

A Ghost on the Suwannee



Creek Flood Plane, Austin Cary Forest Larry Korhnak

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A Day Trip on the Suwannee River

Linda and her son Jonathan were on their way to the Suwannee River State Park for a group kayaking adventure. They were taking a day trip on the Suwannee River as a reward for Jonathan, who had made the honor roll for the second time that school year. His mother wanted to treat him to a special day without his little sister “bugging” him. Plus, Linda knew how much Jonathan loved exploring new places, especially the forests.

The white poppies and purple phlox along the rural road caught Jonathan’s attention.

“Mom, do they plant those flowers or do they grow there naturally?”

“I think a little bit of both. Sometimes the state transportation department plants seeds and other times the wildflowers just grow.”

The trip that Jonathan and his mom had signed up for was organized and led by a local naturalist, Spencer Dobbs, who takes groups of people canoeing and hiking all over the state to teach them about Florida history and ecology. Linda and her family had previously been on other trips with Spencer, including a midnight boat ride down the Ocklawaha River. This trip—a canoe and kayak tour down the Suwannee River with a few stops for lunch and hiking in the woods along the way—was the third trip they had been on with Dobbs.

When they pulled into the entrance booth at the park, Linda said, “Hi, we’re with Spencer’s group.”

The ranger told them where to park and which trail to follow to the boat ramp. On the short walk along the river’s edge, they saw some large hickory trees and Jonathan asked his mother if she knew what they were. The leaves were really small, not at all like the mockernut or even the pignut hickories.

“From the bark I’d say it *looks* like a hickory, but I’ve never seen one with such tiny leaves. It could be an ash or something. Let me see, it has curved, jagged leaflets. Honestly, I don’t know. We’ll

have to ask Spencer. Why don't you take a group of leaflets from the ground to show him? I think the park rules say you aren't supposed to pick anything from the trees or plants, but I think it would be alright if you picked it up off the ground and then left it behind afterwards.

Spencer was busy unloading the canoes from his trailer when they met him at the ramp.

"Hi Linda! Hi Jonathan! Pick out whichever boat you want and start loading your gear. Don't forget to grab paddles and life jackets. We'll be getting on the river shortly!"

They greeted fellow paddlers and stowed their lunches, water, and bug spray in a canoe. Everyone carried boats to the water and gathered around Spencer for his welcome. The great Suwannee River moved briskly, and a kingfisher darted from a branch near the water.

"Hi everyone! So glad you could make it. We're going to have a great time but there are a few things to remember. Be sure to keep up with the group and keep my boat in sight at all times." With a wink and a grin he added, "Any stragglers will be left to the 'gators!" Jonathan was having trouble with the buckle on his life preserver and didn't pay much attention to Spencer's words. He helped his mother launch their canoe and they set off downstream, following closely behind the guide's boat. Soon they began to see something strange happening up ahead on the right side of the river. It looked as if another river was pouring into the Suwannee! Spencer pointed to the spot.

"This is a very special place. This is where the Withlacoochee River converges with the Suwannee River. First we are going to cross the river and beach the boats. We'll walk through the forest along the Withlacoochee's bank, and then come back to the canoes and continue down the Suwannee."

A Hike Through the Forest

They paddled up to a sandy bank and pulled their boats ashore. Spencer linked them together with a long rope. A steep path led up to the trail along the high, forested riverbank. The gigantic trees had a canopy so dense that barely any light came through. The cool shade and gentle breeze got Linda thinking that she might like to curl up next to one of the big tree trunks for a little afternoon snooze. As she admired the white flaky bark of a particularly huge oak tree, she saw a quick movement near its base. She waved at the group and pointed. "Look!" she said as a tiny fawn wobbled onto its legs, stared at the group for a moment and bounded off in the opposite direction. "I guess the fawn had the same idea that I did," thought Linda. She asked Spencer what kind of tree it was.

"Oh that's a beauty, isn't it? It's a swamp chestnut oak. Look at the size of those lovely leaves! And the acorns are very large too... look, here's a cap from one. They are quite a treat for the animals, so it's no surprise that there's not a single one left!"



"This is a bottomland hardwood forest ecosystem," Spencer said pointing to trees along the trail. "Bottomland hardwoods are one of the wettest types of hardwood forests. Can anybody tell me what makes a tree a hardwood? I'll give you a few hints—it has to do with the size of their leaves, what they produce, and what they do in the winter"

"Most of them lose their leaves in the winter, I know that," someone in the group said.

"Do they produce acorns?" asked Jonathan. "I know oak trees do." "Well, not all hardwoods produce acorns. But you're right about oaks. All hardwoods produce some type of fruit or nut. What about the leaves?" Spencer loved quizzing people and making them think.

“Oh, yeah the leaves are broad, not like pine needles, which are evergreens.” Jonathan had learned about deciduous and evergreen trees in school a few years ago.

“Good job!” Spencer continued talking about hardwood forests.

“Bottomland forests are found along the edges of lakes, rivers, and large sinkholes. They represent a transition between drier upland hardwood forest and very wet river floodplain or wetland forests. As a result you can find some trees that like it dry, and some that like it wet and they all grow together in this forest,” he said.

Spencer pointed to a cluster of bald and pond cypress trees. Jonathan recognized the difference between the feathery leaves of the bald cypress and the awl-like shapes of the pond cypress leaves. “Bottomland hardwoods may be underwater part of the year and completely dry during droughts. When they are wet, they provide important habitat for young fish, insects, crayfish, worms, and micro-organisms.”

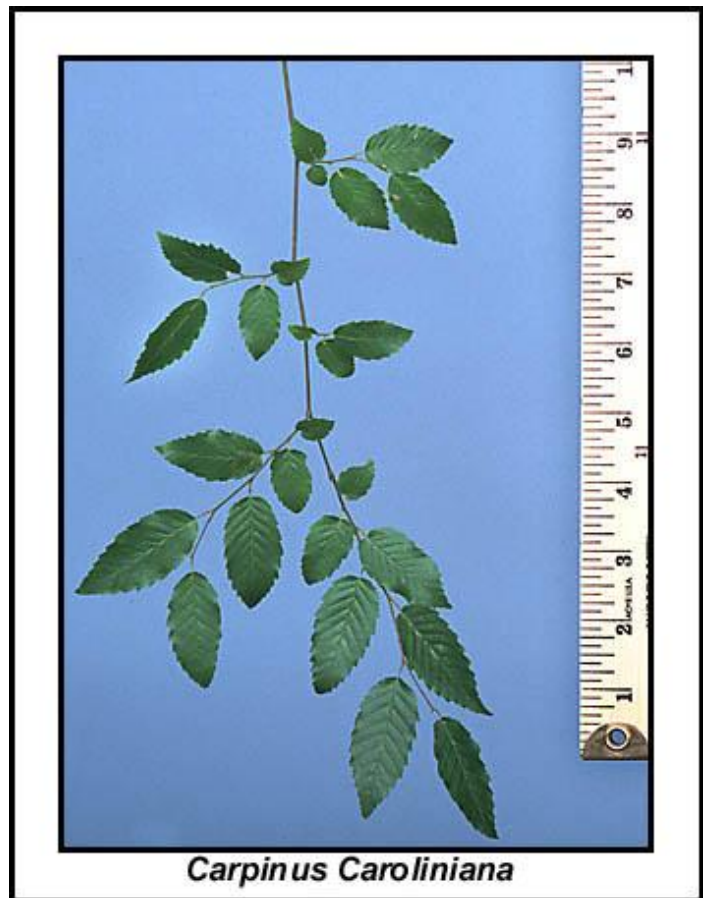
“Hey Mom, there’s one of those trees we were wondering about! Spencer, do you know what this is? Mom says it looks like a hickory, but the leaves are different.”



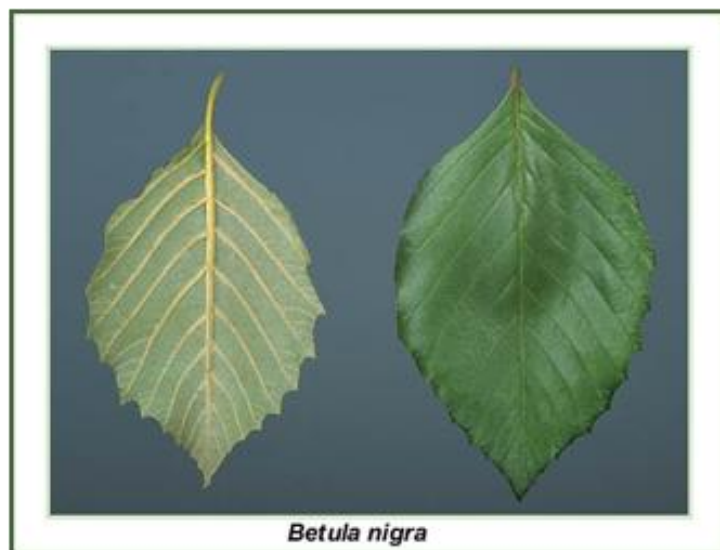
“Nice observation,” Spencer was impressed with Jonathan’s curiosity. “That’s a *water* hickory. You can identify it by the leaves. They are compound shaped, serrated leaflets. They are one of the dominant tree species in the bottomland hardwood ecosystem. We will see lots

of different trees today, many of which are considered dominant species because they are so common in this type of ecosystem. Like over there, look at that magnolia and the live oak.”

The group looked up to where Spencer was pointing and saw the two trees he was pointing to. Spencer also pointed to a red maple and a few smaller oaks, including water, laurel, and white oaks. They followed the trail through the forest, stopping from time to time to ask questions or listen to Spencer.



He identified trees, explaining how to tell the differences between some of the trees with similar leaves. For example, the river birch (*Betula nigra*) and the American hornbeam (*Carpinus caroliniana*) both have simple, alternately arranged leaves. But, the hornbeam produces nutty fruits arranged in hanging clusters and has smooth bark while the river birch produces a cone-like aggregate and has shaggy bark.



As the group listened, Spencer's voice quieted and he began telling them a story about Ellaville, the ghost town that they were walking through.

"This area was a logging town in the 1800s. The town was known for pine logging, turpentine production, and railroad car construction. Up ahead is the old Drew mansion, which was the home of the first governor of Florida, George Franklin Drew. A fire burned it to the ground in the 1970s, and all that's left is brick rubble and the crumbling foundation," Dobbs told the group.

"There is quite a legend surrounding this place. The governor's wife Amelia loved these woods and it is believed that she lived here for many years after the governor died." His voice quieted, "The thing is, Amelia died two days *before* the governor. "The story goes like this: Amelia loved to sit by the river and watch the birds. In fact, she became quite the bird expert. She especially loved woodpeckers. She tried to teach people that leaving dead trees alone, rather than cutting them down, provided homes for woodpeckers. She used to walk through the cemetery everyday because it was a great place to see wildlife. She was very protective about these woods and even though her husband, the governor owned a sawmill, she pleaded with him to leave this area be. "One day she fell ill and passed away. The governor was devastated about losing his beloved wife Amelia. He was so grief-stricken that after he made her funeral arrangements, he sat in a chair and died. The doctor came to the conclusion that the governor had died of a broken heart.

"People who live around here say that she remains in these woods still protecting the trees and the birds."

An Encounter with a Ghost

Jonathan perked up when he heard the words “ghost town.” And when Spencer started talking about a real live ghost, he could hardly contain himself. He was both fascinated and a little nervous about the idea of walking around a deserted town with a ghost on the loose. He started to sweat a little as he looked around the old home site, which began to seem a bit creepy. Jonathan was concentrating so hard on looking for ghosts that he didn’t realize that he had wandered away from the group.

He walked down to the water’s edge and noticed an eerie trail that meandered along the river to an old water wheel covered with yellow jessamine vines. The wheel probably once provided power to the old saw mill, he figured.



He followed the trail up to the cemetery and felt a bead of sweat slide down his forehead.



“This is really creepy,” he muttered to himself, “and so cool.” As he walked through the cemetery he wondered what life was like for the people who lived here back when the governor was alive. He crouched down to read a lichen-covered headstone that was dated 1895. He thought to himself that 1895 was exactly 100 years before he was born.

He found a stump and wondered if this could be where the governor's wife sat and watched the river glide by. Next to the stump was another old headstone and out of curiosity he bent down and brushed the Spanish moss away so he could read it.

"Oh no, it can't be." He read the stone aloud, "Amelia Dickens Drew! The governor's wife!!"

As he knelt there he heard the sound of twigs snapping, as if someone were walking up behind him. He stood up quickly and spun around but no one was there.

"Hello? Is anyone there? H-e-l-l-o-o-o-o?" Jonathan was breathing heavy and was suddenly really scared. He was sure that he was hearing Amelia's ghost. He heard the sound again. The crunching noise grew louder and echoed in his ears.

"Let me see you, r-r-right now!" he stuttered into the air. The rustling stopped short and the forest fell quiet, so quiet that all Jonathan could hear was the sound of his own heart pounding. His imagination was in overdrive. He thought for sure it was a ghost; the ghost that haunts the visitors of Ellaville. Without warning, he heard an enormous flapping sound and he felt a "swoosh" against his ear. He ducked and closed his eyes really tight. He was afraid to look at the ghost. Then he heard the beast scream. It was unlike any sound he had heard before... a piercing "Eeeeeeeeeeeekkk!!"

Jonathan jumped to his feet, but his rubbery legs would not obey him and he kept slipping on the wet leaves. He managed to get his footing and began running, but he felt something grab his pant leg and he stopped short. He was panic-stricken. Amelia Drew had him by the leg and she wasn't letting go. He was too scared to turn around and look at her, so he kept struggling to free himself. The more he fought the tighter she seemed to hold onto him.

He knew he would have to turn around and face her. Maybe he would have a fighting chance, or maybe he could convince her that he loved the woods as much as she did and that he meant no harm.

He slowly turned his eyes toward her, but there was nothing. He couldn't see anything. He tilted his head at different angles; still nothing. He glanced down, expecting to see a ghostly hand grasping his pant leg, but instead he couldn't believe what he saw. The wicked beast that had a hold of pants was...was SMILAX?????

Jonathan began howling with laughter. He was so relieved to be tangled up in a smilax vine rather than the claws of a ghost that he could hardly stop laughing. He pulled out his pocketknife and freed himself from the monster vine.

As he made his way back to the trail, he realized that he was pretty far from the group. He began to get nervous again so he started running. Behind him he heard the eerie "eeeeeeekkkkkk"

As he scrambled back to the trail, he heard the distant sound of his mother's voice.

"JONATHAN, where are you? Hurry up, we're ready to go!!" He ran as fast as he could towards the sound of her voice, sure that the ghost was close behind him, breathing on his neck.

"Mom, Mom," he was out of breath and terrified. "Mom, I was in the cemetery and Amelia came after me and she screamed and..."

"Jonathan, honestly," his mother interrupted. She looked cross and unconvinced. Jonathan had a vivid imagination and his mother was used to his tall tales.

Spencer and the others gathered around Jonathan and listened to his story, trying to figure out what really might have happened.

"Jonathan, did you say she screamed?" Spencer asked, trying hard to conceal a chuckle.

"Yeah, she made a sound so loud and she was right behind me! This place is definitely haunted." He folded his arms and felt uncertain. They don't believe me; they probably think I'm crazy, he thought.

"Was the sound like this, 'eeeeeeeeeeekkkk!'" Spencer made the exact sound the ghost had made.

“Yeah, that’s it!” Jonathan said, both surprised and confused that Spencer could make the same noise as the ghost. Had Spencer heard her too?

“As exciting as a ghost might be, I have to disappoint you, Jonathan. That was almost certainly a barred owl. But a very cool sighting. Probably more exciting than a real ghost!”

While Jonathan wasn’t completely convinced by Spencer’s explanation of the ghost sighting, he joined the group as they made their way back to the boats. He withstood the good-natured jibes about his adventure, and some of the group wanted to know what else he had seen when he went off on his own.

He remembered the sound of the twigs cracking behind him.

“Hey, Spencer if it was an owl, how do you explain the fact that I heard her walking up behind me?” Jonathan felt like maybe he *had* been right, after all.

Spencer thought a second and replied, “Well maybe the owl was on the ground eating and that’s what you heard.”

Jonathan decided to accept Spencer’s explanation, at least outwardly. He was not convinced that he should let go entirely of the idea that he had actually encountered a ghost.

The Canoe Classroom

Everyone got in their canoes and pushed off. As they paddled downstream, Spencer explained the forest ecosystem. “Hardwood forests have more wildlife species than many other ecosystems in Florida.

This is because so many of the trees produce fruits and nuts for animals to eat. And also because there are several layers of forest cover that I’ll talk about in a minute. There are lots of ground birds and songbirds that use this type of forest. Wild Turkey, Chuck-will’s Widow, American Woodcock, and many ducks can be seen here and in other bottomland hardwoods. There are also other species of birds including Northern Cardinals, Blue Jays, vireos, wrens, and other birds,” Dobbs told the group.

“Different kinds of mammals also inhabit bottomland forests. You can see white-tailed deer, wild hog, raccoon, skunk, fox, otter, gray squirrel, and, if you’re lucky, maybe even a black bear or a fox squirrel.

“Snakes live in these hardwood forests, too. You need to watch out for poisonous snakes such as coral snakes, cottonmouths, or Eastern diamondback rattlesnakes. But you’ll also find many nonpoisonous snakes. Box turtles and mud turtles live in the moist areas; and frogs, skinks, and fish breed in the shallow waters and vegetation”, Spencer said as he continued his wildlife lecture.

“And finally,” he added, “bottomland hardwood trees are preferred nesting sites for cavity dwellers, such as owls, woodpeckers, and squirrels. Several threatened or endangered species may be found in these habitats, including the Florida panther and both the Bachman’s and the Swainson’s warblers.”

The group paddled along at a pleasant pace. The limestone walls along the river were teeming with wildlife. Birds flitted in and out of crevices and several banded water snakes hung out on the roots that were clinging to the limestone.

“As I was saying a while ago, the trees provide a forest cover that often grows in distinct layers with an overstory of dominant tree species, a midstory of companion trees, vines and shrubs, and an understory layer of herbaceous plants and more vines. Earlier I mentioned several of the dominant tree species in this forest type. Does anyone remember any of them?”

One of the group members in a kayak provided some tree names. “How about the swamp chestnut oak and live oak,” he said.

“Good job, anybody else?” Spencer looked back at the group. Linda didn’t really like to speak in front of groups, but she chimed in anyway

“Spencer, I don’t know if they are a dominant species or not, but I’ve seen quite a few red maples along the banks.”

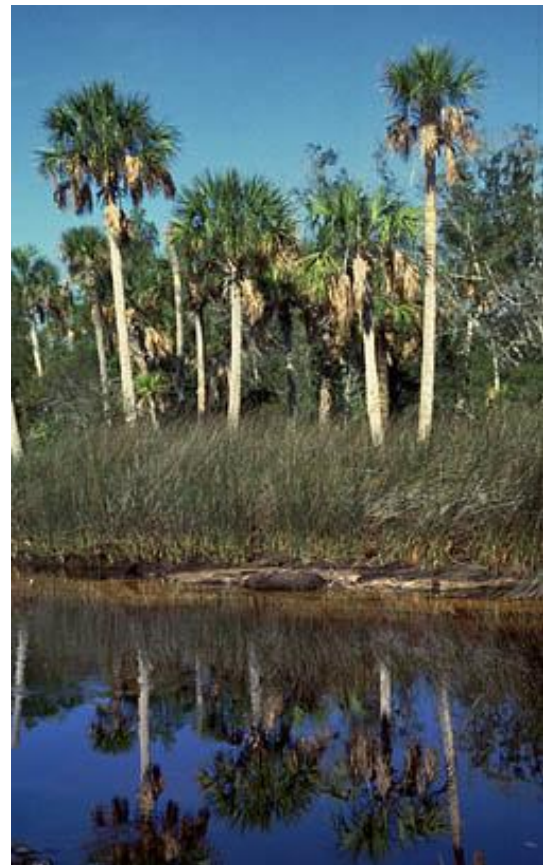
“Great, Linda! You’re right. Red maples are a dominant species,” he said with a note of pleasure in his voice. Spencer was always happy when people in his group made thoughtful observations.

“Don’t forget water hickory!” Jonathan hollered up the river to Spencer.

“Indeed, Jonathan. There are just a few more, anyone?” Spencer waited a moment before finishing the list: “Cabbage palm, laurel, white, and water oaks, and American beech.”

“Now does anyone have ideas about what trees are in the midstory in this forest?” he asked. “Remember, those are the shorter trees that are common to this type of forest. Now, many trees in the midstory will eventually become overstory trees, once they grow tall enough.”

“Well, I can see a lot of American



hornbeam and river birch from here that aren't as tall as some of the others we mentioned as being overstory species," said someone in a canoe.



"And while we were walking, I saw several buttonbush trees and pignut hickories. Are those considered midstory trees?" inquired another.

Before Spencer could comment, Linda asked, "I think I saw winged elm. Oh yeah, and buckeyes. Are either of those right?"

"Wow! You guys are all right! There are lots of midstory species common to the bottomland forest community. Nice work, gang. I guess

y'all do learn a lot about nature when you come on these trips." Spencer was beaming. What he wanted most in the world was to share his knowledge of environment with people. And he was always glad when the participants on his adventures seemed interested.

"The understory is the layer of vines and small plants. Did anyone notice any understory plants?" Spencer asked.

"SMILAX!!!! I'm sure of it," Jonathan said, laughing. The rest of the group looked slightly confused, but Linda and Spencer both smiled, remembering Jonathon's adventure in the cemetery.

"How about poison ivy?" Spencer asked turning his attention back to the group.



“Oh yeah,” everyone said in unison.

“And what about trumpet creeper?” Spencer added one that might have been more difficult for group members to identify.

“Did anyone see any of the invasive exotic plants? Plants that are not from this area and may take over the native species? Like kudzu or air potato?” Spencer saw several people nodding.

“I noticed some coral ardisia. The one with the red berries and fun-looking leaves,” Linda noted.

“That’s right. You can recognize the leaves of coral ardisia because they are waxy and have scalloped edges,” Spencer explained.

The group paddled for several hours while Spencer continued to talk about the forest. Jonathan learned a lot about the history, plants, and wildlife in the bottomland hardwoods. As he listened to Spencer, Jonathan decided that the “ghost” was *probably* a barred owl. He was a little disappointed that he didn’t have a real ghost story to tell his friends when he got home. But then again he could tell the story anyway, and then add the part about what really happened. Everyone would at first be very intrigued and then have a good laugh!

Jonathan realized that he had also learned the importance of sticking with the group and not wandering off alone into the forest. What if the group hadn’t noticed I wasn’t there and left without me? Gosh I sound like Mom, he thought to himself and then turned to his mother who was standing nearby.

“Mom, thanks! I had so much fun today and I learned a ton. I can’t wait to do this again. Maybe we can go on an overnight camping trip next time.”

“Yeah, I had a lot of fun, too. Thank *you* for getting such good grades in school. Maybe if you keep it up, we can all go on a camping trip in the summer.”

They made their way down to the boat ramp at Lafayette Blue Springs State Park where the van was waiting for them. The group

loaded up their canoes and kayaks, and then Spencer drove the group back to their cars.

The End of a Long, Long Day

Jonathan slept for most of the ride home. He dreamt about camping in the forest and shrieking owls. His mom woke him up when they got home. He grabbed his gear out of the car and ran inside to tell the rest of the family about their adventure.

“Lizzy, I saw a real ghost out there! You woulda been so scared. It was really cool. I’ll have to show you some of the trees I learned next time we visit the park. I wonder if all bottomland hardwood forests have the same kind of trees. Mom, can we go to another bottomland forest sometime?”

Jonathan could hardly remember all of the things he wanted to share with his father and little sister. That night at dinner, he retold the ghost story. He told his family that he would never be absolutely sure if Spencer was right about the barred owl.

“Just maybe,” Jonathon said, “it really was the governor’s wife keeping an eye on the cemetery and the bottomland forest around the ruins in Ellaville.”

Places to see bottomland hardwoods in Florida:

Bottomland hammocks may be found scattered throughout Florida. Some good examples of these ecosystems may be seen in:

Ichetucknee River State Park

O'Leno State Park

Apalachicola National Forest

San Felasco Hammock

Suwannee River State Park

Dead Lakes State Recreation Area

Wakulla Springs State Park

St. Mark's National Wildlife Refuge

Faver-Dykes State Park

Silver River State Park

Myakka River State Park.

This story takes place in a real park, the Suwannee River State Park. While the characters are fictional, the details about the plants and animals are factual. The story of the Town of Ellaville, governor and his wife are mostly true. There is no record of haunting by the late Amelia Drew, however the governor did pass away two days after his wife. If you would like to find out more about Ellaville and other ghost towns in Florida, visit

<http://www.ghosttowns.com/states/fl/ellaville.html>

Links to learn more:

Bottomland Hardwoods Fact Sheet from Electronic Data
Information Source of UF/IFAS Extension--

<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/uw316>

EPA

<http://water.epa.gov/type/wetlands/bottomland.cfm>