

Congaree Swamp Stories

Featured Speaker Transcript

Ranger Fran Rametta - Owl Calls and Influences In Becoming a Ranger Involving a Love of Snakes, Featuring Stories of Snake Experts and Flying Squirrels, as well as How the Kingsnake Trail Got Its Name

Ranger Fran Rametta: Thank you. Thank you, I appreciate that. "Hoo Hoo hoo hooooaw." Do ya'll know what that is?

Campers: An owl?

Ranger Fran Rametta: Yeah. We have an owl in the Congaree Park about this big (motioning). About that big. Have ya'll ever heard the owl out in those woods? No? Okay, well it's called - It's a barred owl. He loves to live right in the trees right around us here. The barred owl loves to live in there, and of course, he's a southern owl. He says "Who cooks for ya'll?" Can ya'll say "Who cooks for ya'll" for me?

Campers: "Who cooks for ya'll? Hoo Hoo hoo hooooaw."

Ranger Fran Rametta: Of course the owl doesn't say it in English, does he? No, he says it in owl talk. So, like this - like this, he goes: "Hoo Hoo hoo hooooaw. Hoo Hoo hoo hooooaw." Let's ya'll try it on three. On three, everybody try it. You ready? One. Two. Three.

Campers: "Hoo Hoo hoo hooooaw. Hoo Hoo hoo hooooaw."

Ranger Fran Rametta: Alright! Fantastic, I didn't know you had such good owls here today. You got some great owls here today. I arrived here in 1980. I came from the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Ya'll ever heard of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park? In the Great Smoky Mountains, we had lost of bears, okay? And we also had lots of big trees. And the rangers up at the Great Smoky Mountains, when they heard where I was coming - I was going to Congaree Swamp National Monument to go work, and the rangers up at the Great Smoky said "What?! You're going to a swamp?! You must be crazy!" I thought - For a while there, I thought I was crazy too, coming from the Great Smoky Mountains National Park down to a swamp in South Carolina. But when I got here...What you have a question already?

Camper: Can you talk slower?

Ranger Fran Rametta: Okay, I'll slow down when I talk. That's alright, I got high passion. I got high vibes. That's why I talk like that. But when I came down here, I did not know what to expect. In fact, I was kind of a little bit afraid of it, because I did not know about swamps. I had no idea what swamps were. In fact, none of you were even born - how many of you were born in 1980? Oh, your uncle was born in 1980? So, ya'll weren't even born yet, and that's when I arrived here at

Congaree. Well, I came down here from the Smokies. They had big trees in the Smokies - big hemlock trees. And those trees were so tall, when you walked under a hemlock tree, it just shaded you right out and cooled you right down. It was really neat to see those big trees. When I came here to Congaree, and I saw some bigger trees - some of the biggest trees I ever saw in my whole life. And these trees are called loblolly pine trees, and here's a picture of those loblolly pines right here. Okay? And all these pines you see in this picture are right down that road right behind us. Right down that road. Giant trees. Look how big the car is compared to those trees. Ya'll see the car down there? See those trees? Yeah. Yeah, here ya go, look at that. Big, big trees. I'll show ya'll. Look at that. See the car? And look at the trunks of those loblolly pines. Now that's what the place looked like when I arrived here in 1980. Just like that. Talk about big trees! What happened to these trees? How come there are not so many big trees down that road anymore. Anybody know why?

Camper: Because they fell.

Ranger Fran Rametta: September 21st, 1980.

Campers: Hurricane Hugo. Hurricane Hugo.

Ranger Fran Rametta: No, 1989.

Campers: Oh no. No flood. Hurricane (unintelligible)...

Ranger Fran Rametta: Yeah. September 21st, 1989, Hurricane Hugo took those trees down.

Camper: My mom told me about that.

Ranger Fran Rametta: Took about 30 percent. Thirty percent or forty percent of the trees fell over. So, Hurricane Hugo made quite an impression here. But do ya'll know why I got to be a park ranger in the first place? My dad took me camping when we lived in Oklahoma. He'd take me every summer when school was out. And we'd go to the Rocky Mountains, and we'd camp out on the boulders, and have a campfire right on the boulders. And we'd look up, and the stars would be twinkling down on us and we just loved being out there. Outside in the woods. And my birthdays and during Christmas time, my dad would buy me big picture books of nature, and so I could still see pictures of the wolverines, and the lemmings jumping over cliffs in Alaska and all kinds of things like that. So that kind of got me interested in nature. And one thing I really like in nature is snakes. Anybody in here like snakes? Okay. One of the reasons I like snakes, is when I was in kindergarten, living in Oklahoma, we had some construction work going on behind my house, okay? And I was walking down a driveway they were just building, and there was a man on a tractor about a hundred yards away from me. And I looked down, right near my feet something was wiggling right near my feet. It was bright silver. It was a beautiful, beautiful creature. It was a snake. Okay? All silvery looking. I was in awe, said "Oh my gosh, isn't that a neat looking snake there?" I didn't know what it was. That man jumped off that tractor. He ran all the way over there - 100 yards, and he had a hoe in his hand. And he chopped that snake into little bloody pieces right in front of my eyes. And ever since that day - now I was not afraid of that snake, okay? But I was angry at that man. And ever since that day I protected snakes. You know, for the rest of my life I swore that I'd protect snakes. That was part of my destiny. So today at Congaree, the building you see behind us - right behind us over there - the big building - the learning center - Some of you've been in that building already, right? You've been over there? Well that used to be my office, okay?

And I can remember back in the mid-80's, not many people came to visit us on Sundays. It was kind of a slow park, and not many people had heard of the Congaree Swamp National Monument at the time. Well, I was sitting in that building right at my office. I heard the door go "errr-swish," and I heard footsteps coming up those steps in the front, probably ya'll walked up. And I looked up, and there was a man standing in front of me six feet tall. And he had a hat - he was wearing a hat with a snakeskin sewn around the top of his hat - a ten-gallon hat, like a cowboy hat. He had a picture of a cobra snake staring at me right from his t-shirt, okay? On his right shoulder, he had a tattoo of a snake on his right shoulder - purple, purple tattoo. On his left shoulder, he had another tattoo of a snake. Now have ya'll ever had - seen silver snake rings? You never saw those before? Well, they used to be in style about fifteen years ago. Well, he was wearing silver snake rings all over his fingers, okay? Now that wasn't everything he did. I looked at his jeans - He had cut a slit in his blue jeans and had sewed snake skins into the slit in his blue jeans. How would you like to do that to your blue jeans? Cut a slit and put a snakeskin in there. You wouldn't want to do that? Not only that, I had to look him up and down, because on his sneakers, he had sewn snake skins all around the soles of his sneakers. First thing he said to me, "Ranger, I'm a snake expert." Was I going to argue with him?

Campers: No.

Ranger Fran Rametta: No I did not argue with that six foot man, okay? And he said "I'm a snake expert." I said "Okay." So I gave him a trail map. He walked out with his buddy and went down near Weston Lake down here. They were out for two hours. Two hours later, I heard a rocking going on on the front steps. I heard this creaking in the steps. "Creak, creak, creak, creak." That was a pretty unusual noise - I never heard that before. So I opened the screen door, right out here on the porch, walked out, and that snake expert was sitting there holding his thumb, just like this (rocking), going back and forth. Anybody know why he was doing that?

Campers: He got bit?

Ranger Fran Rametta: He was bitten by a venomous snake, okay? And he told me, he said "I've been bit." The snake expert, okay? "I've been bit by a venomous snake." What was the first thing I did in an emergency.

Campers: Call.

Ranger Fran Rametta: What?

Campers: 9-1-1?

Ranger Fran Rametta: 9-1-1, yeah! Air five! Air five, okay? (motions high five). Yeah, so I called 9-1-1. It took the ambulance fifteen minutes to get there. Okay, but in the meantime, I had to treat the man for shock. So we took him into my office, laid him right down on the floor, put his feet up on a pillow, and he sat there and held his thumb, just like that where he'd been bit, Okay? I was hoping he wasn't going to die on me. Alright? It - he was lucky that he didn't. But it took the ambulance fifteen minutes to get there. But there was another ranger there with me named Catherine Bratt, and she had a pistol on her hip. And we knew in order to get that man to the doctor and get the right anti-venom put in him, we'd have to identify that snake properly. And the doctor wouldn't accept our i.d., he'd have to have the snake in person holding it in his hands, to give him the right anti-venom. So, the snake would have to go with the ambulance all the way to

the hospital. So he wasn't going to go alive, was he? Somebody had to kill that snake. Who was it going to be? You think it was going to be the ranger with the pistol?

Camper: You?

Ranger Fran Rametta: No, I didn't have a pistol. The woman ranger had a pistol. I said "You want to shoot that snake for us?" That we had found in their cooler - there was a cooler that their friends had - and it was a zip top. Well, let me tell you how I did it, okay? The cooler was sitting right here just like this, okay? And it was a cooler - it was a strap on it, it was a white cooler, had a little zip-top zipper right around the top of it. And it was all zipped up. And we figured, how can he be bit? And we were kind of suspicious. What was in that cooler? It wasn't just Coca-Cola.

Camper: It was a snake!

Ranger Fran Rametta: I'll tell you what. I unzipped the top of that zipper very - as carefully as I could, and I took a stick - a long stick and I pulled over the top of that and what do you think that I saw in that cooler?

Camper: That snake.

Ranger Fran Rametta: I saw two copperhead snakes. Venomous!

Camper: Were they alive?

Ranger Fran Rametta: Yeah they were alive, okay? But I knew I was - we were going to have to kill one of them to get back to the hospital alright. So, we actually dumped the snakes out on the ground, and one of them wiggled off and kind of escaped from us, but I had to kill the - I said "Katherine Bratt, why don't you shoot that snake for us?" She said "No, I'm not going to shoot that snake?" I said "C'mon, please, shoot that snake." "No, I can't shoot that snake." So, well, "Fran, you do it." I said "I'm not doing it. I don't have a pistol. Let me borrow your pistol," No I couldn't borrow the pistol. That's against the law, oaky? So I took a - found a stick lying around right here in these pines over here, nice long stick about yea long (motioning), and I went up to that snake and I went "Bam! Pow!" And I missed it. I missed the head, okay? So I did it again, because I was kind of nervous. Remember, I'm supposed to protect snakes, not kill snakes, okay? So I was kind of feeling pretty bad. Remember that? What I thought about when I was in kindergarten? I said I'm going to protect all snakes? This was pretty hard for me to go ahead and kill that snake, but I had to, so I said "Bam!" I finally got it on the head, and killed that snake. The ambulance arrived, and they had a big, black glove with ice in it. And they put that big, black glove right on the man's hand, and they were treating that man for shock, and remember, he was a snake expert, right? He was a snake expert, okay? So took him in a stretcher - took him all the way to the hospital. And the dead snake went with him. And you know - Do you know why they were collecting those snakes? Because they were going to sell the snakes for twenty-five dollars each. Now, how much did the ambulance ride cost? About 400 dollars maybe? How much did the doctor bill cost? Maybe 1000 dollars? So, if they're going to make - try to sell them for twenty-five dollars, do you think they made money on that deal? If he paid out a thousand four hundred dollars? It didn't work out too much did it? But you know, from then on, if anybody ever came up to me and said "Hi, I'm a snake expert," I kind of was "Yeah, maybe you are and maybe you aren't." Remember now, these snakes out here - You're bigger than they are, right? Would you go fight a giant? You would or you wouldn't? Okay, now remember, we're a lot bigger than those snakes. We're six feet tall, and the poor snakes, right

down on the ground. They're a lot smaller than us. They're not going to try to go after us. Okay? In the woods, you leave wildlife alone, they leave you alone. That's the safest thing you can do out there. We have wild pigs in the park. We have all kinds of things in the park. So, one of the reasons we're here as a national park is to protect it. We protect everything here. We protect the snakes, we protect the birds, we protect the plants, we protect the giant bald cypress trees, the Spanish moss, the bald cypress knees, and we protect you. So, that's our mission. That's our goal. And that mission, and that goal is "to protect and preserve," has kept me in the National Park Service for over thirty-two years. Because I really believe in that mission. And other rangers not only protect natural history, they protect part of our history. Anybody here been to Gettysburg National Historic Site? How about any other parks - historical parks in South Carolina? Anybody been to Fort Sumter? Okay, you've been to Fort Sumter, right? So that's another protected area. It protects part of our history. But I have other stories about the park of things that have happened. One of the things I remember - they'll never get out of my mind, is we lead a lot of night tours here at Congaree, in fact, every Friday night, we have a night tour called an "owl prowl." And I remember back in 1983, 1984, we were leading some of the first owl prowls ever led at Congaree, walking up that boardwalk. Any of ya'll ever been on that boardwalk yet? The high boardwalk? Ya'll been out there already? Okay, some of you have, alright. We were coming back up at night, and had about thirty-five people with us. It was about 10:00 at night. And I heard - in those days, we'd let people walk by themselves from Weston Lake all the way up to this center right here - to the old ranger station, now the learning center. And I heard a screaming up in the middle. I just heard this lady "screaming, screaming," at the top of her lungs. And remember, I didn't have a pistol with me. And I didn't know what was going on. I was a little concerned. And so I went running up to the middle of the line. It was pitch black. We had our flashlights with our little red filter color on it. And the woman kept screaming and screaming "aaahhh, aahhh, aaaahhhh," and I went running up there not knowing what to expect. I didn't know if anybody had fallen off the boardwalk or what. I ran right up there, and a flying squirrel had flown right into her face and hit her right on the cheek. And that flying squirrel - we had our red lights automatically, shining right at that flying squirrel as it was falling right off over the edge of rail of the boardwalk. And as soon as our red lights hit that flying squirrel, the barred owl swooped right down on top of that flying squirrel in mid-air and caught it. And it flew right back up to the tree and it started to eat the flying squirrel right in front of our eyes, and that - nobody screamed after that. We just watched. No more screaming, just watching. We were watching the flying squirrel turn into a barred owl right before our eyes. So anything can happen out there. We're always finding new thing and seeing new stuff.

I was out with a ranger last month, about a month and a half ago. We saw something in the water right next to our feet. And it was wiggling. It was bright red like blood. And it was sitting there wiggling. What was wiggling blood doing in the creek? And we walked right up to the edge of the creek and there was the wiggling blood. We looked down at it. We got closer and closer and closer to this wiggling blood right under water in the shallows, and there was little worms, wiggling bright red. It's called tubifex. Tubifex worms. And they were living right in the water that was untouched but looked like it was wiggling blood. Yes, pretty neat. We don't know what we're going to find out here. There's so much out here, there's stuff we've never seen before. We don't even know what kinds of insects we have in the Congaree National Park. We have an idea, but we don't even know what kind of beetles live here, or all the butterflies, or all the moths. There's still new stuff to find. Always out here. And for me, its been a love of learning. Just to learn something new, its just been so exciting. And one of the things about being a park ranger and doing my job, is you need to have a little love in you to love the resource love the people that you meet and deal with everyday. So you combine love and curiosity, and you make a good naturalist, or a good historian. That will keep you going for a long, long time. And so I still stay here today, because I know, when I walk out in those woods, I'm going to find something new out there. And when you all walk out in

the woods, every time you come out to Congaree, you too are going to find something new out there. So, what are you going to find in the next couple of days while you're still here? Does anybody have any idea? If anybody has any questions right now, I'm open to questions, so does anybody have any questions for the naturalists? Yes?

Camper: Why did the woman scream when the squirrel hit her cheek?

Ranger Fran Rametta: Well she didn't know what it was. Can you imagine walking in the dark and then something "bam," slaps you right on the cheek and you don't even know what it is? You might think its...

Camper: Somebody slapping her...

Ranger Fran Rametta: Yeah, somebody slapping you or something. You can't see, right? So she didn't know what it was. So she was screaming. She was afraid. She was afraid. That's why she screamed.

Camper: It bit her?

Ranger Fran Rametta: No it didn't bite her, it just went right by her cheek.

Camper: It ran into her too?

Ranger Fran Rametta: It ran into her. Yep. Yes?

Camper: Do you mean literally a flying squirrel?

Ranger Fran Rametta: Yeah, a little flying squirrel. They have another squirrel here, not just the gray squirrels that you see around your homes, but a little squirrel that has little flaps on the side of its legs, and it doesn't fly like a bird it just glides. It glides from tree to tree. And they're especially active at night. So you need to come out on our night tours and you might see some of those flying squirrels coming through. You might get slapped on the cheek too, wouldn't that be neat? Yeah what?

Camper: Do you all still do that?

Ranger Fran Rametta: Yes we do. Every Friday night we do the owl prowls, so ya'll can come out with your families and sign up two weeks in advance to join us on those owl prowls.

Camper: What time is it?

Ranger Fran Rametta: 8:00. We start at 8:00, okay? Hey, anybody afraid to come out here at night? Oh, it's so neat, you don't have to be afraid. It's wonderful at night. Yes? Okay. What?

Camper: Which walk do ya'll go on?

Ranger Fran Rametta: We go on the boardwalk loop. We stay on the deck all the way around. All the way around. We never know what we're going to see.

Camper: What about the Kingsnake Trail?

Ranger Fran Rametta: Kingsnake Trail! Okay, Kingsnake trail is - if you look on this map right here, the Kingsnake Trail is right down in here, okay? It's in this section right here. And the funny thing about the name of that Kingsnake Trail - Back in '83 and '84, we had high school students working with us called the Youth Conservation Corp, and the high school students came from Columbia, around the area here. Some local high schools. And we built these trails. We had to build these trails ourselves. And I remember on a hot, June day, when the sweat was pouring down my face, and we were walking way back down in that section of the park, and we were laying out the Kingsnake Trail - We didn't know the name of it then, but we were laying out the trail and clearing it. We were cutting branches and things that were laying in the trail and little pieces of wood, we were pulling them out of the way just to make the trail, so that it would be clear for all of you to be able to walk on later. So we were cutting that trail and one of the Youth Conservation Corp students yelled, and said "Look, there's a snake! Snake over there! Ranger, there's a snake!" So what did I do? I ran over there and I picked up that snake and I brought it up to everybody and they could pet it on the tail. Okay? It was a king snake, and so that's how we named the Kingsnake Trail the Kingsnake trail.

Camper: So there's a bunch of king snakes over there?

Ranger Fran Rametta: Well, not a bunch, but there was one at the right time at the right place, and so we named it the Kingsnake Trail. So, pretty neat. And so you can walk on that trail today. It's about 10 miles going in and 10 miles going out. Yeah?

Camper: So did ya'll name the Bluff Trail too?

Ranger Fran Rametta: Yeah we did. It's not a very exciting name, but we didn't find any king snakes, obviously, on the Bluff Trail, so, but...

Camper: How did ya'll come up with that?

Ranger Fran Rametta: Well, because you're sitting on this slightly higher ground. You see these small pine trees all around us? That's from a pine plantation maybe forty, sixty years ago. Somebody planted all these pine trees in here, okay? It's not natural, but it's a little higher than when you go down on the floodplain in the Congaree. We may be up about 110 feet above sea level right here, and as soon as you go down the little ramp on the boardwalk, you get to about 90 feet above sea level, so we have a little bluff here. A little high ground. And Bluff Road used to be called Pine Bluff Road because what?

Campers: Pine.

Ranger Fran Rametta: All the pines growing here, right? So you don't hear that called that anymore, but we're on the bluff. We're on the high ground right here. It's not a very big bluff, but it is a bluff.

Camper: They got the church still there too. They got Piney Bluff Church there...

Ranger Fran Rametta: Yeah, Piney Bluff Church is still there isn't it, right? So part of our history is still here, right? We have roots, don't we? We all have roots here.

Off camera: Do you guys have any questions from the Ecology Camp experiences?

Ranger Fran Rametta: Yes.

Camper: Have ya'll seen any other king snakes since that time?

Ranger Fran Rametta: Yes, we've seen other king snakes since that time.

Camper: On the same trail?

Ranger Fran Rametta: Different trails, different trails. You know, one of the neatest snakes that I really like, since we're on the subject of snakes, okay, is the black rat snake. And they can get to about (motioning) this long, okay? And they get big around, those black rat snakes, and what do they eat?

Campers: Rats.

Ranger Fran Rametta: Yeah, they eat rats, okay? So they'll eat the rodents. Anything they can find. They also climb up trees. They'll climb straight up the side of the tree, right up the bark. Straight ahead. Straight up. Now, how in the world can they do that?

Campers: Oh, they're sort of sticky at the bottom...Slime?

Ranger Fran Rametta: Okay, but also, they have little scales underneath their bellies that go straight across, right? And those little scales hook right into the bark of those trees and they'll crawl straight up the trunk of that tree. Straight up.

Camper: It hurts?

Ranger Fran Rametta: No, it doesn't hurt them. They're fine, but why would they climb a tree? What would they go up and get? Bird eggs, right? Bird eggs nests up in high trees. They would go get those eggs. Everybody here like to eat eggs? You got to watch for the cholesterol, right? But snakes like eggs too. Especially the black rat snakes.

Now I remember one day, we used to hike in the woods, Ranger Guy Taylor and I. Ranger Guy Taylor retired from the National Park Service back in 1989, okay? And he lives right here in South Carolina. He's 89 years old, and a month ago he had a heart attack, so he was one of the very first rangers here at Congaree. And he's hoping - he's recovering from his heart attack, and I hope to talk to him on the phone here shortly. His daughter called me and told me what happened. But Ranger Guy Taylor and I would come out here. There were no offices here. There was no building back there. There was no restroom over here. There was no shelter here. There was just the woods. So what would we do for eight and ten hours a day out here in the woods?

Camper: Build?

Ranger Fran Rametta: We would patrol. We would walk and build. We would build trails and footbridges. And run into all kinds of wildlife. So, those days were pretty special days for us. And now I've seen the park change from 1980, to just the woods, and then the learning center you have right behind you, and then the building behind us, the restrooms, and then this building, the

covering, and then finally the big Visitor's Center right across from us - 12,000 square feet of the Visitor's Center. So, I've see all those changes go on since I've worked here. And it used to be a staff of maybe four of us, and now we have a staff of maybe thirteen or fourteen people, and lots of volunteers helping us out. So, we can't operate our parks without our volunteer staff, maybe some of you could become volunteers in a couple of years and help us out at Congaree National Park. Would anybody like to do that, you think? Oh, there you go, Okay. You don't know, right?

Camper: Maybe.

Ranger Fran Rametta: Maybe.

Camper: It sounds like fun.

Ranger Fran Rametta: Fun?! Whoa, fun?! How would you like to get paid to paddle a canoe trip down Cedar Creek? Is that fun? How would you like to get paid to walk through the woods with a bunch of people with you?

Campers: Oh yeah.

Ranger Fran Rametta: Yeah? Would you like that? Or how would you like to get paid to walk on a patrol and walk all the way down to Weston Lake one day and walk all the way back, and eat a picnic lunch down at Weston Lake? Would you like to get paid to do that? Or how would you like to get paid to get in a motorboat and drive all the way up the Congaree River and all the way back down in one day and count bald eagles? Would you like to do that?

Campers: No. Yeah. Yes. Yes.

Ranger Fran Rametta: Yeah! Or how would you like to get paid to get a floating boat and give a nature tour looking at the high bluffs on the river and talk about geology and sand.

Camper: Yeah, that sounds good.

Ranger Fran Rametta: Yeah? Would you like to save somebody in a search and rescue? Come out here and look for them at night?

Camper: Not at night.

Ranger Fran Rametta: Not at night? Oh Okay (laughing). I think we have some other rangers under this shelter. Do ya'll enjoy your work? Do you like doing what you're doing?

Off camera: I love it!

Ranger Fran Rametta: You love it? We've got a passion over here.

Off camera: Oh yeah, rock-and-roll!

Ranger Fran Rametta: Rock-and-roll, yeah! Rock-and-roll, so...

Off camera: Any other questions for Ranger Fran? Alright!

Ranger Fran Rametta: Okay, before we end, I want everybody to stand up. Stand up, and before we end, we're all going to do the owl call together. Here we go, you ready, and I'll do it one more time for you to practice. Listen to me. It goes like this: "Hoo Hoo hoo hooooaw." Okay you ready? On three. One. Two. Three.

Everybody: "Hoo Hoo hoo hooooaw."

Ranger Fran Rametta: Alright! Ya'll are great! Give yourselves a hand!

Off camera: Thank you, Mr. Fran!

Ranger Fran Rametta: Thank you. Thank you [end].