Tis the season for a family Christmas tree hunt

— By Craig F. Eisenbeis, Correspondent —

Although the first signs of Christmas started showing up in local stores even before Halloween, now that Thanksgiving is in the rearview mirror, the Christmas season is officially underway. And, for many people, one of the first things that comes to mind is finding a Christmas tree; and there is no better way to accomplish that than by staging a family hunt for a wild Christmas tree in our neighboring National Forest.

The first step, of course, is to obtain a Christmas tree permit from the local Forest Service office or one of several commercial outlets. "We are seeing a lot of happy faces in the office," said Sisters District Ranger Ian Reid. "People definitely want to get out and find their perfect Christmas tree."

Regardless of a person's cultural background, nearly everyone in our society has grown up in the shadow of the Christmas tree, making it a familiar — and inescapable — sign of the season. Accordingly, the Christmas tree is usually accepted as a neutral and secular symbol of the holiday season.

The name "Christmas," of course, is derived from the term "Christ's Mass," which is a celebration of the Christian tradition of the Nativity of Jesus. While the actual birth date of Jesus is not known, it is generally acknowledged that the date of December 25 was somewhat arbitrarily selected, most likely to conform to preexisting seasonal festivals, most notably the Roman Saturnalia.

Initially, the celebration of Christmas was not an integral part of the Christian faith and was not even observed until hundreds of years after the event. The actual religious observance of the date did not begin until the middle of the fourth century. Christmas trees, as we know them today, did not appear until much, much later.

Actually, there is evidence that the Christmas tree had its beginnings in pagan traditions dating back more than a thousand years. The tree concept was adopted into Christian custom in the 16th or 17th centuries, a tradition that is generally considered to have begun in northern Europe, with Germany most often cited as the point of origin. By the mid-19th century, Christmas trees had also become common throughout Britain.

By the time that the first settlers of European descent arrived in Sisters Country, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Christmas tree custom was well established. Back then, obtaining a Christmas tree simply meant going out into the forest, cutting the perfect tree, and bringing it home to decorate. That was traditional then, and it still can be today.

If your idea of a traditional Christmas does not involve an artificial tree or an urban Christmas tree lot, those of us in Sisters Country have a ready alternative. With thousands of acres of National Forest surrounding Sisters, it is easy to make a Christmas tree experience the centerpiece of a memorable outdoor family event. The first step, of course, is to obtain that Christmas tree permit.

Christmas tree permits cost $5 each, and up to five permits are permitted per household. The Northwest's Douglas fir tree is commonly considered the nation's Christmas tree. In fact, Douglas fir Christmas trees are shipped all over the world; and Oregon leads all others in their export. Douglas firs are common in many areas near Sisters, as are true fir species such as noble, white, Pacific silver, red, and grand firs.

"For some (forest) visitors, this may be their first time cutting a tree, but for others, like me and my family, this has become an annual tradition," said Reid. "We encourage the community to use and enjoy their public lands, and please be safe..."

So far this year, the snow level in the Sisters area has lingered in the higher elevations, which — for the time being, anyway — can enhance tree-hunting opportunities, since many of the prime fir trees are found at slightly higher elevations outside of town. So, now is the time to take advantage of that rapidly closing door of opportunity.

Keep in mind that a Forest Service permit is valid only on Forest Service lands, so tree hunters must be certain that the selected tree is not on private land. If unsure, it is a good idea to have a Forest Service map that clearly shows forest boundaries. Trees selected for cutting must be at least 150 feet from state highways, picnic areas, campgrounds, or other developed sites. Trees within 300 feet of streams and lakes are also off limits.

Other guidelines include selecting a tree that

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The Fly Fisher's Place

The Fly Fisher's Place serves up gadgets, flies and equipment that will please any angler on your Christmas list — from kids to adults, men and women, at all levels of skill and experience.

It's not all about the gear, though. If you have a fisher-person in your family, they will find joy in a gift certificate for one of The Fly Fisher's Place's extraordinary fishing expeditions. Many families coordinate with each other to send their fisherman on the trip of a lifetime — a gift that will never be forgotten. International trips to Chile, Belize and Tasmania make for extraordinary gifts of experience.

And while you're at it, get out there on the water. Owner Jeff Perin says that McKenzie River fishing is as good as it's ever been; East Lake makes for a very special experience, and never forget the local favorites, the Deschutes and the Metolius River.