Trees as old as time

Bonner County’s ‘big trees’ are part of its long history

By Hannah Combs
Reader Contributor

My first spring in Sandpoint, I visited a friend at her cabin and she wouldn’t let me leave without a visit to “the big tree.” The property behind her home turned into a mass of creek channels during spring runoff, and she lent me thigh-high muck boots to slog through the frigid water. Clinging to shrubs, I propelled my way across, only looking up when I was on dry land again. I was standing in the shadow of the most incredible tree I had ever seen, a lone western red cedar whose fellows had been cut or fallen decades before.

More than eight feet in diameter, it was stretching out into the creek, looking as though it might go for a walk at any minute. The interplay with water through the years had sculpted its lower trunk into a fantastical twisting growth of burl and roots.

Coming from the Midwest, this first encounter with a “big peckers, and old growth stands tree” was a moving experience, with waves of pure wonder pouring over me. For those who have dense understory that provides everything from roofing shingles to guitar soundboards, at Schweitzer is one iconic example. Nestled near the towering cedar can be discovered in the winter or summer months, though a summer hike might entail more of an expedition.

Though neither native to North Idaho nor as imposing as the cedars, the magnolia tree’s history goes back much further. Known for its exquisite ephemeral pale blooms, the magnolia was one of the earliest flowering plants, developing during the Cretaceous Period. The fossil record shows magnolias on Earth as early as 95 million years ago.

The oldest magnolias are North Idaho. With blooms that usually appear before the leaves, magnolias always put on a stunning early spring display, which can be seen throughout our community.

Bonner County is home to a few record trees of its own. The University of Idaho Big Tree Program recognizes six Bonner County trees as the largest in the state: the Douglas maple, red alder, butternut, subalpine larch, paper birch and black cottonwood.

The record-holding subalpine larch can be found near the upper Roman Nose lake. The paper birch and black cottonwood can both be seen on the Gooby farm near the base of Gooby Road. The Sandpoint Tree Committee’s “Outstanding Trees of Sandpoint, Idaho” booklet says of this black cottonwood, “This multistem giant measures 8 feet in diameter and reaches a height of 113 feet.” The black cottonwood’s sap was used by some Native American tribes as a glue or even for waterproofing, and today its flower buds are used in some perfume fragrances.

Whether your favorite tree is hidden deep in an old growth forest or on colorful display for everyone to see, take a moment this spring to visit your tree and stand in awe of its beauty. The history of these ancient species precedes us, and there is much to learn from their grace and resilience.

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