

Congaree

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Park
South Carolina



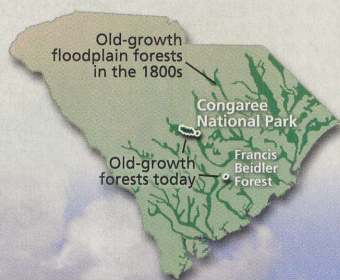
A Last Stand for Floodplain Forests

Along the meandering Congaree and Wateree rivers rests Congaree National Park, a world of primeval forest, champion trees, diverse plant and animal life, and tranquility. This park protects over 26,000 acres of old-growth bottomland hardwood forest, the largest such area left in the United States. Congaree's bottomland forest is a wetland system of the Congaree and Wateree rivers. Because the park experiences wet and dry periods as the rivers flood and recede with seasonal rains, the vitality of the park's forest ecosystem depends on the good health of the rivers.

Until the late 1800s huge expanses of floodplain forests enriched the southeastern United States—with over one million acres in South Carolina alone (see map below). In the 1880s the lumber industry began harvesting these forests. Many remnants that survived the ax and plow were drowned by reservoirs. In less than 50 years most of these great bottomland forests were destroyed.

Congaree's trees escaped large-scale cutting because logging was especially hard here. Francis Beidler, whose lumber company owned bottomland forests in South Carolina, decided to leave the Congaree forest alone. Logging along the Congaree River ceased in 1914. In the 1950s conservationist Harry Hampton recognized the Congaree forest was one of the few remaining ecosystems of its kind and began efforts to protect it. Two decades later, when logging again threatened the area's giant trees, a public campaign led to establishing Congaree Swamp National Monument in 1976. In the following decades, the park was expanded and thousands of acres were designated as wilderness. In 2003 it became Congaree National Park. Today the park is a sanctuary for plants and animals, a research site for scientists, and a peaceful place for you to explore a forest of towering trees and diverse wildlife.

Question mark
butterfly



Barred owl



Amanita



River otters



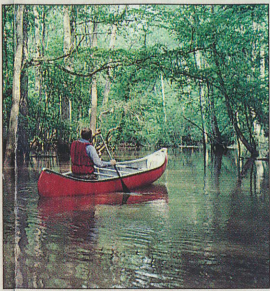
Stop at the Harry Hampton Visitor Center for information and program schedule, exhibits, a park film, and a bookstore. The visitor center is open daily year-round, except Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1.

If you are planning an overnight trip in the park, stop by the visitor center to obtain camping regulations, safety information, maps, and a free camping permit. Permits are granted for up to two weeks; the limit is 28 days in any six-month period. If you will be camping in

the backcountry, bring a stove for cooking because fires are prohibited. If you are in the campground, you must use existing fire rings.

You may experience the park's natural wonders on land or water. The boardwalk loop provides wheelchair and stroller access to Weston Lake and foot access to other trails that wind through the floodplain. Colored blazes (markers) make the trails easy to follow. Free ranger-guided nature walks and canoe tours are available.

A marked canoe trail invites you to explore Cedar Creek in your own canoe or kayak. You can also rent canoes and other gear from a variety of outfitters in the Columbia, SC area. Before embarking on any boat trip in the park, be sure to check water levels online or by contacting park staff.



© TIM THOMPSON

Safety and Regulations

- Pets must be leashed; they are allowed on all trails except boardwalk.
- Be alert for poison ivy, stinging insects, snakes, and mosquitoes.
- Anglers must have a South Carolina fishing license. Minnows and fish eggs are prohibited as bait. Fishing is not allowed in Weston Lake.
- Bicycles and motor vehicles are not permitted on trails.
- Littering, digging bait, picking plants, and disturbing wildlife are not permitted.
- For firearms regulations, check the park website.
- Emergencies: call 911.

Accessibility

We strive to make our facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. Call or check our website.

Getting to the Park

Congaree National Park is southeast of Columbia, SC. From I-77 take exit 5 onto SC 48 (Bluff Road). Follow the signs to the park.

More Information

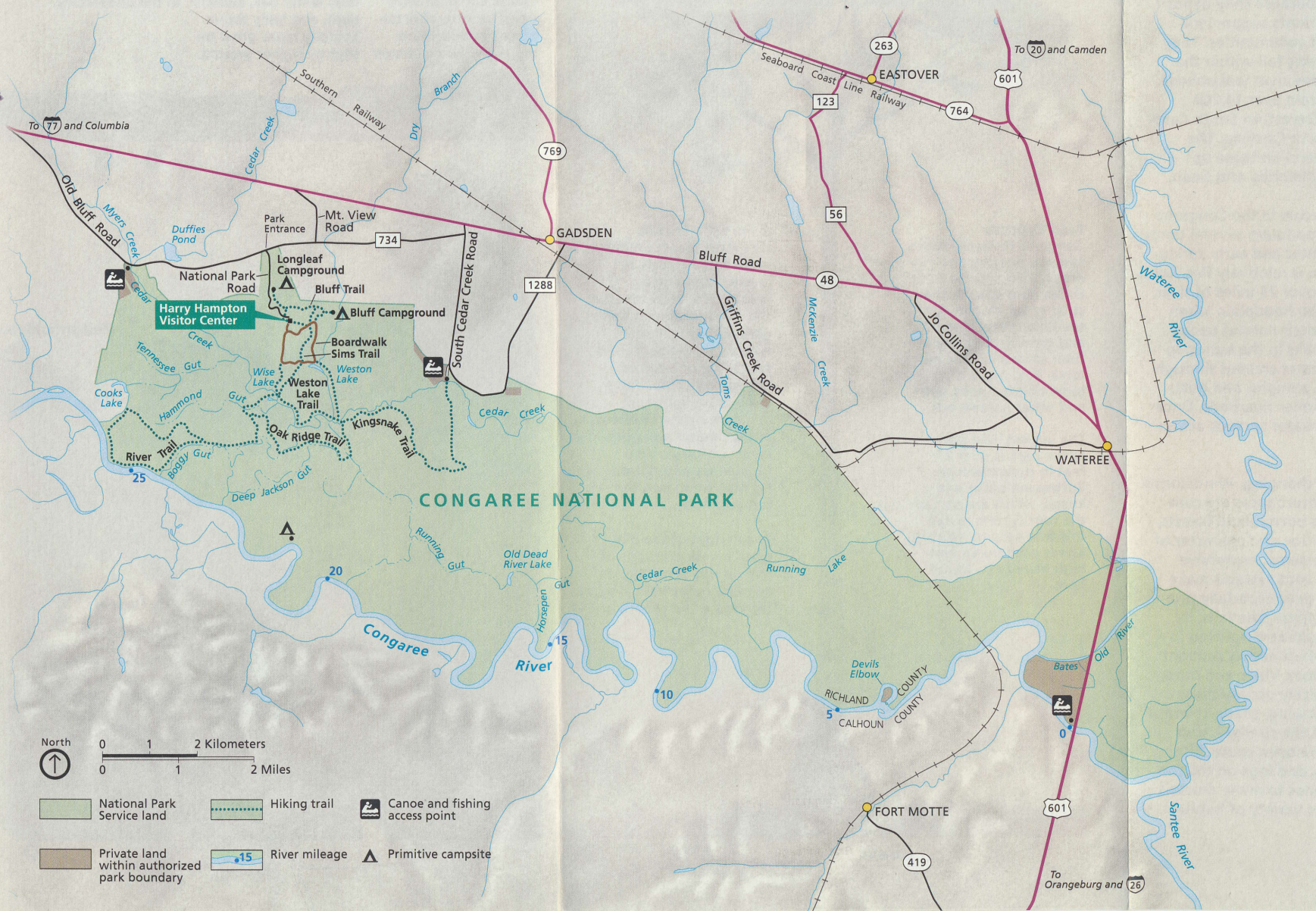
Congaree National Park
100 National Park Road
Hopkins, SC 29061
803-776-4396
www.nps.gov/cong

Congaree National Park is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about national parks, visit www.nps.gov.

Wilderness

Congress has designated most of the park for protection under the 1964 Wilderness Act. Bicycles and motorized vehicles and watercraft are not allowed in wilderness. Wilderness protects forever the land's natural conditions, opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation, and scientific, educational, and historical values. For information visit www.wilderness.net.

©GPO:2012-372-849/80974 Reprint 2012
Printed on recycled paper.



Home of Champions

Congaree National Park is known for its unusual array of giant trees that hold the record for size of their species, including loblolly pines, hickories, and bald cypress. Both the canopies and understories of the park's forest harbor these giants. Their growth depends on the floodwaters of the Congaree and Wateree rivers.

Floods are essential to the park's entire wetland ecosystem because they deposit rich soils whose nutrients support the park's complex plant communities. They occur when heavy rains fall within the Congaree and Wateree river watersheds. These watersheds drain over 14,000 square miles of northwestern South Carolina and western North Carolina. The park's wetlands depend on these upstream waters being healthy and clean.

Flooding typically occurs in the Congaree and Wateree river floodplain several times a year, usually in winter and early spring. The park's floodplain is relatively flat, with only a 20-foot drop over 23 miles of river. Floodwaters enter the floodplain when the rivers overflow their natural banks and rise through breaks in the banks. In the floodplain the water courses through a network of creeks, sloughs, and guts; some of them are former riverbeds. Once these are filled, the water spreads across flat ground.

The forest is always changing. Windstorms and other natural disturbances are common in southeastern bottomland forests, altering the composition and character of these dynamic ecosystems. Impressive heights and shallow root systems make some of Congaree's trees especially prone to toppling. When a large tree falls, its crown may leave a half-acre opening in the forest canopy, which allows sunlight to reach the forest floor. Vines and other sun-loving plants quickly occupy these openings. Slower growing, shade-tolerant plants emerge, block the sunlight, and eventually reclaim the open space. The downed trees, limbs, and logs on the forest floor provide homes to many animals and contribute to the variety of habitats and biodiversity.

Bald Cypress

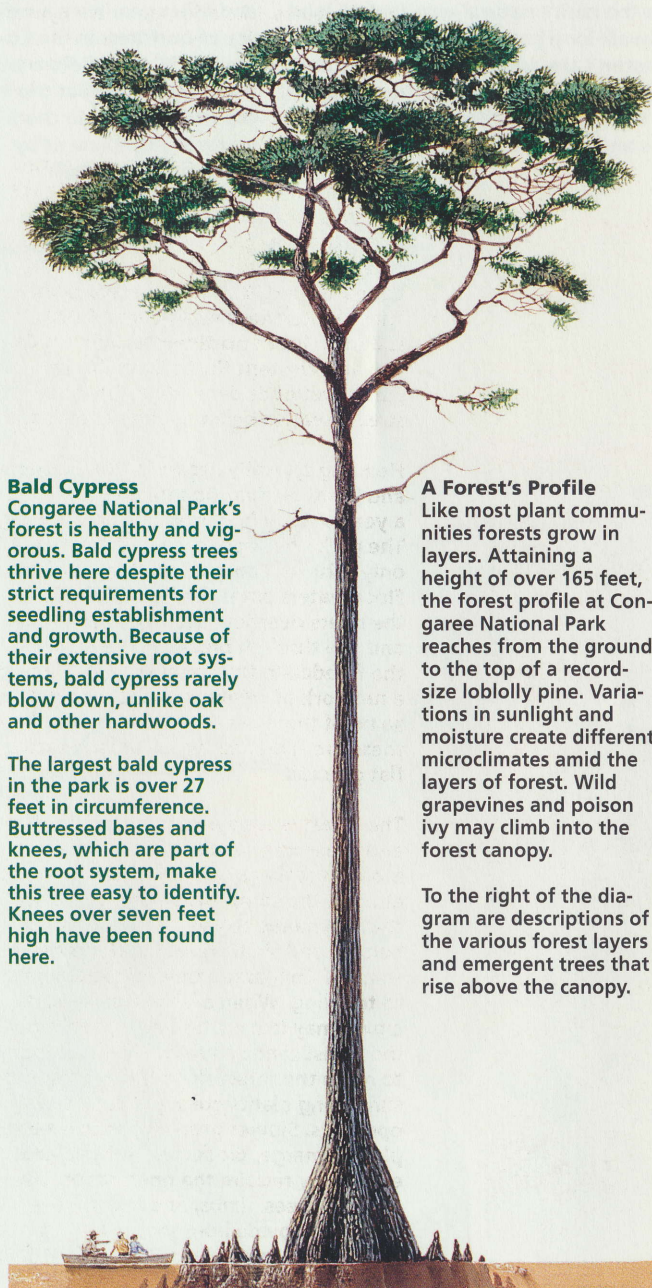
Congaree National Park's forest is healthy and vigorous. Bald cypress trees thrive here despite their strict requirements for seedling establishment and growth. Because of their extensive root systems, bald cypress rarely blow down, unlike oak and other hardwoods.

The largest bald cypress in the park is over 27 feet in circumference. Buttressed bases and knees, which are part of the root system, make this tree easy to identify. Knees over seven feet high have been found here.

A Forest's Profile

Like most plant communities forests grow in layers. Attaining a height of over 165 feet, the forest profile at Congaree National Park reaches from the ground to the top of a record-size loblolly pine. Variations in sunlight and moisture create different microclimates amid the layers of forest. Wild grapevines and poison ivy may climb into the forest canopy.

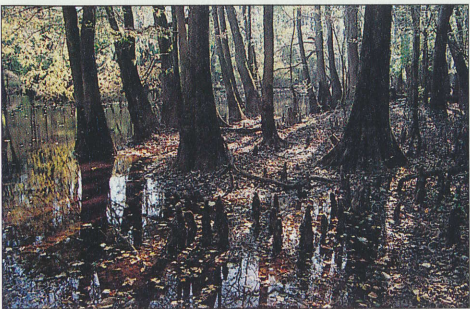
To the right of the diagram are descriptions of the various forest layers and emergent trees that rise above the canopy.



Floodplain Forests and Elevation
 Changes of only a few feet in elevation cause differences in how long an area is flooded and dramatic changes in soil conditions. These differences allow diverse associations of tree species to grow in the floodplain. Sycamore, cottonwood, and hackberry trees, whose roots tolerate periodic flooding, grow along stream

and river banks. Bald cypress and tupelo dominate low areas of standing water, along with water ash and red maple. Overcup oak, laurel oak, and green ash are abundant in better-drained flats. On drier soils, dense stands of cherrybark oak, water oak, sweetgum, and holly thrive. Loblolly pines grow on slightly higher ground.

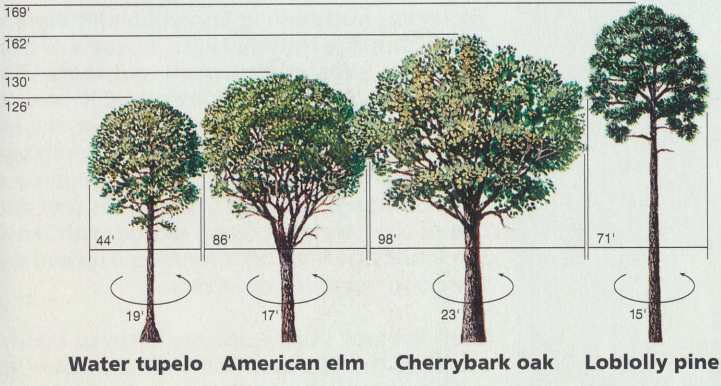
Sweetgum and Mixed Hardwoods
 This common association occurs throughout the floodplain. Sweetgums, along with elm, swamp chestnut oak, laurel oak, water oak, green ash, and many other hardwood trees, dominate the canopy. Ironwood, holly, and pawpaw are abundant in the understory.



Bald cypress trees grow in lower elevations along creeks, sloughs, and oxbow lakes.

Floodplain Biodiversity
 Congaree National Park ranks among the most diverse forest communities in North America. It has over 20 different plant communities. Preliminary surveys have found over 80 tree species, 170 bird species, 60 reptile and amphibian species, and 49 fish species. These numbers will likely go up as surveys continue.

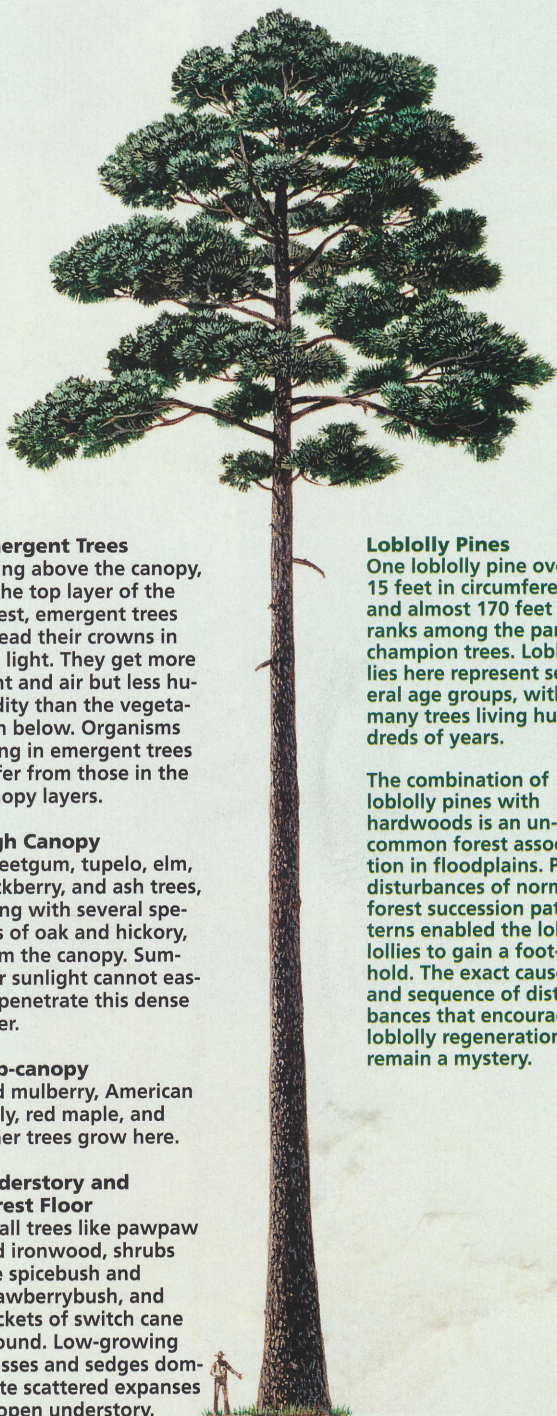
Local record heights



Cross-section of the Congaree River Floodplain

Shown above in cross-section, the topography of the Congaree River floodplain changes only slightly in elevation. This profile sections the park on a line from high bluffs south of the Congaree River to the visitor center on the lower northern bluff line. Numbered circles identify portions of the cross-section enlarged





Emergent Trees

Rising above the canopy, in the top layer of the forest, emergent trees spread their crowns in full light. They get more light and air but less humidity than the vegetation below. Organisms living in emergent trees differ from those in the canopy layers.

High Canopy

Sweetgum, tupelo, elm, hackberry, and ash trees, along with several species of oak and hickory, form the canopy. Summer sunlight cannot easily penetrate this dense layer.

Sub-canopy

Red mulberry, American holly, red maple, and other trees grow here.

Understory and Forest Floor

Small trees like pawpaw and ironwood, shrubs like spicebush and strawberrybush, and thickets of switch cane abound. Low-growing grasses and sedges dominate scattered expanses of open understory.

Loblolly Pines

One loblolly pine over 15 feet in circumference and almost 170 feet tall ranks among the park's champion trees. Loblollies here represent several age groups, with many trees living hundreds of years.

The combination of loblolly pines with hardwoods is an uncommon forest association in floodplains. Past disturbances of normal forest succession patterns enabled the loblollies to gain a foothold. The exact cause and sequence of disturbances that encourage loblolly regeneration remain a mystery.