

Congaree Swamp Stories

Featured Speaker Transcript

John Paul - The Pleasures and the Dangers of Hunting the Animals of the Swamp and Observing Its Wildlife, Including Snakes and Snake Bites

Ranger Corinne Fenner: Some of you were at Ecology Camp a couple of weeks ago, and Keyanne, I know you remember - you had mentioned that earlier that you had met Mr. John Paul on the Creek. Go ahead - you remember meeting him?

Camper: mmm-hmm

Ranger Corinne Fenner: And he was canoeing...What else was he doing out there? Go ahead.

Camper: Fishing!

Ranger Corinne Fenner: Fishing! Alright! So he has spent a lot of time in the Congaree, hunting, fishing...And remember the photographs we looked at yesterday? He takes a lot of beautiful photos with his camera - you remember we said he kind of - he "hunts" with his camera now, in the park. So he's going to go ahead and tell us about some of his experiences that he's had throughout the Congaree, so I'm going to turn it over to Mr. John Paul.

John Paul: Thank you. Well, first how about ya'll tell me what ya'll like best about the swamp. Okay?

Camper: The thing I like best is that you can come here any time you want, like - it's not - It's like open to anybody.

John Paul: anyone else?

Camper: Canoeing.

Camper: The best thing I like about this place is you can hear all the things outside and you get to walk (unintelligible) on the nature walks.

Camper: The thing I like about here is learning about the different types of trees, and cultures and all.

John Paul: Have you learned a lot since you've been here? Get Mrs. Corinne or Gale to show you, and where you walk into the Welcome Center back here, go to the back wall, I found it last week. I think I showed you...There was a granddaddy longlegs spider nest in the top of a little bush back there. That bush is a prickly ash. Another name for that bush is devil's walking stick because its got thorns all up and down the stalk. A second name is a toothache tree, and that comes from the

Indians. They named it the toothache tree, because you can strip the bark on it and you can rub it on your gums, and its juts like Anbesol that you buy at the drugstore for a toothache. There's a lot of that stuff out here. How many animals have ya'll seen?

Off camera: You saw animals at Ecology Camp. What kinds of animals did you see?

Campers: Snakes. I saw birds.

John Paul: Bird?

Camper: A deer?

John Paul: A deer? I was coming up Cedar Creek, down below the footbridge where we saw ya'll the last time a couple of weeks ago. And there was a little fawn about that high, spotted.

Camper: a what?

John Paul: A little fawn, a baby deer.

Camper: oh

John Paul: Its mother walked off into the bushes, and it stood right on the creek bank and let me paddle right up by it before it turned around and followed its mother. Have you done a lot of walking in the swamp? We have a lot of otters in here. Who knows what an otter is? Go ahead.

Camper: It's a type of mammal that eats shells, and that lives in the water, and that floats on its back.

John Paul: Right, they're like a seal in salt water - pictures of seals that you see in salt water. Your otter is fresh water. And they don't have flippers, they have feet. They can actually run on land. But you can see - you see them in here playing. I was camping down on Elder's Lake about four years ago, and I've got to have it - I like to sit in the dark in the swamp by myself. And I'll get up about two hours before daylight, and make me a pot of coffee. I'll put the ladder out. I'll move my chair right out on the edge of the creek bank. And just sit, drink my coffee. And you get to listen to the animals wake up. You get to listen to the whole swamp become alive. And right at the crack of day when you just couldn't see, I happened to glance down, and the water was about as close - about half the distance from me to her - to me, and an otter had slipped up, and he had his head on the bank looking at me. And I glanced at him a couple of times. One rule in the swamp is that you never stare at any animal. You glance at 'em and glance away. You never see two animals staring at one another. You always glance, and glance away. Well, I glanced at him a couple times, and I glanced back down and he was gone. Probably twenty minutes later, I glanced down, and here's four of 'em, with their heads laying on the bank looking at me. He had gone back down, he had rounded his buddies up, and apparently said "Hey, ya'll come look at what I found." But I had become the zoo, like you go to Riverbanks Zoo, I was what the otters see.

But I would sit down there and you would be sitting at your camp sight, and the next thing you know you hear a flutter and glance around, and a owl has come in as close as ya'll are, and he's just watching everybody, or watching me. And there again, you glance at him there, every once in a while, you glance at him, and as long as you don't stare at him, he will stay, basically the whole afternoon, and just watch what you're doing there. He's curious. So what you want to do

when you come in here and walking, and I've talked to Mrs. Corinne about this, is you try to become part of the swamp. In other words, you try to fit in. You try to become one of the animals. And you do that when you walk in the swamp, you never hear animals whoopin' or hollerin' going through the swamp. Your animals are always quiet. If you hear an animal make a sound - if you hear a squirrel chatter, if you hear a doe deer bleat, if you hear any sound like that - if you hear one of the hogs in the swamp go "woof," it's a warning sound. They have either seen you, or they have smelled you. They are warning the rest of their type, plus they are warning the rest of the other animals that there is something strange in the woods. So you come in, you walk quiet. When you walk up to a limb, instead of walking into that limb, and brushing past it and letting it fly back by you behind you, bend down. Go under that limb. When we were hunting, you would hunt squirrels listening for him to jump, because you would hear the leaves on that limb shake. And the animals in here are the same way, but they - A lot of the animals are curious. Last year, or year before last, down Cedar Creek Road where ya'll were canoeing - I always walk in the swamp out there, and I was following a pair of pileated woodpeckers, which is your real large woodpeckers - they stand about that high (motioning), and I wanted a shot of both of 'em in one picture, and I had been following those birds for probably two hours. And the next thing you know, an owl, a barred owl, stood about that high (motioning), he flew in from behind me, flew just in front of me and lit, and turned around and looked over his back at me. I got a couple shots of him, walked in front of him, got a couple shots looking back at him. I listened for the woodpeckers. I heard 'em. Went to walk towards them, and he would wait to see what direction I was walking, and then fly in front of me, and wait for me to catch up with him. And of course, every time he flew and got in front of me, he'd run the woodpeckers off. But to him, I was another animal in the woods. I was part of the swamp instead of being a stranger to it, I was just another animal, and he was curious.

But we've got a lot of hogs in here and a lot of people are afraid of the hogs, and there's no hog in here - in fact, there's no animal in here that's going to bother you, if you respect it. Every animal in here will get away from you instead of coming at you. I've had hogs come within twenty, twenty-five feet of the tent, and stand and look at me and then wheel, and then go back in their caves. Even to your alligators. They are not going to come out on the bank and chase you. There's nothing in here that's going to follow you. It's one of the safest places you can be. If you respect the swamp and you know how to act in the swamp, and I guess that's what all of this is leading up to, because I think everyone should know swamp safety. And I have some people disagree with me on some of it, but it's worked for me for sixty-five years in the swamp, so I have to be doing something right. But one of the biggest fallacies, and what I mean by fallacy - the biggest mistake, that people make in the swamp - Every once in a while, you'll get off the trail. You'll walk up to a log that you've got to cross, or during a floodwater, the high water will flow the log across the trail you're walking on. But either way, you've got to cross that log, and it doesn't matter if that log is that high or whether that log is that high (motioning). Don't walk up, and just step over that log. If it's a tall log, you step up on it, look on the other side, and then step across. But if you walk up to it and just step across, then there's a possibility there is something just laying up against the other side and you have put your foot down right by it. So you walk up to that log, step up on it, and look first. Another thing is - I was coming around the Kingsnake Trail, end of last week. And there's areas on the Kingsnake Trail that is completely grassed up. The grass, weeds, and stuff is that high (motioning) - you cannot see the ground. And you have to walk through patches of it that's as long as this building here. And everyone has a tendency when they hit a place like that. They want to slow up, they want to take deliberate, slow steps. They are trying to see ground, they are to penetrate the grass and stuff - they are looking for that snake. They don't want to step on that snake, they don't want to get bitten by that snake. And what's happening is when you're doing that - is you're asking to get bitten if he's there. When you hit an area like that, go ahead and walk it just like you would this floor here. Don't slow up. And the reason is, is you've got to go back to

the way wild animals think - They work off of instinct...And how many of you have trouble with bullies at school? Any of you? Any of you know any bullies? You do? If you pay attention to 'em, and you're on the playgrounds or something and you see that bully coming, as long as he is steadily walking, then you're not worried about it. But if he comes up close and slows up to stop, then you get worried, because you think "Well, he might be after me this time." Well, you see, that wild animal, even to the snake is the same way, as long as you are in a fluid movement, you will walk right by the cottontail, you will walk right by the deer, you'll walk right by the snake. The cottontail and the deer will never get up, they'll lay right where they'll lay. The snake will lay where he's laying, You become a danger when you slow up and stop. If you slow up and stop by that cottontail, he's going to get up and run, the deer is going to get up and run, and the snake is the same way, so you try to keep in a fluid movement, you try to keep a steady pace. If you want to stop in the woods out here, or if you want to stop on one of the trails, then glance ahead of you, pick a clear area - a clear opening to stop in that you can see all the way around. That way, you'll know that you're not stopping in the wrong spot.

Years ago when my father was alive, the wild hogs that are in the swamp now, they were put in here by people who were living on the edge of the swamp. But I know you've seen on television, read in books about the cattle ranchers out west, running cows loose in the open range. Well, the hogs were done in the swamp this way, and you actually had a brand for them, which was a series of slots and V's cut in their ears, and you would use dogs to catch 'em with. And if you caught a mother hog with a litter of pigs, then you marked the pigs the way the mother pig was marked. And you would come in and you would find one to barbeque and you would take it out. If you go put up - wanted meat, then you would find one to put in your smokehouse. Well, I know all of you that has had something that somebody else has done, that you just had to do it, whether it's making a perfect basketball shot, or whether it's cooking that perfect cake. But someone else has done it, and you just wanted to do it so bad, you could taste it. Well, when I was about 12 years old, I was real skinny like a beanpole, didn't weigh 100 pounds. One weekend, my male first cousin on my father's side, Daddy, and myself, and one of my school friends my age, were walking in the swamp down on the lower part of the swamp to camp for the weekend, and Daddy had left the boats down at our old camp the weekend before, so we were going to walk in and paddle the boats back out. Well, going down, we caught about a hundred and fifty pound pig. That had one dog with us, Queen, so Daddy and Junior tied the hog, and put him on a pole and toted him to the camp, and it was real hot, well, not real hot, but it was warm, so Daddy said "We won't butcher him today, we'll wait and butcher him tomorrow before we come out." Well the next morning we got up, and the hog and the dog was gone. The hog had got loose. Well, Dillard, and myself and my friend, my friend. My friend - we got in Uncle Buddy Graves old wooden creek boat, and we started paddling up the creek shooting squirrels from the boat. And we got up next to Horse Pen Gully (coughs) Excuse me - I don't know what this is...But I heard the hog and heard the dog out on the bank. I heard Queen speak, and I pulled into the bank - was about that high above the water. And Queen had the hog. But they had fought and wrestled all night. They were both so give out that the hog was lying down with its feet facing the creek, flat on its side. The dog was locked down on an ear. It was lying down with all four feet propped up on the hog, like they were sleeping. Well, here I am, 12 years old, 100 pounds, well I wanted that hog. That would be the first hog I ever caught by myself. So I took my boot strings out, and my school friend - well, he was too afraid to get out the boat. So I got out, and between Queen's help, helping me, I got the hog's feet and mouth tied. And he still wouldn't get out the boat to help me get it to the boat. So the dog and I, we would catch one end and pull on it, and the other end and pull on it, until we finally got it to the lip of the bank. And I told Dillard, I said "Come up, and help me get him in the boat" because the drop was about that high (motioning). And he about went out the back of the boat. I mean, scared to death, so I finally told him, I said "Alright, you just hold the boat. You just hold it tight against the bank."

And now keep in mind, I was so proud. I was walking that high off the ground (motioning). I could have walked across the creek and not got my feet wet, I was so happy. I caught my first hog at twelve years old by myself. He pulls the boat up against the bank and holds it. I pushed the hog off. It hit the bottom of the boat, and did not slow up. Tore the whole bottom out the boat. Drowned the hog. And that's going from 60 to zero in no time at all. But then I had to go back down and tell my father what I had done, and we got the hog. The water wasn't but about three foot - three to four-foot deep. But all he said was "Well, son, at least you got him." But that's how things can change on you so quickly. But my father - he trapped fur in the swamp here. He would put out traps, catch raccoon, otter, muskrat, and in the earlier years, every once in a while, we would catch a few mink. And in the earlier years, we mainly sold the hides, and the later years, he sold the hides and the meat. In the summertime, we would fish the swamp, and he would sell fish, but there is - With all of that being said, there is just nothing like the swamp. It is a continuous, changing garden. Every year you come in here, you can see something different. You can see some change in it. I would imagine that they have already told you that years ago, where the creek is now, is probably where the Large Congaree River was eons ago, five, ten-thousand years ago, and over that period of time, it has moved to the south, southwest, and made this floodplain swamp. But what people don't think about is, it's still moving. It hasn't stopped. Is there anything one of ya'll - ya'll would like to say or...

Off camera: Questions...

John Paul: Questions?

Camper: Was it easy to catch a hog?

John Paul: It was - If you had good dogs, it was easy. You had to be real careful because the hogs won't bother you until you disturb them and make them mad. Now every once in a while, you would catch one too big, and you wouldn't want it. So you'd have to tell the dogs to turn him loose. And now if you had to do that, then you had to get behind a tree and hide, where the hog couldn't see you. But you would hide behind a tree - or hide behind a log or something and tell the dogs to loosen, and they would let him go and he would run off. But when they turn him loose, if they saw you, then he would come after you.

Off camera: Now were they holding onto him like by the ear like you were telling before?

John Paul: Yes. You used two dogs. You always hunted with two dogs, and you train them to catch ears because the hog has got tusks coming out of his mouth - got long teeth. And what they do is they sling that head and they cut with those tusks. Its very seldom they try to bite anything until they get it on the ground and they get over the top of it. Until then, they're continuously slinging that head, trying to rip with those tusks. But we caught one morning Daddy, and myself and my sister's husband, Buck. And he was a big boy that we didn't want, and he got mean, and we got behind a tree, got out of sight, and Daddy told the dogs to turn him loose. Well, Buck wanted to see the dogs turn the hog loose, and he stepped out from behind the tree. And that bull saw him. And it came after my brother-in-law. And he turned out running and he made it from about as far as from here to maybe you, and he tripped on a (unintelligible) vine. And about from then on, about the length of this shed, he was running on his hands and knees with that hog right at his fanny, snapping before the dogs could catch the hog again. But there again, we had disturbed the hog was the only reason he was that way. Had we just walked up on him, he would have

immediately run. There again, you would have heard that "woof," and then he'd have been gone. Yes.

Camper: How hard was it to survive in the wild?

John Paul: It wasn't hard at all, because you knew what you were doing. I wonder now how we did it, because I go in here now, and the mosquitos eat me up. If I camp, I take a tent. And I take bug spray where I can spray it on the inside of the tent, and then zip it up where they can't get to me. When my father was alive when I was your age, he would throw a tarpaulin in the boat - a coffee pot and a frying pan, and some meal and flour, and some lard, shortening. And you would hunt a fish wherever you would stop at. You would go out and find a switch cane break. Do you know what the switch canes are? Switch canes is this small bamboo you would see growing on the bank when you were canoeing. It doesn't get - about my height is as big as it gets, and the little canes is about big as your finger. But you would find a switch cane break and you would strip the leaves off the canes until you got enough to make you a bed out of. You would lay the tarpaulin down and lay on part of it and pull the rest of it over you. Nothing to keep the mosquitos off of you, no mosquito repellent or anything, and I know the mosquitos had to be just as bad, but I don't remember 'em. Now, I can't come in here without a tent and mosquito repellent. And I think what it is, is you don't miss something if you've never had it. We had never had a tent. We had never had mosquito repellent, so you didn't miss it. The mosquitos were just a fact of life.

I told a story a while back - but it's not having stuff. We've got a fish that's a right big fish on the river, but the name of it is the striped bass. I don't know whether any of ya'll have heard of it or not, but some people call it the rock fish. And everybody fishes for 'em in the spring. Well, I've never seen but one caught in Cedar Creek, and we caught him years ago, down below Horse Pen Gully. And we did not have coolers. We did not have ice. There was no way to keep the fish from spoiling, and they die real quick. Well, that evening, when we caught him, we didn't - We wasn't going to eat him - we already had enough fish for supper that night. So I took him and went over to a mud bar across from the camp, and I dug me a hole about that deep (motioning), and I buried him - covered him completely up. We ate supper that night and went to bed. The next morning, I got up and I went back over there and I was digging him up, and a guy came down the creek in a canoe, fishing. And he looked at me and he said "What you doing, digging bait?" And I said "No, sir." He said "Well, what are you doing?" I said "I buried a fish here last night." And he looked up at me and he said "Well, you digging him up?" And I said "Yeah, I'm digging him up." And he said "If you buried him yesterday, why are you digging him up this morning?" And I said "Well, we're going to have him for breakfast." And that's all he could take. He couldn't take anymore. He went back up the creek. He thought I was a nut. But what he didn't think of was that down so deep in that mud bar it was cool - it was just like a cooler, and it would keep that fish from spoiling. So you went about things in a different way to still be able to stay in here and survive. But you harvested squirrels, you harvested raccoons, you harvested fish. A lot of the fish you caught in the summertime, when fishing was good, you would salt down like you would meat - just like country ham. But you would salt it down and you would eat it through the winter when you didn't have many fish. But you found there were ways that are just forgotten now - that people don't know of anymore. Going back to the animals - Have ya'll seen any snakes in here?

Camper: I saw one last year.

John Paul: Last year? And you've seen one? I think the worst time people get more afraid is the last of April, and June of the year - with the cottonmouth. But it's mating season for the cottonmouth during that time. And you'll be down there in your canoe, and you'll be cooling it

going down the creek, and you'll hear a splash and look up, and a cottonmouth has fallen off the limb, or he's come off the bank, and he's headed straight for the canoe, coming straight to you. And of course, most of the time, people panic and either try to outrun him, or they'll try to swat him with the paddle. And if you will just stop and watch him, he will come up - he's libel to come up as close as you are to the canoe, and he will go into a half-coil on the water and stand up, and just look at you. And if you leave him alone, you drift on by him and he goes back to the bank. But he's protecting his girlfriends. He wants to make sure that you're not after them. And once he sees that you're not then he will leave you and go back to the bank, but of course when he comes to the canoe, you can imagine how bad it scares most people.

Off camera: What time of year did you say that was?

John Paul: The last of April, June - strike that. The last of April through May, into June.

Off camera: Okay.

John Paul: But the one rule is that you do not slap at him with the paddle, and if you do then he turns vicious. And then you've got your hands full. Where, if you will just leave him alone, drift on by him - he might, he's libel to might come within two feet of you. But you can drift on by him, and he will stay where he's at or he'll go back to the bank.

Camper: When he comes to look at you are you supposed to stare at him, or just glance and look straight ahead?

John Paul: Ignore him. Make believe he's not there.

Camper: If you don't know he's right there, and you keep on paddling, and it hits him, what would happen?

John Paul: You mean, if you don't see him? If the canoe hits him, it's not going to cause any harm.

Camper: But I mean, paddling.

John Paul: Oh you'll see him. You won't hit him with the paddle. Going back to your question, when you go to drift by him, if it ever happens, if you are really worried, don't try to hit him with the paddle. Pick the paddle up, and if he's on this side of the canoe, put the blade of the paddle - Just stand your canoe up - your paddle up on the edge of the canoe like that where you've got the wide part of the blade between you and him, and then you've got no problem. But there's none of the snakes in here that are going to try to bite you if you can - if you're walking in the fluid movement like I was talking about a while ago. You could literally step on him and you will be off him and gone before he's going to try to bite you. They are not vicious like most people say, it's just that people are so afraid of them, and with the cottonmouth that's in this swamp - I don't wish it on anyone, but were someone to get bit by a cottonmouth, you've got plenty of time to get to a doctor. Yes.

Camper: The poisonous kind?

John Paul: Mmmm-hmm. He's the only poisonous water snake we've got.

Camper: When does the poison actually get to you after he bites you?

John Paul: At the time he bites it starts. But its slow. It's not immediate. It does not happen all at one time. The biggest danger with a snake bite is the venom - it immediately starts a degeneration of the cell tissue. What that means, is that it starts eating the flesh immediately, so you're going to have a big sore in the area of that bite, but with the cottonmouth, there are very few people, almost non-existent that die from a cottonmouth bite. Your rattler - When a rattler strikes, he's got the longest fangs of any other snake in this area. He penetrates full depth and injects all of his poison in one bite. The time he hits, that poison is injected. A copperhead, which is a smaller snake, has shorter fangs, and now he - he hits just like a rattler. But they never inject much poison, and with a copperhead, most of the time, it's what's called a dry bite - it's a warning bite. And in fact, that's what happened with your rattlers a lot. Now your copperhead, he's completely different with his bite. He's got a medium length fang - A big cottonmouth will have fangs about that long (motioning), and they can penetrate about so deep. But when he hits, he cannot immediately inject, like a rattler does. The cottonmouth has to hit, clamp, and then pump. And I don't know about you, but he could have jaws made out of stainless steel, and he couldn't hang onto me to pump, because I would clear the length of this building. But they're not as bad as people talk about 'em. They're not as bad as everyone has been led to believe. You are not going to fall over dead if you get bitten. Just keep your cool. If someone's with you, you stay there, send them for help, and you'll be alright with about anything in this swamp.

Off camera: Alright we're going to have one more question okay?

Camper: If you panic, will the venom get to you faster?

John Paul: Well, when you panic, you have a tendency to run. You have a tendency to do things you shouldn't be doing. And it's like you out here playing. The more you play, the more you run, the faster your heart beats, the more blood it pumps, and it distributes the venom quicker. You understand?

Off camera: That was a good question.

John Paul: That was a real good question [end].