

A Brief Essay on Trees by Herb Everett, Oregon

I find myself most at peace in forests, especially old growth forests. Forest ecosystems are special places. They say that forests are the lungs of the world. Trees release oxygen, sequester vast amounts of carbon, provide homes for all kinds of critters, and produce wood and other products which have been essential to human civilization.

My partner Nancy and I visit forests often. In this brief essay I'll share some pictures from a few of the special forests we have visited.



LONG ISLAND: Willapa Bay

Many years ago, along the American Northwest Coast, we spent a couple of days camping on Long Island in Willapa Bay, in the state of Washington. Willapa Bay is the second largest estuary on the Pacific Coast and Long Island is the largest West Coast estuarine island. After being industrially logged for decades, it is now part of the Willapa National Wildlife Refuge. It is accessible only by boat at high tide.



Many of the trees on the island are Western Redcedar (*Thuja plicata*). Some of them, especially in the 274 acre Don Bonker Cedar Grove, are over 900 years old and 150' tall. There are many large snags, which provide shelter for wildlife and then nutrients for new generations of trees.





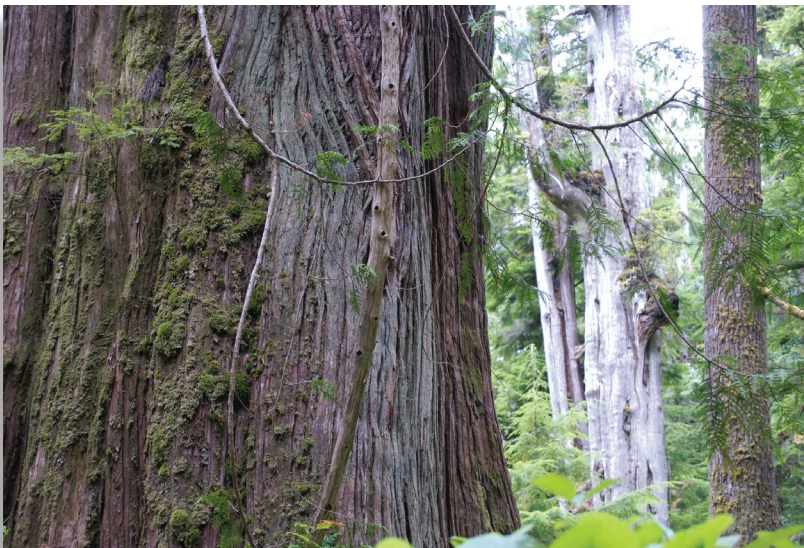
Many of the stumps left from the industrial forest days are large and still show signs of 'springboard' logging. To me they sometimes appear ghostly. Many of these old stumps are already 50 to 100 years old.

For a great description of these and other aspects of the Willapa forest, I recommend reading Robert Michael Pyle's book *Wintergreen*.

With annual rainfall of about 110 inches, the forests of Long Island grow quickly and densely, with salal, huckleberry and salmonberry bushes carpeting the forest floor.



Western Redcedar has been essential to Northwest First Peoples. These trees have provided the materials for shelter, clothing, tools and transportation—from birth to death, from cradles to coffins. The easily split, rot-resistant wood is used for dug-out canoes, house planks and posts, and totem poles. New and pliable roots are woven into baskets and cradles. The wood is also an excellent fuel for drying fish, as it burns with little smoke.



BUTTE FORK of the Applegate River

Farther south and more inland, Nancy and I have hiked and camped along the Butte Fork of the Applegate River in the Red Buttes Wilderness of northern California. The forest there is very diverse, with old growth Sugar Pine (*Pinus lambertiana*), Chinquapin (*Chrysolepis chrysophylla*), Douglas-Fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) and many other species. The Sugar



Pines, the tallest (some 250') and largest species of pine, and chinquapin are especially impressive. In most of the area we live in (near Eugene, Oregon), we see only a variety of chinquapin that are just large bushes, whereas in Red Buttes they are 80' trees.

The area features wet and cool winters, but hot summers. It is an area prone to fires, including a major wildfire in 2020. The big sugarpines though are extremely fire resistant, with many being 250-300 years old. In our 2025 hike there we saw small fire scars on some of the big pines, but not much damage, whereas, nearby, other trees were completely burned.



One of the rare plants found along the trail is Snow Plant (*Sarcodes sanguinea*), a parasitic plant growing on the saprophytic fungi growing on the roots of old conifers.



GREAT BASIN NATIONAL PARK, NEVADA AND WHITE MOUNTAINS, CALIFORNIA

Here, we hiked amongst some of the oldest living trees in the world, Bristlecone Pines (*Pinus longaeva*). In the White Mountains of eastern California, one of the trees in the Methuselah Grove was carbon dated to be 4,856 years old!

Both at Great Basin and in the White Mountains, these trees live in extremely harsh environments. They live in arid mountains at over 10,000 feet elevation. Much of the 13 inches of average annual precipitation falls as snow. It seems they like it there in part because little else of any size

can survive in such harsh surroundings. They often appear ragged, growing in unusual twists and turns, often with only some parts of the tree still productive. They are a wonder to behold.



STEENS MOUNTAIN

Finally, in eastern Oregon, we have hiked and camped many times at Steens Mountain. Not quite as high in elevation as the White Mountains, and with more rain and snowfall, Steens has lovely forests of Quaking aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) and Western Juniper (*Juniperus occidentalis*). Hiking there in the fall is especially colorful. The area hosts populations of many types of animals as well, from sandhill cranes in the Malheur Wildlife Preserve to the wild horses that now proliferate along the range.



So much for this brief tour of forests that are a bit off the beaten path. They are indeed special places worthy of our care and support. But then so are the forests in our own hometowns. Those forested places we frequent regularly provide us cooling shade and quiet relief from the everyday grind. I usually feel physically and spiritually uplifted after a spending time in the woods. And I hope you do, too!

In our age of global climate change, I think it's especially important to protect our forests and help them rejuvenate.

A few of the organizations working to protect forests are:

American Forests: <https://www.americanforests.org>

Sierra Club: <https://www.sierraclub.org>

In my state of Oregon, among others we have:

Cascadia Wildlands: <https://www.cascwild.org>

Oregon Wild: <https://www.oregonwild.org>

Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center: <https://www.kswild.org>

Douglas-Fir National Monument: <https://www.douglasfirnationalmonument.org>

And check out your local Friends of Trees organization: <https://www.friendsoftrees.org>

