

# THE DAWN OF CREATION

## THE LAST OLD-GROWTH BOTTOMLAND FOREST LIVES IN SOUTH CAROLINA

By Tom Poland

To travel back in time you need only enter a cypress-vaulted cathedral called Congaree National Park. Here, South Carolina's last virgin forest stands as tall as any temperate deciduous forest the world over. As civilizations rose and fell, Congaree's trees have grown outward and upward, some for 800 years, silently pushing their leaves toward the sun. Reflected, refracted, and filtered to a shimmering green, light resonates among the boughs of one of Earth's highest canopies.

Seventy-five protected tree species--half the number Europe boasts--bequeath their green, carbon-dioxide-inhaling ways to us where world-record trees take their place among California's redwoods and Yosemite's sequoias as arboreal legends. Three-hundred-year-old loblolly pines, exceeding 15 feet in circumference and 150 feet tall, tower above a sky-devouring canopy. Before the saws and dams, 24 million acres of lofty bottomland beauty carpeted the East Coast. Congaree--the one bottomland refusing to go quietly in the night--saved itself but not without a fight.

In the 1890s, loggers felled some bald cypress monarchs whose water-soaked logs sunk in revenge rather than float downriver to sawmills. The oft-flooded floodplain, too bemired for road building, then frustrated the loggers who abandoned their quest. Only nature has touched Congaree since. In 1989, Hurricane Hugo toppled several national champion trees, including a Shumard oak.

Nature set this green-variegated gem--the country's 57th national park and South Carolina's first--along the Congaree River's north bank some 20 miles southeast of Columbia. There, the interplay of sunlight, minerals, and water sustains a 22,200-acre biome--the country's largest contiguous tract of old-growth bottomland hardwood forest.

It's there. The dawn of creation. Walk the boardwalk. Take trails deep into this primeval forest. Canoe where river otters braid through cypress knees and kaleidoscopic shadows burst across blackwater as birds and butterflies flutter through this leafy paradise. Go. Inhale the same rich forest scents prehistoric foragers breathed. Then let out a thankful sigh a relic of the great forest primeval endures.

FIND OUT MORE...

Congaree National park  
803-776-4396 • [www.nps.gov/cosw](http://www.nps.gov/cosw)

