Congaree Swamp expedition--April 15-27, 1969

The anticipated arrival of Dr. Eliot Porter in Columbia in mid-April, 1969 provided the impetus for new exploratory, natural history, and photographic efforts in the Congaree swamp. Thanks to Peter Manigault, aerial assistance was provided for in the form of expert pilot (and also bird watcher) Lewis Bannon of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Ernest Dickerman of Knoxville, Tennessee was on hand as representative of the Wilderness Society. An old friend, herpetologist Gary Williamson of Norfolk, Virginia, was present for his second visit to the swamp and again for the purpose of recording reptiles and amphibians.

By the end of his present stay Gary was to have a list for the swamp and immediate vicinity that included 10 species of snakes, 8 species of frogs and treefrogs, 5 species of lizards, 4 species of salamanders, 4 species of toads, and 2 species of turtles.

Mr. and Mrs. Bannon, Ernest Dickerman, and I were the first to arrive. No sooner had we set up camp than the heaviest rain of the season set in. We wondered how Ernie Dickerman could survive the flooding rain in his flimsy plastic shelter half. Not only did he survive but he astonished us by lighting a fire in the pouring rain the next morning. Next to arrive was Gary Williamson who immediately set about collecting reptiles and amphibians for our photographic needs. On the evening of April 17 we all gathered at Harry Hampton's house to partake of refreshments, meet Dr. Porter, and to see some of my slides of the swamp. Dr. Porter was accompanied by Mike Linshaw of Philadelphia who is a medical student was a strong interest in photography. We were joined that evening by Peter Manigault and Farley Smith.

Unfortunately a rapid rise in the river saw the entire swamp flooded by the time Dr. Porter was ready to begin picture taking. We did make several sorties into the swamp in two boats provided by Harry Hampton. But most of our operations had to be from the air. Thanks to good flying weather and the expert handling of a Cessna 173 by Lou Bannon, we not only obtained many photographs from the air, but we recorded a surprising number of birds and a few other forms of wildlife. Since the trees were nearly in full leaf, we identified and saw relatively few birds over the more heavily wooded parts of the swamp. Most of our best sightings were over the Congaree River and over the expanses of water and relatively open cypress stands below the juncture of the Wateree and Congaree. Some 30 species of birds were recorded in six flights. On a memorable flight on April 26, in which Miss Annette Ducein, Mrs. Elizabeth Phelphs, and myself were passengers, we saw three alligators. Two of them, basking in the sun, appeared huge from the air. Mrs. Phelps saw a black animal ploughing through the swamp that could well have been a black bear. No cattle could have been in the area below the Wateree where she made her sighting.

One of the outstanding finds was a large heron-egret rookery off an oxbow lake below the juncture of the Congaree and Wateree. Numerous nests could be seen in the tops of cypress trees. Since we could only guess at the number of nests notivisible, no close

estimate is available as to the size of the colony. But judging from the large numbers of birds seen returning toward dusk, the numbers were well in the hundreds and with Great Blue Herons and Common Egrets predominating. Smaller egrets, either cattle or snowy, were present, and so were a few anhingas.

In spite of the heavy leaf canopy, Pileated Woodpeckers were seen on nearly all flights. Three were seen on the April 26 flight alone. This species readily stands out as it flies across bodies of water or an opening. With even only half a look, there can be no question as to identity. The practical feasibility of flying to look for the Ivory-bill seems more reasonable than ever. The time to do such flying would be before the leaves are out.

One bit of evidence that Ivory-bills may be present was seen in feeding work along the railroad trestle through the swamp just below the Beidler tract. Gary Williamson and I saw bark stripping at tops of newly dead trees that closely resembled the Ivory-bill work I had seen in Texas. Local reports keep coming in. A Mrs. Faver of Eastover, a member of the bird club, has provided one of the most recent (we trust that Harry Hampton has checked into this).

On April 26, we were joined by a group of six ladies from the Carolinas and Louisiana. They were Barbara Bodman, Majorie Ducein, Annette Ducein, Dorothy Peebles, Elizabeth Phelps, and Scott Barton. By now the water was low enough to get half way in on the clubhouse road. Several members of the party reported seeing or hearing a small warbler that could have been a Bachman's. Such a possibility had been suggested earlier by Lou Bannon. No very reliable identification was obtained however.

Miss Ducein took numerous movie shots and stills from the air. Both she and Mrs. Phelps were greatly impressed by everything they saw.

A return expedition is planned for the fall--probably in October. At this time Dr. Porter hopes to obtain the shots inside the swamp that he missed this time because of high water. We hope that most of those participating in the recent expedition will return. We also hope we'll have the opportunity of sharing the swamp with still other conservationists.

Although the elements weren't entirely with us, I feel that this was a very successful expedition. I can't over-emphasize the importance of a small plane and an expert pilot in an operation of this kind. My special gratitude goes to Mr. Bannon for his superb piloting. We are also all very grateful to Harry Hampton for theloan of his boats and motors and various other of the services he provided.

John V. Dennis
May 9, 1969

Birds and other wildlife seen on five flights over the Congaree swamp, April 16-26, 1969

	April 16	April 17	April 21	April 26
Turkey vulture	1		6	20
Black vulture				20
Red-shouldered hawk	1		4	
Large buteo	1			1
Sparrow hawk			1	
Osprey	2			2
Anhinga			2	1
Great blue heron	5	4	50	40
Louisiana heron			1	2
Little blue heron		4		15
Green heron		1		
Yellow-crn'd night heron	1	1		
Common egret	1	1	50	120
Smaller egrets				10
Wood duck	2			15
Mallard				2
Shorebirds				large flock
Mourning dove				3
Kingfisher				1
Chimney swift	1	2	40	30
Swallows			30	30
Pileated woodpecker	1		3	3
Crow	6	4	2	7
Blue jay		2		4
Mockingbird	1			
Grackle		2	1	flocks
Redwing		2-3 flocks		flocks
Goldfinch		3-4 flocks		flocks
Evening grosbeak	flock	flock	flock	
Alligator				3
Black bear ?				1