

A BIG TREE
Adventure
IN BOGACHIEL VALLEY

Traversing trails and rapids through one of America's most pristine forests, a big-tree hunter searches for a champion that few living souls have seen.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TYLER WILLIAMS

STEPPING INTO THE RAINFOREST, I stood motionless, letting my eyes adjust to the dim light. Three gargantuan Sitka spruce trees came into focus, growing in a perfect row from a carpet of coarse moss that covered everything — decaying logs, huckleberry bushes, tree branches, vertical trunks. The suffocating cloak of dull green cast a stillness throughout the forest, and I was glad for a little creek that brought some cheer to the scene, noisily bouncing along beneath a tangle of alder to my left. Uphill, the distant glow of daylight indicated a flat far above. This is where I planned to stumble and crawl for most of the day in search of a single tree — a national champion silver fir that big-tree guru Robert Van Pelt measured more than a decade ago. He surmised that he and his companion, canopy researcher Steve Sillett, were “maybe the only humans to have visited this tree.” And I was just going to wander into the woods and find it. Can you say needle in a haystack?

Within minutes, I reached an obvious game trail that led uphill. The path was clear at first and then vanished as it tracked beneath obscuring sword ferns. But it was there. My feet could feel it. The hidden trail crested a benchland — a long, level strip of land with slopes on each side. They're usually quite narrow; this one was as wide as a two-lane highway. I was creeping along the edge of this terrace when a large, moss-encrusted trunk made me pause. The trunk wasn't particularly big compared to the Sitka spruce behemoths nearby; yet, it held my gaze, transfixed. I looked up out of habit to confirm the species. The needles had a spiny appearance and were highlighted like they were frosted. I froze. This was a silver fir. I looked again at the trunk and its unique shape, similar yet infinitely distinct from all others, like a human face. It was familiar. This was The Tree.



Paddling down the Bogachiel River

Pacific Ocean westerlies. Those ocean winds carried wave after wave of moisture-laden air that unleashed wet, heavy snowstorms onto the Olympics so deep that even the long days of summer could not melt it all. Glaciers formed. The methodical rivers of ice gouged at layers of sandstone and shale, and when a warming climate forced their retreat at the end of the Pleistocene 10,000 years ago, a wheel-spoke pattern of drainages remained, emanating from the center of the Olympic massif. On the west — the ocean side of the mountains — today’s valleys line up in formation, separated by ridges that act as open arms to the moist air, funneling and squeezing the atmosphere as it climbs toward the regal heights. The river valleys draining the summits derive their names from native tribes: Wynoochee, Hump-tullips, Quinalt, Queets, Hoh and Bogachiel. To modern explorers, each tongue-twisting title drips with the promise of adventure.

THE HUNT FOR A CHAMPION

This is quintessential wilderness, where deep, dank forests of fantastically large trees hide inescapable gorges that open into idyllic parks of bigleaf maple and lolling elk. Above, the primeval forest opens a high country rich with wildflowers of purple, yellow and orange; mountainsides painted Kelly green and streaked with bright, white shocks of snow; bewitching hemlocks swooping over alpine lakes; and high peaks that rise above it all, jagged black spires that emerge from precariously hanging blue glaciers overburdened with snowpack. To travel through this landscape, one must read the terrain carefully, move with patience and determination and have a special trick or two up his sleeve. My secret weapon came in the form of a pack raft, an ingenious little boat that weighs just five pounds, stashes easily in a backpack and inflates to become a whitewater-worthy river craft. This unique piece of equipment would be my escape from the impenetrable forests of the Bogachiel.

Hiking along a manicured park trail en route to the river’s source, I was just another backpacker except for the bright-yellow paddle in my hand. The unusual walking stick caught the attention of a ranger as we passed. “Keep an eye out for any sign of the German man who disappeared in there,” she advised after learning of my route. He was simply gone, vanished, dissolved, swallowed by the beautiful, gnarly Olympic Mountains that hold 10 million nooks capable of the deed. Supposition has it that

This particular tree, Van Pelt’s Hades Creek fir, had lost its place in the *National Register of Big Trees* after a decade without measurement, so field checking its status was an important step to re-list the same tree or nominate a new one. As it turned out, my expedition through Washington’s Bogachiel River Valley did both.

THE VALLEY OF THE SILVER FIR

The Bogachiel could be called the valley of the silver fir, for nowhere else are *Abies amabilis* as prevalent. Although the species forms pure stands from Crater Lake to southeast Alaska, the high-mountain habitats, where silver fir is most common, lay buried under snow for six to eight months a year, and the growing season is brief. These snowbound silvers can form lovely deep groves of big, mature trees, but for the real giants, one must go low, into the valleys, where the winters are mild and the trees grow almost throughout the year.

The Bogachiel is such a valley, carved out of the basement rock of the Olympic Mountains, where 50 million years ago the sea floor smooched onto the continent, giving rise to a landform that stood straight in the path of

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Caption to come...

he dropped into the upper Bogachiel thinking it was the well-traveled Hoh Valley farther south. I eased off the trail with trepidation, trusting my plan to emerge from the forests five days hence.

With one hand on a huckleberry bush and the other stabbing my paddle into the duff, I shuffled my feet downward, edging into the earth as if I were side-slipping with skis down a double-black-diamond slope. More than once my feet lost their tenuous grip, landing me on my back and grasping a handful of stems. Incentive to keep moving came with swarms of mosquitoes that circled my head at each rest. Progress was slow but measurable, with changing tree species indicating the descent. Mountain hemlocks were replaced with western hemlocks. Alaska cedars changed to red cedars. Huge, perfect trunks of Douglas firs appeared, bullying all other trees aside. Just as the rumble of the Bogachiel River penetrated the quiet woods, a silver fir emerged, arrow straight and soaring 200 feet into the sky.

Most field guides report silver firs as growing 75 to 150 feet tall, but in the Bogachiel, they routinely reach 180 feet, and the Hades tree was estimated at 218 feet. Shelter from adjacent hemlocks and Douglas firs certainly aids the Bogachiel silvers in their stature. The species has shallow roots that are susceptible to toppling winds, but the calm created by the Bogachiel’s 200-foot canopy poses little threat. Besides the windbreak, the shelter of the Olympic Rainforest creates nearly eternal shade, and shade is one thing that *Abies amabilis* can’t do without. Following forest fires, a rare but important

natural process in the Olympics, silver firs are absent among re-colonization species like Douglas fir. It isn’t until deep shade returns to the forest — 400 years after a burn — that silver firs can re-establish. Add another 500 years to the cycle until the shade-loving trees mature, and nearly a millennium has passed before silver firs are important players in a mixed-conifer forest. Even in the drippy, moist Olympics, 1,000 years is a long time between fires, but that is precisely the interval currently at work in the Bogachiel, and silver firs flourish.

Still, they are rarely the dominant tree. Western hemlocks ruled my surroundings as I followed a mulchy, soft game trail through the upper Bogachiel Valley, waiting for the pre-pubescent stream to grow into a floatable river. The game-trail hiking afforded opportunity to scan for extra-large trunks, and at noon on my first day in the valley, one reeled me in. I might have breezed on past, but the tree kept re-emerging through the cathedral forest, 200 yards distant at the edge of the valley bottom. Its trunk measurements were immediately impres-



Looking down into the Bogachiel Valley

sive, but it wasn't until I paced off the tree's crown that I began to appreciate its true size. A dead top extended 30 feet beyond any live foliage, making it one of the tallest-known silver firs: more than 220 feet from forest floor to highest snag. I soon passed three more *Amabilis* that were big enough to measure, but none approached the size of the dead-top tree, and it became apparent that this one might be a new record holder.

As the game trail splintered into a boggy dead-fall maze, the river, small as it was, began to look better. I inflated the boat, dry-bagged my essentials and set off. It was true pleasure to be floating, even if I did have to bounce and slide and wiggle through the rocks that were inches or less below the surface. More boulders, a narrower riverbed, a rapid that sluiced me through a chute: Changes were afoot. The river plunged ahead, forcing me to paddle hard for shore above an obvious waterfall. Standing, I could see grey walls downstream and the river ensconced within. Despite the ominous



The newly-discovered champion tree, possible rival to the legendary Hades Creek silver fir

view, I was elated. Now, I knew exactly where I was, having pored over satellite photos of this dark cleft for weeks. In the morning, my boat was again stashed away as I hiked around the treacherous canyon.

Cresting a chest-high log, I was stopped in my tracks by a stark, white color. A clean, bleached skeleton of a bull elk rested at my feet. I had been

following a trail of fresh elk traffic for two days, yet this was the first one I'd actually seen. These forest-savvy Roosevelt elk are the largest mammals on the Olympic Peninsula, which lacks both moose and grizzly bears due to glacial isolation.

The peninsula was a beacon of rock amidst a sea of ice prior to the last 10,000 years, and a high level of endemic species resulted. There are 15 plants found nowhere but here and a few others that are noticeably absent, like silver fir's counterpart, noble fir. A thriving population of black bear and elk remains, however, and they forged a way for me along the edge of tributary canyons streaked with waterfalls.

The route led through massive cedar trees, one of which was decorated with huge burls that exploded into a horizontal platform of wood at 120 feet, sending up several spires that stood in the erect formation of a menorah candle. The cedar grove led to a once-productive spruce flat covered in several feet of cobble from a recent landslide, where old trees stood foliage-less, waiting to crash onto the apocalyptic landscape. The map indicated a flat ahead, near the confluence of the river's North Fork. In reality, gorge walls plunged vertically to the river, which spilled over jumbled rock piles far below. I realized then that the tall forest canopy was too dense to allow an accurate topographic portrayal from an aerial photo. This was terra incognita, and I would find what I find, assumptions be damned.

A fern gulch offered access back to the water, and I re-launched in the raft. An hour later, I emerged from the canyon into the broad, lower Bogachiel Valley. The Pacific's grey marine

layer methodically advanced upstream. That night, the unmistakable odor of ocean dew wafted through my tent.

HADES CREEK

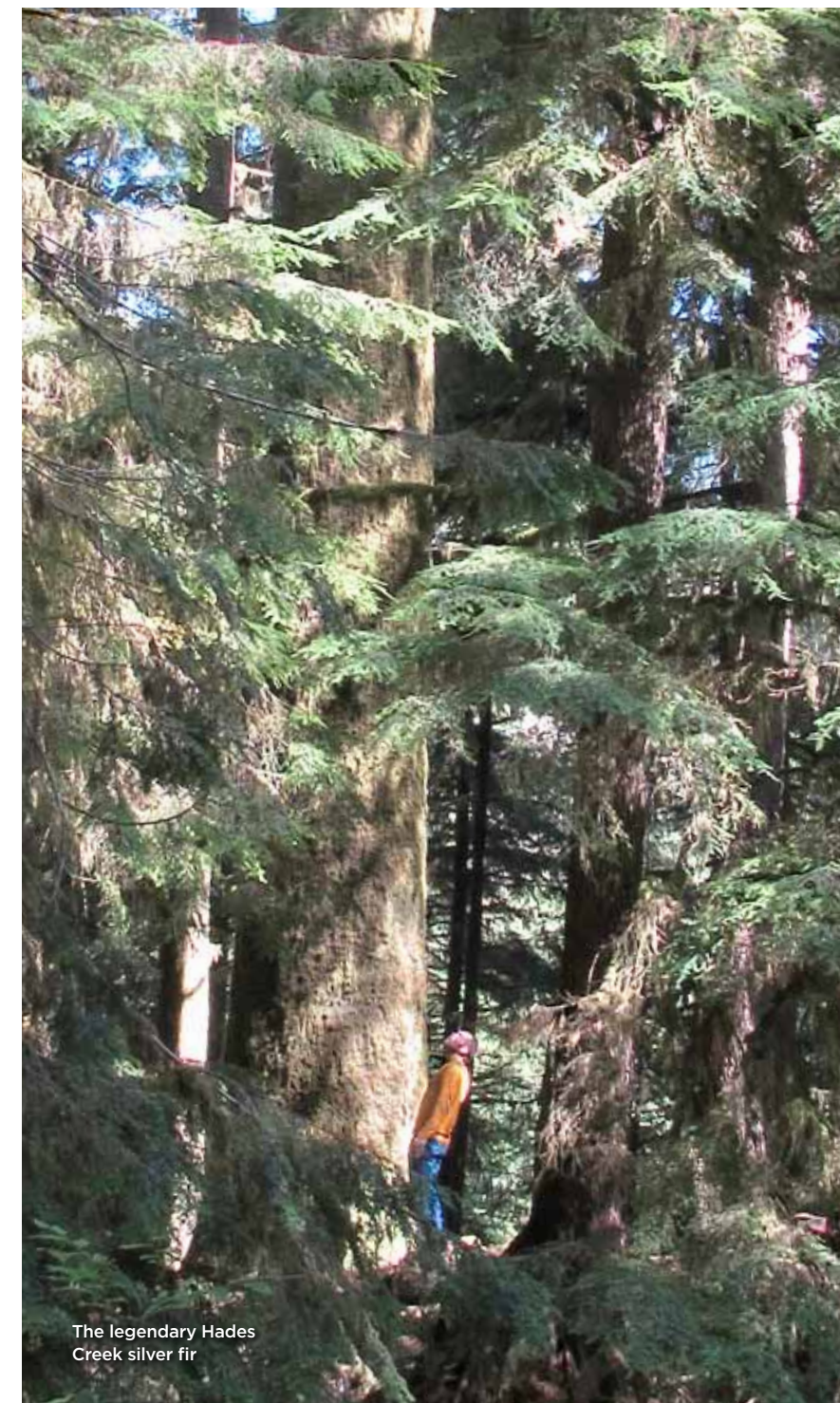
The grey broke early, allowing swaths of sun to lighten the somber lid of morning. I floated beneath clinging cedars that lurched over the water and past driftwood logs with roots reaching 30 feet into the air. Arriving at Hades Creek, I prepared for an all-day bushwhack that was thankfully cut short after encountering the familiar-looking trunk of the Hades Creek tree. Now, it was simply a question of measurements. Would my discovery from the upper valley stand up to this old champion?

The circumference tape indicated four inches more for the Hades tree. I carefully paced off the crown, double checking in two directions before calculating the numbers and comparing its crown to the upper tree's — dead even. The race was still wide open, with the marginally ascertainable height category to determine the champion. I walked away with my clinometer, sighting the tree from different angles, hemming and hawing. It looked very similar to the other tree, right up to the dead crown. Without bias from my notes, I wrote down a number — 220 — and returned to my pack to crunch figures. It was two feet shorter than the upper tree, but the four inches of girth advantage meant that Hades would retain her crown by an almost indecipherable two points.

With such similar results, these two silver firs are evidently representative of maximum size for the species. But the chance exists that a still larger specimen is out there. Before leaving the valley of silver firs, I found one more big tree — and it sits right beside a trail, not back in Sasquatch country like the other two. On the broad saddle of Indian Pass, between the Bogachiel and the next drainage north, stands another *Amabilis* fir with measurements virtually equal to the others. It only lacks in height, presently topping out at just less than 200 feet. Given the fact that both the upper Bogachiel tree and the Hades tree have dead crowns and are on their way out, this Indian Pass silver fir might gain the crown someday. In any case, the reign of champion silver firs is likely to reside in one very special rainforest haunt — the Bogachiel. 🌲

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The legendary Hades Creek silver fir



Measuring the possible champion tree found in the upper Bogachiel Valley