

# Congaree Swamp Stories

## Featured Speaker Transcript

### **John Cely – Stories About Observing Wildlife at Cedar Creek, Helium Balloons, Survival Tips, and Saving the Swamp**

**John Cely:** And you know, probably people told you the best way to see wildlife is just sit down at the base of a tree and just be quiet and have it come to you, or have it fly by you or whatever, but another good way to see wildlife is a canoe or a kayak. And you can paddle down the waterways and be very quiet - that's the whole secret of finding or seeing wildlife anyway, is being real quiet. And this was early in the morning. It was in the wintertime, and up on the bank of Cedar Creek, I saw two black objects on the bank. I knew it was some kind of animal, and I got over there, paddled closer to it, and I realized there were two pigs. They were I guess what you'd call teenage pigs. They were not adults, they weren't babies. They were - they probably weighed seventy five, eighty pounds. And they were just sleeping on the bank. I guess they just - you know pigs are active during the night a lot. I guess they were just taking a little morning rest. So I started getting closer and closer in my kayak, and I said "Man, I'm gonna just get right up on these pigs." And I almost, I got my paddle and I almost was going to touch them. I could see their little sides just heaving up and down as they were just breathing, sleeping. I said "Maybe that's not such a good idea. That pig might get so scared it might jump in the bay with me." And the last thing I wanted was a pig in my kayak. But what I did, I just backed up a little bit and got my paddle and knocked on the tree - there was one in the water - it was a tupelo tree. It said "whock," and those pigs - you've never seen two animals move as quickly and get out of there as fast as those pigs did. I mean they were (snaps fingers), they went from sound asleep to running full blast back away from the swamp. That noise - they knew that noise wasn't supposed to be there.

Another time I was paddling down Cedar Creek, and this was about a week after a flood. We had a big flood down there and that water, you know, it would come up, you know 8, 10, 12 feet. And paddled around the bend, and there was some thick vines up in some trees, and there was this great, big old black thing hanging up there in the vines about three feet off the water. I thought "What in the world is that?" I thought maybe it was a bear or something. And I got closer, and I realized it was a dead pig hanging by his back legs. But what had happened, when that water had flooded a week ago, he was swimming across the creek and got his feet caught up in those vines and couldn't get out. And he had drowned or just starved to death, but here's this dead pig just hanging up three feet off the water.

Have ya'll seen - ya'll know what a river otter is? You've seen a river otter before. It's one of my favorite animals. I was walking in the swamp one time and got out to the edge of Cedar Creek. I thought I'd just sit down by the creek, and see what I could see, being quiet, not moving. Low and behold, this family of otters comes swimming up the creek - about five or six of them. You ever seen otters before? They really have a good - they know how to have a good time. They were just swimming along, and just having a good time playing in the water.

Off camera: Right on the map right there

**John Cely:** That's right! Not a very good otter - but, they look a lot better than that. Anyway, this otter caught a little brim - a little blue gill. And when they eat a fish like that, they will either crawl up on a log or get up on the bank and eat it. So he had this little blue gill in his hands, and came up to the bank right below where I was sitting - didn't see me, and I could have spit on the otter if I wanted to, but I said "Man, this is great, I'm getting a ring-side seat." Now, if you were eating a fish, if you were an otter, would you hold it by the head or the tail?

**Off camera:** "tail," "head," "tail," "tail," "tail," "tail."

**John Cely:** Tail? Who said tail? If you hold it by the head, you get a much better grip on it. If you hold by the tail, it kinda is gonna slip out from you, but they generally - they hold this fish like a popsicle - they hold it by the head, and then just start from the tail. And they just start eating away. And you just never heard such a crunching and scales and bones, they just eat the whole thing "crunch, crunch, crunch." And that otter got about half way through, and I mean, I was less than five feet away, staring at this otter right on the bank below me eating a fish and that otter - I guess he felt somebody was looking at him. You ever had that feeling somebody was looking at you behind your back or something? Well that otter looked up, he turned up and here I was - eyeball to eyeball with an otter. And so I guess he thought for a second, "Well, that doesn't look right," so he gets his fish and goes off in the water and goes somewhere to eat it.

I was down in the swamp years ago, not long - maybe three or four years ago, and I was way off the trail back in the middle of the swamp, and I saw something shiny in the bushes about five feet off the ground, and I said "What is that?" It was in the wintertime, you could see a little better. And I walked over there, and I got closer and closer, and I realized it was a balloon - a helium balloon that you'd buy in a grocery store, but there was something unusual about the balloon. It had a Ziploc bag attached to it - a little, small sandwich bag, and as I got closer, you could see the sandwich bag was wrapped around the balloon with a piece of fishing line. And inside the sandwich bag was a note. And the note said "To whoever finds this balloon, we turned this balloon loose in Dandridge, Tennessee." You know where Dandridge, Tennessee is? It's up near Knoxville. You know where Knoxville is? It's in eastern Tennessee. And they had an address and so I wrote them a letter and said "I found your balloon. It's a miracle that anybody found your balloon, because nobody ever goes back where I was." And it turned out that they'd turned these balloons loose in September, and I found the balloon in December. Now I don't know how long it had been in the swamp, but anyway, when you looked on a map, Dandridge, Tennessee is about 200, 250 miles from the Congaree Swamp. So that balloon got up in the atmosphere and blew all that whole distance. They had several balloons that had been recovered by people, but that was the long-distance champion that day. But I wanted to stick a little note, when I wrote them a letter, get a ticket from Corinne there, and said "You are charged with a \$50 fine for littering the swamp."

**Off camera:** (laughter)

**John Cely:** But I didn't do that. But it's probably not a good idea to turn balloons loose - on purpose at least. Because every time I walk in the swamp for any amount of time, sooner or later, you'll find those little helium balloons on the ground or up in the trees or something that get caught in there. Let's see, what other wildlife stories do I got for ya? I can't think of anything offhand...

I would like to tell you a story about a friend of mine who I first got to know many years ago. He grew up in Columbia. He was a school teacher at Dreher High School. His name was Jim Elder. And Jim Elder used to love to come down here and look at the big trees in this park, and this was

way before it was a park. Well, the previous owners had started cutting the swamp down. They were going to turn these trees into, you know - lumber, and veneer and all sorts of things. And they really cutting down some big, old trees, and Jim just didn't think that was right. So he started talking to some people and of course he met Harry Hampton. You all have heard of Harry Hampton. He was kind of the "father" of protecting this park. But anyway, Jim Elder was about my age. He started talking to people and asking around, and said "You know, it's just not right that they cut this park down. These trees are too big, and they're just - it's too beautiful a place to just turn into lumber." So one thing led to another, and he eventually talked to the owners of the park and said "Maybe you all would be interested in selling this park - selling this land to the National Park System. And at that time, the owners were not interested in selling their property, and so one thing led to another, and Jim Elder organized a lot of people and started a movement to help save the place. And he and Harry Hampton pretty much saved this place along with some help from other people, of course. But I just wanted to tell you about Jim Elder because he was a guy who made a difference. And he was just one person. He was just an ordinary person like all of us, but he did make a difference, and I think all of you all could make a difference too. Don't ever let anybody ever tell you that one person can't make a difference, because you can, and you all know that right? You can make a difference. I don't care what it is you do, but you can make a difference. You are totally unique. There's no one else quite like you. And you have gifts and talents that no one else has, and you can develop those talents and gifts and make a difference. Ya'll got any questions for me? Anybody got any wildlife stories?

**Camper:** So, if anyone comes in the forest and has axes and you don't see them, would anyone know about it and what would they do?

**John Cely:** Well, that's a good question. What if you get lost out there? The best thing you could do is tell somebody where you're going and what time you plan to be back, so that way (interrupted by airplane noise) - That's the sound of freedom, right? Anyway, you just need to tell somebody where you're going. And you know boy scouts? They used to talk about the buddy system. You know when you go swimming, when you go off somewhere like that, try to have a buddy with you. It makes a lot of difference to have some help.

**Camper:** the axes...and if they try to cut down trees?

**John Cely:** What about it?

**Camper:** and then if no one sees them, and then what?

**John Cely:** Well, if nobody sees them, I guess its okay. It's not okay, but if you don't get caught - it's still not the right thing to do to be cutting a tree down...

**Camper:** How can you protect yourself from danger?

**John Cely:** Well, just use a little bit of common sense. Probably the biggest danger of being out in the park is - especially in the wintertime, would be hypothermia. Ya'll know what hypothermia is? That's exposure to cold - especially if you're in a canoe or a kayak or a boat, if you happen to fall in in January. It doesn't have to be that cold outside for you to succumb to hypothermia - your body core temperature gets below a certain point and just can't warm itself. So you need to have some matches that are, you know - waterproof matches. You need to have some warm clothing like fleece or wool - and that kind of thing.

**Camper:** When you sometimes, if you do go out and walk, and you want to know where you're going do you use the map that you created?

**John Cely:** Well, I usually - I'll take a compass with me sometimes. I try to take a compass all the time. If it's - if the sun is shining, you can usually tell which way east, west, north and south is, but if its overcast and no sun, you know, a compass can help. And if you don't have a compass, you look for moss growing on the north side of a tree. You ever heard of that trick?

**Camper:** Yeah! The moss grows the most on the north and a little bit on the south, then that's east and that's west.

**John Cely:** Right. And there's always one tree that's got more moss on the south side than north for whatever reason. You always look at a group of trees. You don't just look at one or two. You look at a group of trees.

**Camper:** Did you see any other animals on the river other than sea otters?

**John Cely:** Oh yeah, there's lots of animals there on the river. There are beaver now. Occasionally I'll see alligators out on the river, eagles, heron, osprey. It depends on the time of the year. One time I was - sometimes you'll see deer out on the river - swimming across the river. One time in my little kayak, I got real close to a deer. It didn't smell me or see me. It was eating acorns. I got close enough I could actually hear the deer crunching those acorns, like eating popcorn, "crunch, crunch, crunch."

**Off camera:** Back to the last question. Can I ask a follow up? I read one time that it was harder to use that trick in here because of how dense the canopy is, so the sunlight doesn't penetrate down, and there isn't much of a difference between the north and south side? What's your take on that?

**John Cely:** Yeah, there are some areas that are kind of like that, but usually, most of the time, you will definitely see more moss on the north side of the tree.

**Off camera:** Like you said, using a number of trees, not just a couple of them.

**John Cely:** Yeah, and sometimes you've got so many trees so close together, you'll actually have one growing in the shadow of another one, so the moss will be on the south side of the tree. But you know, if you look at a group of trees, usually it will hold up that way.

**Off camera:** Did you play a role at all in the founding of the park?

**John Cely:** I helped out a little bit. I dedicated the map to Jim Elder, and there were a lot of people who helped out with that - Richard Watkins, who lived over in St. Matthews. It was truly a citizens', grassroots effort. And it was truly a case of where the power went to the people. Just the ordinary Joe, little guy made a difference, just writing letters, making phone calls, and helping out in every way he could.

**Off camera:** To the people - just maybe for a little help for those, for some of the campers trying to put together a story about how the - you know, how the (park) was actually founded, you mean writing letters..what did you...

**John Cely:** Well, the idea - the Park Service had actually - Harry Hampton back in the 1950's brought the Park Service down in here to study the area, and they had to make a recommendation first, and they gave a very strong recommendation and issued a report that's still in the files that this was an extraordinary place that ought to be a part of the National Park system. Well, you know, the National Park Service is like any other agency of the federal government. It's funded by congress, and congress has to appropriate money to buy this 15,000 acres. I mean, it cost millions of dollars. The state couldn't afford it. A private individual couldn't afford it, so the whole idea was to get congress involved, and you know, at that time Floyd Spence was the congressman from the second congressional district that included the park, or what was later the park. Strom Thurmond was the U.S. Senator, Fritz Hollings was the U.S. Senator. So the whole idea was to get congress to actually introduce legislation that would acquire the place, and that's what happened October the 18<sup>th</sup>, 1976.

**Off camera:** Does that make sense everybody? As far as how the park was purchased?

**Camper:** yeah

**John Cely:** Do you know who your congressman is? Who is your congressman? Do ya'll live in Gadsden? Eastover? Where do ya'll live?

**Camper:** Columbia

**John Cely:** Columbia. I think the line is kind of down the middle, but Jim Clyburn, James Clyburn is the congressman from the sixth district, which includes part of this area. I think the swamp is actually - the park is in his district, and then Jim Wilson-

**Off camera:** Joe Wilson

**John Cely:** Joe Wilson is the other congressman from this area [end].