



Friends of Congaree Swamp News

Save the date

Congaree Big Tree Hike

Meet at the Visitor's Center breezeway on at 1 p.m. on **Sunday, Dec. 4**, for a three-hour, five-mile hike to see a snapshot of the "Forest of Champions."

The hike will feature the national champion loblolly pine, a former national champion overcup oak, big sweetgums, large cherrybark oaks, and other hardwoods.

The route will be mostly on the Weston Lake Loop but with some off-trail walking. Hiking boots/shoes are recommended along with water and a light snack if desired.

To sign up, contact John Cely at (803) 782-7450 or cowasee@gmail.com.

Christmas Bird Count

This year's Congaree Swamp Christmas Bird

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One man's contributions to saving the swamp

Editor's note: This is the first of two articles about John V. Dennis and his contributions to the establishment of Congaree National Park. Look for the second in our Winter 2023 newsletter.

By Neal Polhemus

As the 50th anniversary of the founding of Congaree National Park approaches, we are afforded opportunities to recognize and commemorate conservation milestones and outstanding individuals who contributed to this monumental achievement.

The establishment of Congaree Swamp National Monument in October 1976 was not foreordained or miraculous or dumb luck. Rather, it resulted from the unyielding commitment and sacrifice of a group of citizens who believed that the value of preserving the hardwood floodplain forest ecosystem as a whole was more valuable than the forester's capital appraisal.

This past month marked the 50th anniversary of an important scientific article, "Big Trees of the Congaree Swamp" by John V. Dennis published in *National Parks & Conservation Magazine*. I have been tasked with providing the historical background of Dennis' article and his contributions to the movement.



Dennis beside an old-growth bald cypress at Heron Lake in the Cache River bottomlands, southern Illinois. (Photo courtesy of Gary Williamson)

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President's Corner

Dr. John Grego

Running Creek

In September, a Friends member learned of planned improvements by Norfolk Southern Corporation to its railroad trestle that runs through the park from the Congaree River to Kingville. The railroad was the eastern boundary of the park from its expansion in 1988 until the 2003 expansion to the Wateree River. Norfolk Southern owns 100 feet of land on either side of the railroad track's centerline. It maintains service roads on either side of the trestle, including culverts across guts and sloughs, until the service roads end at Running Creek, which runs along the floodplain's northern edge.

Some discussions of the repair suggested improvements to the service road that caused grave concern, and we immediately prepared Freedom of Information Act requests for permits from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control for more information.

When the Corps responded by providing information from the 2011 Norfolk Southern railroad bridge improvements over the Congaree River, we suspected they must be unaware of the railroad's new project. The park learned of the project at the same time we did and took steps to learn more as well. Nonetheless, we were shocked at the failure to notify either the park or regulatory agencies beforehand.

In the interim, Friends members made a couple visits to the site. An early trip on foot from the south side of the project suggested only modest regrading of the roads and normal staging for repairs to the trestles. However, when a couple members paddled down Running Creek to the site a week later, they found that a causeway had been constructed across Running Creek so that water was no more than shin-deep the length of the causeway, thus blocking a navigable waterway.

At this point, we contacted the Corps directly, and they indicated we needed to file a wetlands violation report. As part of the filing, we included contact information for accessing the remote site, and later learned that the Corps reached out to the park and visited the site along with park staff.

After filing the wetlands report, we contacted Southern Environmental Law Center. They counseled that independent action by Friends of Congaree Swamp may be needed, provided the Corps did not respond in a timely fashion. Given the Corps' quick response, independent action by Friends was unnecessary for the time being, though we did coordinate a site visit with Southern Environmental Law Center to inspect the site and learn the lay of the land.

Typically when a construction project of this scope takes place in navigable waters, a couple different permits would be needed—a Nationwide Permit from the Corps or a Construction in Navigable Waters Permit (Regulation 19-450) from DHEC. The latter is superseded if an application for a nationwide permit has been made to the Corps.

In this case, the project would be governed by Nationwide Permit 14, which addresses linear transportation projects. We studied the permit and shared notes with Southern Environmental Law Center.

The Corps continues its investigation and we report any changes we see at the site. Recently, we observed widespread flooding downstream from the site, likely due to the causeway's diversion of Running Creek to other waterways, and shared those observations with the Corps.

At this point, we assume the causeway is

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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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2023 Annual Meeting

Friends of Congaree Swamp will hold its annual oyster roast and business meeting Sunday, March 12, 2023, at Belle Grove off Bluff Road near Columbia.

Registration will begin at 2 p.m., followed by nature and cultural history tours on the 800-acre property.

Following the 5 p.m. business meeting, supper will feature roasted oysters along with the usual feast of chili, vegetarian selections, and desserts prepared by Friends board members. Beer, wine and non-alcoholic beverages will be available.



Belle Grove polo stables

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Count will be held **Sunday, Dec. 18**, beginning at 7 a.m.

A CBC is an all-day effort to find and identify as many wild birds as possible within a 15-mile diameter circle.

The Congaree Swamp CBC, founded by Robin Carter in 1993, includes almost all the national park and adjacent areas, from Gadsden and Wateree in Richland County to Fort Motte and St. Matthews in Calhoun County.

Christmas bird counts, conducted nationally each year since 1900, are the oldest citizen-science project in the country. This effort, which now includes more than 2,600 circles and more than 80,000 participants annually, is sponsored by the National Audubon Society.

The Congaree Swamp CBC often has among the highest counts in the country of Pileated Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Yellow-bellied

Sapsucker, Barred Owl, Blue-headed Vireo and others.

Join us for part of the day or all day. If you are a novice, an expert birder will lead you around the boardwalk in the morning.

The boardwalk hosts some of the park's best sites for interesting wintering species and permanent residents, including Winter Wren, Blue-headed Vireo, White-breasted Nuthatch, Brown Creeper, Red-headed Woodpecker, and Rusty Blackbird.

Experienced birders can participate in one of our many parties spread throughout the circle. Those parties assigned to the main trail system will meet at the Visitor Center parking lot at 7 a.m. for this event.

MLK Day of Service

As part of Martin Luther King Day of Service, Friends of Congaree Swamp members will meet **Monday, Jan. 16**, at 9:30 a.m. at Bates Bridge landing on U.S. 601, to collect trash at the Congaree River boat ramp,

parking lot and access road.

Depending on attendance, some of us may drive to Bates Old River landing, Bates Ferry trailhead, Fork Swamp trailhead and Congaree Ferries pullout to clean those sites as well.

Keep the Midlands Beautiful will provide trash pickers, trash bags, gloves, etc. to assist with the clean-up and we will use the dumpster on site to dispose of non-recyclables.

Light hiking boots, water, sun protection and a snack are recommended. We should be finished about 11 a.m.

Still Hike

Back in the days during and after Prohibition, Congaree Swamp was an ideal place for illegal moonshine stills. On **Saturday, Jan. 28**, Friends of Congaree Swamp members will have an opportunity to explore some of the numerous still sites within the park.

After our successful 21st Amendment hike in 2021, commemorating the repeal of

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Dennis

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A native of Maryland, Dennis studied political science at the University of Wisconsin, received a master's degree in botany from the University of Florida and studied ornithology at the University of Illinois.

In 1948, Dennis published an article in *The Auk* that provided photographic documentation of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker in the remote mountains of Eastern Cuba. That Dennis spent time in the mid-1960s studying the flora and fauna of the Beidler Tract in South Carolina is not at all surprising.

With Harry Hampton's retirement from *The State* in 1965, the longtime bullhorn advocating for preserving the swamp fell silent for the thousands of readers of the newspaper. Soon thereafter, from January-May 1966, with support from the Charleston Museum and the *News and Courier*, Dennis spent a total of two months in the field investigating the botanical wonders of the Congaree Swamp.

Hampton provided access to the swamp and the hunt club's facilities along with considerable supplies, transportation, and guidance which made it "possible for [Dennis] to operate in the swamp as well" as he did. In a leaflet titled, "Woody Plants of the Congaree Forest Swamp, South Carolina," Dennis made plain the objective of his investigation: "the preservation of the swamp in its near semi-

virgin state."

Although Dennis did not include the Ivory-billed Woodpecker among the 118 species recorded in the swamp, he believed the most likely home for the bird was in the "most inaccessible and least visited...remote eastern corner" of the Beidler Tract where "much virgin cypress" remained standing.

Dennis' 'Woody Plants,' published by the Nature Conservancy in July 1967, was a significant intervention in the body of literature promoting the preservation of the swamp.

More than three years had passed since the National Park Service published its Special Area Report that characterized the Beidler Tract as a "biological community of rare quality and considerable scientific value" and recommended the establishment of a national monument.

However, because of "land acquisition problems and lack of wide popular support," the park service did not take action to protect the "unique character of the swamp, its big trees, varied flora, and rare plant and animal species."

Consequently, Dennis provided a comprehensive science-based inventory further documenting the swamp as a "unique entity" at a moment

when there was a lull in conservation momentum.

As local leaders later attested, it was Dennis who coined the term "Redwoods East" to describe the giant hardwoods and towering pines of the Beidler Tract. The term was a powerful rhetorical refrain in the preservation movement that stirred up pride and a sense of



From left, Gary Williamson and John V. Dennis in 1985 on Billy's Lake in the Okefenokee Swamp collecting material for Dennis' book "The Great Cypress Swamps." (Photo courtesy of Gary Williamson.)

duty for many local citizens of the state's natural resources.

It was in 'Woody Plants' that Dennis provided the first comparative analysis of the swamp's big trees to those of the California redwoods. "Nowhere else in the East is there such a large example of virgin or semi-virgin bottomland swamp. For the size of trees and general unspoiled nature," Dennis observed, "there is little short of the redwoods in California for comparison."

After 'Woody Plants' was published, Dennis continued to devote his efforts to preserving the Beidler Tract. If the Ivory-billed Woodpecker could be

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Dennis

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categorically documented in South Carolina, cause for preserving the forest would be irrefutable.

In September 1967, Dennis attended the National Convention of The Audubon Society in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Dennis' presentation highlighted recent sightings of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker in East Texas and ongoing surveys for the ghost bird in South Carolina on "18,000 acres of virgin forest."

One of the slides in Dennis' presentation included a photo of Hampton "navigating" his boat on Cedar Creek. Surely Dennis' half-hour lecture about his efforts to document the ghost bird impressed

Department of the Interior Secretary Stewart Udall, who spoke after him. That Dennis crisscrossed the continent in search of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker and conversed with federal officials on the importance of protecting its threatened habitats during the multi-decade campaign to protect the forest should not be forgotten.

In 1972, Dennis published "Big Trees of the Congaree Swamp." As a result, Dennis' Big Trees article provided an opportunity for local leaders of the Sierra Club—Jim Elder and Dick Watkins—to bring their cause to attention of the public, a hurdle they had struggled to overcome.

With several copies of Dennis' article and the park service's Special Area Report in

hand, Elder and Watkins met with a reporter for *The State* to make their case. They explained the importance of local stories to further bolster national publications on the Congaree Swamp.

Despite the credibility Dennis' article provided on the biological significance of the forest, the newspaper declined to run a story. It was not the last time they would be turned away but, without Dennis' article Elder, Watkins and others would not have had any ready ammunition in their uphill battle to protect the Beidler Tract.

As Elder concluded in the years after the monument was established, Dennis was the right person and the right time, for which there was not a "better candidate for the job."

Grego

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temporary. Nonetheless, we need to ensure that it is properly permitted and that steps are taken to fully remove the causeway and restore Running Creek when the project is complete.

The Corps has maintained open communications with us, and we will consider further action pending any Corps enforcement action.

Cedar Creek update

Since our report on the alarming and disruptive drop in Cedar Creek water levels in June, we are no closer to understanding the underlying cause. Southern Environmental

Law Center contacted us after our newsletter was distributed because of their statewide interest in surface water use.

We then arranged a site visit to better understand the use of water by the park's upstream neighbors. During the site visit, it was generally agreed that the abrupt drop in flow was caused by management of water control structures rather than direct surface water withdrawals, but there are so many reservoirs upstream that it would be hard to identify the specific source of the decreased flow we observed in June.

Further, if water was held behind a dam, it would be helpful to know the cause—

perhaps it was related to increased demands upstream or perhaps to reservoir maintenance.

We drew some consolation in the apparent one-time nature of the June event, though unfortunately a similar event occurred October 18-19. This event did not have the obvious impact of the June event, since water levels, while dropping abruptly from 3 feet to 2 feet, still supported recreational paddling, albeit marginally.

We plan to reach out to some of the park's neighbors to discuss possible remedies to ensure a sufficient flow to maintain water quality and provide recreational paddling in the park.

Researcher to study Asian needle ants

The Friends of Congaree Swamp board recently approved a \$2500 research grant application submitted by Clemson graduate student Drew Kanen to study the invasive Asian needle ant at Congaree National Park.

Drew is a master's student in biological sciences. Board members were unaware of the presence of Asian needle ants in the park, but Drew has already detected their presence in pilot studies.

The ants colonize rotting logs on the forest floor, and hence share a preferred habitat with a familiar species at the park—marbled salamander.

Drew plans to study the

extent of the ants' presence, their habitat preferences and whether they are displacing marbled salamanders as they compete for resources.

As John Cely noted in his comments on the proposal, the ecology of fallen logs is one of the most understudied environments in the park, and the board was

eager to support this research.

Drew's study will examine habitat preferences of the two species on a larger spatial scale based on vegetation community, elevation, and flood frequency. Suitable fallen logs found to already host either salamanders



Asian needle ants



Marbled salamander

or ants will be studied using data-logging soil sensors that will record long-term microclimate conditions.

Differences and similarities in macroclimate and microclimate preferences among the two species will be used to study possible impacts on the salamanders.

Friends of Congaree Swamp will provide funding for 100 microclimate soil sensors as well as three handheld microclimate loggers used in the selection of study sites. Upon completion of the study, the equipment should be available for other park researchers.

Drew indicates that there may be an upcoming opportunity for citizen scientists to get involved in the identification of logs currently colonized by either marbled salamanders or Asian needle ants across a selection of varying park habitats.

Upon completion of his research, we will ask Drew to prepare a newsletter article to share with Friends members.



We took advantage of low water conditions in mid fall to organize a big tree hike on short notice in the eastern end of the park. More than 25 Friends members met at the Bates Ferry trail head for a four-mile route that took us past five bald cypresses over 27 feet in circumference. Participants pictured with a bald cypress over 28 feet in circumference near Running Creek.

Superintendent reception

Friends members held a welcome drop-in for Gregory Hauburger, the park's new superintendent, and his senior staff in October. From left are Stephen Akins, acting superintendent; Hauburger; Katherine Hartley; David Shelley, resource stewardship and science; John Cely; Neal Polhemus; Dick Watkins, Michael Dantzler; and Charles Aznive, maintenance.



Litter pick-up

Friends members gathered to collect litter at our Adopt-a-Stream site at Bates Bridge Landing on National Public Lands Day. Some of our members drove to the Bates Old River landing to collect litter there as well. From left are Clay Parker, Ed Ingram, Bob McGinness, Will Prioleau, Gwen Geidel, Steve Dennis, Robb Schmitt (in background), Bailey Slice Parker, John Hart, Michelle Wilcox and Josette Wilcox.

Save the date

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Prohibition, next year's hike will take us to some new sites as well as a couple accessible sites from our 2021 hike.

Meet at the Longleaf Campground parking lot at 9 a.m. Most of the hike will be on uplands with short excursions along the muck swamp, depending on water levels at the

park. Be prepared for muddy conditions in spots; waterproof ankle-high hiking boots are recommended.

This is a short hike, mostly on trail or along park roads. We will take care not to touch artifacts, or otherwise disturb the sites.

This outing is solely for members of Friends of Congaree Swamp and will be limited to 25 participants.

If you are interested in learning more about the history of moonshining in the swamp intertwined with tales of Jim Crow justice, pick up a copy of *Tales of Congaree*, available from the Visitor Center book store.

To sign up for all but the big tree hike, contact John Grego at (803) 331-3366 or friendsofcongareeswamp@gmail.com.



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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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