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Travel 

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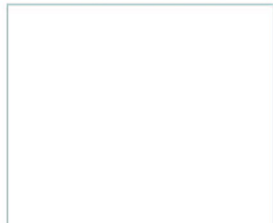


reprint

Swamp explorations

Like

South Carolina's wetlands offer ancient trees, canoe trails, and glimpses of wildlife



GOING TO SOUTH CAROLINA

Getting there: A number of airlines serve Columbia but none has direct flights from Miami or Fort Lauderdale. Connecting flights take from 3 1/2 to six hours. Roundtrip airfare starts around \$370 from Fort Lauderdale, \$390 from Miami. For those flying to Charleston, American Airlines has two nonstops a day from Miami, a flight of an hour and 40 minutes. US Airways, Delta and Southwest also have connecting flights from Miami or Fort Lauderdale that will make the trip in 4 to 5 1/2 hours with one stopover. Airfare starts at \$325 from Fort Lauderdale, \$375 from Miami.

When to go: Winter, early spring or late fall. Fewer bugs and less humidity in the cooler months, expect daytime temperatures in the 60s and 90s in warmer months.

Information: www.bedierforest.com.

WHERE TO STAY

Chesnut Cottage Bed and Breakfast, 1710 Hampton St., Columbia, 803-765-1730, www.chesnutcottage.com.

Hotel by Mary Boyd, the 1991 President's rooms will

Hilton Columbia Center, 924 Senate St., Columbia, 803-744-7800, www.hiltoncolumbia.com. Located in the Vista

BY JACK HORAN
SPECIAL TO THE MIAMI HERALD

HOPKINS, S.C. -- At Congaree National Park, everything is super-sized -- trees, log jams, snakes, even the volume of bird calls. That became obvious years ago during an overnight canoe excursion along Cedar Creek deep in the park's swampy interior.

Congaree park contains some of the largest and oldest trees in the country, massive bald cypresses, swamp tupelos, loblolly pines and other towering giants that have never been cut. Huge cypresses, some centuries old, lined the creek and beyond along with gnome-like cypress knees, some three and four feet high.

Every 500 feet or so it seemed, deadfalls toppled by storms forced our canoe caravan of 25 paddlers to a stop. One by one, we clambered onto the log jams and balanced ourselves while grabbing the gunnels of our provision-laden canoes and heaved them over the logs. As we paddled the open water, non-venomous brown water snakes as big around as a man's forearm slumbered on limbs hanging over the water, refusing to give up an inch of their territory to the intruders.

After dark, at our creek-side encampment, a barred owl perched on a limb directly over our tent and blasted away with bullhorn-loud hoots, keeping my wife awake much of the night. That's her account. I slept through all the hoots. The

Hilton Columbia Center, 924 Senate St., Columbia, 803-744-7800; www.hiltoncolumbia.com. Located in the Vista

WHO COOKS FOR YOU? AWWW.

Over the years, I've made six trips to Congaree

historic area next to the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center. Rates from \$199.

Over the years, it's made an trip to Congaree National Park, 20 miles south of downtown

historic area next to the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center. Rates from \$199.

Congaree National Park (25 miles from Francis Beidler Forest).
www.congaroonc.com. Rates from \$59 a night.

WHERE TO EAT

Blue Marlin, 1200 Lincoln St., Columbia, in the Congaree Vista District; 803-799-3838; www.bluemarlincolumbia.com. Specializing in seafood dishes with a Lowcountry accent; entrees \$15.75-\$24.95.

Doc's Barbeque and Southern Buffet, 1601 Shop Rd., Columbia, near the University of South Carolina stadium; 803-799-1532; barbecue sandwich baskets, \$5.35; plates, \$6.99; lunch buffet, \$9.12; dinner buffet, \$10.09.

Villa Tronco, 1213 Blanding St., Columbia, near the Capitol; 803-256-7677; www.villatronco.com. Italian cuisine includes pasta, seafood and chicken entrees in the \$13-\$25 range.

OTHER NATURE-RELATED PLACES

Riverbanks Zoo and Garden in Columbia displays lions, elephants, giraffes, kangaroos, Galapagos tortoises and lemurs as well as several botanical gardens. 800-779-8717.

The ACE Basin near Walterboro covers 350,000 acres of private and public conservation lands. Thousands of migratory birds winter in the basin, named for the Ashepoo, Combahee and Edisto rivers. www.acebasin.net.

Cypress Gardens, Moncks Corner. This privately operated attraction includes a cypress swamp, butterfly house, aquarium, reptile center, 4.5 miles of walking trails and a gift shop. 863-324-2111

until 2003, when Congress upgraded it to a full-fledged national park and dropped the word "swamp" from its name. It's not a true swamp but a floodplain forest with 11,000 acres of old-growth bottomland hardwood forest, the largest remnant left in the U.S.

Congaree is one of two large wetlands in South Carolina notable for their ancient forests, where visitors can view wildlife, take canoe trips and go on guided walks.

The other is National Audubon Society's Francis Beidler Forest at Four Holes Swamp, which protects the largest remaining virgin cypress-tupelo swamp, some 75 miles to the south of Congaree.

Both were once owned by Chicago timber magnate Francis Beidler, who bought thousand of acres in South Carolina in the 1890s.

CONGAREE

While Yellowstone showcases geysers and Yosemite its glacier-sculpted mountains, Congaree exalts its skyscraper trees. The 120- to 130-foot-high canopy is one of the tallest temperate-zone hardwood forests in the world. When it is leafed out, the canopy creates a perpetual twilight below.

A loblolly pine stands 169 feet, the height of a 13-story building. The park claims six trees that are the biggest of their kind in the country plus 19 others that are the biggest of their kind in the state. A sweetgum rises 159 feet; a cherrybark oak, 156 feet; a water hickory, 146 feet. The national champ Shumard oak reigned here until Hurricane Hugo in 1989 blew it down. The girth of the largest bald cypress stretches the tape at 27 feet, 5 inches.

How do these trees get so big? The Congaree River floods much of the park 10-12 times a year, depositing nutrients from its sources in Upstate South Carolina and North Carolina. A two-foot rise in the river can send flood waters a mile or two back into the park.

Congaree sounds like a mucky place, and it is, with water standing in sloughs, or "guts" as they are called, much of the year. No need to soil your shoes while exploring the park. Visitors can follow a boardwalk that runs for 2.4 miles from the Harry Hampton Visitor Center. The boardwalk passes by Weston Lake, an oxbow left 2,800 years ago when the serpentine Congaree River changed its course.

From the boardwalk, visitors can ponder big trees, glimpse wildlife and take trails to oxbow lakes for fishing or on overnight hikes and backcountry camping. The 34.4 miles of trails — flat, often muddy and sometimes brushy — lead to the river, to Cedar Creek and into the park's interior.

On a Sunday in February, during my sixth visit, visitors strolled the boardwalk, fished Wise Lake and took a guided canoe trip on Cedar Creek (unlike my earlier visit, the park now regularly clears a channel through the deadfalls). No foul odors arise here; in spring, Congaree exudes a delicate fragrance.

Wildlife prospers in the park. One of the favorite ranger-led trips is the "Owl Prowl" in which visitors try to engage owls in long-distance hoot-outs. Beside the ubiquitous barred owl, the park holds otters, deer, bobcats, feral hogs and woodpeckers. The park once likely was the haunt of the ivory-billed woodpecker, thought to be extinct until claimed sightings in Arkansas in 2004 that are disputed. A federally sponsored search of Congaree four years ago turned up no trace of the bird.

Some 140,000-150,000 people visit Congaree annually (admission is free), with visitation peaking in March-April and September-November, said Park Supt. Tracy Swartout. "You're seeing a time of significant change in the park" in those months, she said. "The canopy opens and closes. The park is exceedingly dynamic."

BEIDLER FOREST

Beidler Forest in Four Holes Swamp lies off Interstate 26 near the town of Harleyville, about 40 miles northwest of Charleston. Admission is \$8 for adults, the forest is closed on Mondays.

Beidler died in 1924. In 1969, Audubon and The Nature Conservancy acquired 1,800 acres of virgin cypress-tupelo forest from the Beidler family. Since then, Audubon has added buffer lands to increase the forest's size to 16,000 acres.

Like Congaree, Beidler Forest can be seen via boardwalk. The 1.75-mile-long boardwalk begins at the visitor center, which displays two live caged snakes, a red rat snake named "Checkers" and a greenish rat snake named "Jake," both common inhabitants of the swamp.

Step onto the boardwalk and into an ancient forest, with many trees approaching senescence. During a February visit, my fourth, leafless swamp tupeloes, water elms and sweetgums wore moss-and-lichen coats. Dwarf palmettos provided green relief among brown rotting logs. Tea-colored water moved along the forest floor. Scaled pieces of bark, the work of woodpeckers, littered parts of the boardwalk.

The boardwalk rail passes within inches of several stocky bald cypresses, close enough to hug the fluted buttresses. The thickest cypress sports a 10-foot-diameter trunk, obese even by tree standards. The oldest known tree is an uber-elderly 1,500-year-old cypress. When it was a sapling, the Roman Empire had just fallen.

Beidler Forest's trademark creature is the prothonotary warbler, a small, bright yellow bird that nests in the swamp and can be identified, if not seen, by its musical "sweet-sweet-sweet" call. It's also the home of numerous bats, particularly those that roost in decaying trees, of which Beidler Forest has an abundance.

As a conservation preserve, Audubon doesn't allow off-boardwalk hiking or camping. It does offer guided canoe trips and night walks by reservation.

Fourteen years ago I joined a bat-research expedition at Beidler. Six of us, researchers and journalists, piled into canoes on a hot July evening. At the launch, a swarm of mosquitoes attacked us as we began our paddle. A half-mile into the swamp, researchers strung a fine mesh net across a stream channel. We clicked off our headlamps and waited. Nine o'clock. Ten o'clock. No bats. Eleven o'clock. A thunderstorm.

Then, success. The net snared four bats. Plucked free, the bats glowered at their captors and bared their tiny teeth. The researchers inspected and measured the furry fliers, then let them flutter away, watched by alligators with red eyes like glowing coals.

As we waited in our canoes almost no mosquitoes pestered us. Then I realized why. Bats eat them. Beidler Forest provides hollow trees for bats to nest in and bats in turn keep the mosquito population under control. Now that's my kind of swamp.

Jack Horan of Charlotte, N.C., is co-author of "Paddling South Carolina/A Guide to Palmetto State River Trails."

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