



# Giant Red

## In an Ancient Grove

BY DENNIS PENCE

**I**t's like walking through a cathedral," Marty said during an over-the-fence conversation early one sunny morning.

She was speaking of the Giant Red Cedar National Recreation Trail less than a dozen miles from the tiny town of Elk River in northern Idaho's heavily timbered backcountry. Dominating these huge trees is a record western red cedar that

has been growing for three thousand years and is eighteen feet in diameter at breast height. I was hooked by her vivid description.

Having spent my childhood in a land of big trees on the Washington coast, I had to see this "cathedral" for myself. The next day my better half, Teri, and I went in search of Elk River's big cedars.

Less than a two-hour drive from our Kooskia area home, we arrived in Elk River. I had been to the community several times over the last few years

but, strangely enough, had never heard of the Giant Cedar Grove. I pinpointed the location on a forest service map, yet still spent a few minutes hunting for the road that traverses the dozen or so miles up Elk Creek to the grove. With a population of only around 125 people in Elk River, the Elk Creek Road couldn't be that hard to find. I drove through town, spied Elk Creek Valley, and took a road to the left. When the road started climbing out of the valley, I decided I took a wrong turn.

ABOVE: Judah Wright examines the Giant Western Red Cedar near Elk River, the largest tree east of the Pacific Crest.

How does one get lost in tiny Elk River?

Perhaps a closer look at the map was warranted. Or better yet, how about returning to town and asking someone? What a novel idea. Teri always says asking directions isn't something most men are capable of doing, and I'm an avid member of that group.

Simply put, I discovered that I had to make a right-angle turn from Front Street, which became Larch Street. After it turned to gravel, I went another quarter mile or so and turned left onto the well-maintained Elk Creek Road 382, following the signs.

On the way, I discovered there is another grove of big cedars up Morris Creek. For now though, we proceeded to the Giant Cedar Grove.

I'm not sure what I expected, but certainly not this. Having grown up in the rain forest of Washington, I was used to big trees, but this was as good as any of the groves I saw as a kid. After an easy hike of less than a couple hundred yards on a paved trail, we came to the record tree. It's not only the largest western red cedar away from the coast but also the biggest tree of any species east of the Pacific Crest on the North American continent.

This cedar was more awesome than most "record" ones I saw in Washington. For one thing, it is still living. Most I saw along the coast were snags with a few green limbs. This tree has green limbs all the way to its full height of 177 feet.

Imagine three thousand growth rings in its eighteen feet of diameter. It was mind-boggling to think of this tree as three millenia old and still alive. I tried to envision what the forest was like when this giant was a sapling, and decided it must have been the same—only more of it. Huge cedars in the wet draws, and mostly white pine interspersed with red fir



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DENNIS PERKINS

ABOVE: Towering cedars dominate the forest in the Giant Cedar Grove.

elsewhere in the upper basin. At the time of Jesus, this tree was already a thousand years old and a giant. Another thousand years later, when the Vikings were setting foot on North American soil, it was the behemoth it is today.

I pondered the odds of survival of this ancient mini-forest. Since it first appeared, wildfire would have been a threat. In contemporary years alone, these trees escaped the Great Fire of 1910, and the saws of a nation hungry for wood products. The latter is quite the feat in itself, since the abandoned site of Potlatch Lumber Company's Camp C is only a few miles away. Most of the Upper Elk Creek Basin was logged in the 1920s and 1930s.

Being in the heart of Idaho's coastal disjunct forest helps to explain the survivability of large trees this far inland (see "Disjunct," *IDAHO magazine*, July 2016). But other factors play a role as well. Distance from other competing trees is one such factor and location in a wet draw with an adequate water supply is another.

Marty was right. It is like walking through an ancient cathedral. "Spiritual" was a word that came to mind as we quietly strolled the forest. One refrains from breaking the silence with idle talk. Only the wind could be heard high above us in the treetops. The forest floor was lush

and green, carpeted with bracken fern and other disjunct species. The flora tones were soft and luxuriant, as only nature can do.

The grove is barrier-free for the most part, with lengthy paved trails suitable for wheelchair navigation through the giant trees. Teri and I had the place almost entirely to ourselves. We encountered only two other couples the afternoon we were there.

A few hours and many photos later, we reluctantly got in our pickup truck for the return drive to civilization. Of course, I couldn't leave this area without making what I thought would be a quick jaunt into the nearby Perkins Cedar Grove. The jaunt turned out to be a twelve-mile round trip up Morris Creek Road 1969. But it was well worth the extra miles.

Perkins Cedar Grove is every bit as impressive as Giant Cedar Grove. Huge cedars cover an entire hillside. A rough half-mile loop trail traverses much of the grove. Not a barrier-free trail, but still a trail. A little rough in places, but traversable.

With the sun on the wane, we left Perkins Grove and headed to Elk River, with one last stop in mind. No trip to Elk River would be complete without a stop at the lodge and store. Their huckleberry ice cream is out of this world.

Cones in hand, we headed home. ■