised concerns about Westinghouse's environmental and safety record.

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Concerns

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Westinghouse's initial response to the report of this incident also raised alarms. It planned to monitor any Contaminants of Potential Concern (COPC) migration using an existing monitoring well 190 feet away from the site. At typical rates of groundwater flow, contamination would not be detected for more than a year. Fortunately, DHEC requested a more aggressive sampling plan.

Leaks including radionuclides from a contaminated wastewater line in 2008 and 2011 were not reported at the time they occurred, and only came to light recently. The 2011 incident is particularly concerning because at the time Westinghouse was petitioning DHEC to decommission air sparging and soil vapor extraction groundwater remediation efforts onsite. Currently, Westinghouse proposes no soil remediation for the 2011 leak because it would be inconvenient to do so. In our opinion, remediation from this leak should be a pre-condition for a new permit.

Another incident from 2019 raises questions as well. During a May 2019 inspection, DHEC found numerous shipping containers containing storage barrels that had not been previously reported. Some of these intermodal containers were not well maintained, and contamination has been found on-site.

Further, these containers,

designed only for temporary storage, had been used for storage for up to 14 years.

Though this incident appears in the Environmental Assessment, Westinghouse's failure to disclose the site and existing contamination shows lack of attention to proper site management and disclosure. Further, the Environmental Assessment makes no mention of the accidental nature of the discovery of this problem.

In addition, DHEC only recently learned of a 1970s wastewater overflow that was cited as a possible source for some of the contamination onsite.

Unfortunately, the communications protocol recently prepared as part of the Consent Agreement leaves too many reporting decisions to Westinghouse's discretion. Given Westinghouse's history, we are not confident that future incidents will be disclosed in a timely manner. A shorter license renewal permit would provide an opportunity to ensure that Westinghouse has changed its reporting culture.

We included some shorter notes on national park designations, impacts on wildlife and endangered species.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission's initial response to DHEC's request for a four-month extension of the public comment period was negative. In the meantime, DHEC and advocacy organizations will carefully review upcoming reports of investigations under the Consent Agreement to bolster arguments for a more thorough environmental review.

Birds

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White-eyed Vireo 11
Blue-headed Vireo 31
Blue Jay 60
American Crow 190
Fish Crow 5
Carolina Chickadee 162
Tufted Titmouse 171
White-breasted Nuthatch 37
Brown-headed Nuthatch 30
Brown Creeper 9
Carolina Wren 238
House Wren 11
Winter Wren 57
Sedge Wren 1
Golden-crowned Kinglet 44
Ruby-crowned Kinglet 327
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher 3
Eastern Bluebird 72
Hermit Thrush 114
American Robin 633
Gray Catbird 4
Northern Mockingbird 47
Brown Thrasher 28
American Pipit 15
Cedar Waxwing 101
Orange-crowned Warbler 11
Yellow-rumped Warbler 82
Pine Warbler 148
Palm Warbler 4
Black-and-white Warbler 12
Common Yellowthroat 4
Eastern Towhee 114
Chipping Sparrow 357
Field Sparrow 29
Henslow's Sparrow 3
Savannah Sparrow 65
Fox Sparrow 15
Song Sparrow 212
Lincoln's Sparrow 1
Swamp Sparrow 55
White-throated Sparrow 275
Dark-eyed Junco 8
Northern Cardinal 334
Red-winged Blackbird 15439
Eastern Meadowlark 47
Rusty Blackbird 76
Common Grackle 7072
Brown-headed Cowbird 98
House Finch 18
American Goldfinch 119
House Sparrow 1
Total Count 27285

Save the date

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provide gear if you need it.

Please contact John Grego at friendsofcongareeswamp@gmail.com or (803) 331-3366 if interested.

Sugarberry Hike

Join us **Sunday, March 8**, for a hike to visit the state champion Sugarberry tree.

The Sugarberry is located a short distance off the Weston Lake Loop Trail, though access can be difficult since a water crossing needs to be negotiated in order to reach it.

The tree is one of a handful of the park's champion trees that is truly exceptional for its kind. At almost 14 feet around and more than 120 feet tall, it is simply much larger than any other Sugarberry that has been documented at Congaree National Park. Since losing a large limb a few years ago, the tree has been in decline and likely will not live long. Even though it is difficult to visit, it is fitting to make the attempt.

We will plan our trip at a most appropriate time of year. The early spring foliage of Sugarberry trees is the most beautiful in the park, and the color will be at its peak when we visit. In addition to the champion Sugarberry, we will visit some nearby large hardwoods and make an

optional trip to another large Sugarberry off Sims Trail.

Meet at the Visitor Center at 9:30 a.m. The hike should last until about noon.

Come prepared for a water crossing. A large stable log crosses much of the gut, but a small stretch of knee-deep water



Champion Sugarberry

will have to be negotiated. We will do everything in our power to assist with a dry crossing. The hike is only two or three miles on good terrain; dress appropriately for the weather and bring water and a snack.

RSVP to John Grego at friendsofcongareeswamp@gmail.com or (803) 331-3366.

Running Creek Paddle

A repeat of John Cely's paddle to the east end of Congaree National Park will be held **Saturday, April 4**.

John organized the first paddle last spring to introduce Friends members to enhanced recreational opportunities

with the park's series of property acquisitions centered around U.S. 601 since 2005.

The paddle will travel along Running Creek to Big Lake and Little Lake, passing interesting open wetlands along the way. We will pass water tupelo and ancient bald cypress, many spared from cutting because they were hollow or otherwise damaged.

Other highlights include a wading bird rookery, views of brown water snakes sunning on tree limbs and prothonotary warblers, newly arrived from the tropics.

Bring your own canoe or kayak. We will launch from the primitive landing on the east side of Bates Old River. To get there from Bluff Road, turn south on U.S. 601 and look for the entrance to the launch site 1.16 miles south of the railroad track at Wateree. Look for a pull-off on the left (east) side of 601 and take the dirt road leading to Bates Old River. For those driving north, the pull-off to the landing is about a third of a mile on the right as you cross Bates Old River on your right.

Regardless of which direction you come from, make sure that you use your turn signal well in advance of the turn to alert trailing traffic.

This is about a five-mile round-trip paddle. We would like to get under way by 9 or 9:15 a.m., so come a little early to get launched

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and have your gear ready.

Leave your coolers and lunch behind, but bring a snack and a beverage for the paddle.

A change of clothes in a well-sealed garbage bag is recommended. The launch site may be a little muddy, so rubber boots or old tennis shoes may be in order.

This trip is limited to 12 canoes/kayaks with Friends members getting preference. Contact John Cely at cowasee@gmail.com or (803) 782-7450 to sign up.

Dawn Chorus Walk

This year's Robin Carter Dawn Chorus Walk will be held **Sunday, May 3.**

Robin, who passed away in 2008, started the dawn chorus event at Congaree National Park in 2005. It was one of many birding events he originated at the park and that we work to maintain through the present day.

To celebrate Robin's legacy, the event is held on International Dawn Chorus Day.

We will meet at the Visitor Center at 5:30 a.m. This will provide an opportunity to listen for the pre-dawn sounds of owls, nightjars, and migrating thrushes before the dawn chorus starts in earnest.

Bird song experts will be on hand to help you identify what you hear, or you can just listen and take in the experience.

Senior days at the park

Calling all seniors! If you are 60 or over and looking for a great way to get out and enjoy your National Park, then join us on Monday, March 2, 16, and 30 for a program designed just for you!

March 2: Trees of Congaree. Join park volunteer naturalists for a program all about some of the most senior residents of Congaree National Park—the trees! Take part in a guided program that looks at the champion trees of the old-growth bottomland forest at Congaree and learn how to identify some of our most common species, along with learning about how these iconic trees have adapted to their ever changing surroundings and survived loggers, floods, hurricanes, and more.

March 16: Birds of Congaree. Join park volunteer naturalists for a program that's for the birds! Take part in a guided program that will explore the avian wildlife that calls Congaree National Park home, either for a season or year-round. Participants will

learn about why Congaree is such an important place for birds, as well as see and learn how to identify some of the more than 200 bird species that have been seen at the park.

March 30: History of Congaree. Join park volunteers for a guided program that will delve deep into the human history of the Congaree floodplain. Learn about the cultural past of this landscape and how humans have helped to shape it into what it is today—from ancient Native Americans to the dedicated conservationists who fought to preserve this unique landscape for future generations to enjoy

Programs will start at the Harry Hampton Visitor Center at 9:30 a.m. Participants should wear comfortable walking shoes and weather-appropriate outerwear. Bring water and a snack. Those with mobility issues should ask program leaders about parking for boardwalk access.

For more information, call (803) 776-4396.

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 Dawn Chorus 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 should include shrimp and creamy grits, scones, biscuits, a breakfast strata, fresh fruit, juice and coffee.

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



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Join Friends of Congaree Swamp today!

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!

Friends of Congaree Swamp, P.O. Box 7746, Columbia, SC 29202-7746
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