

Tree

Continued from Page 1B

Romantic, but with a dose of realism

The idea of loading up the family and heading to the snowy mountains with handsaw in hand and kids in tow just feels romantic, especially if you're saving money.

I've taken advantage of this program three times now, and it is fun, but there also are downsides to consider. Gas money, hazardous driving conditions and no guarantee of that perfect tree all require a full-day adventure that won't appeal to everyone.

Last week, I loaded up three kids and two adults to go Christmas tree hunting in Willamette National Forest east of Salem and Detroit. I tracked the expenses, from food to gas, so that people will have a realistic idea of what this adventure really costs.

Getting the permit and homework

Up first is purchasing a permit from the U.S. Forest Service.

This year you can purchase one online through a very easy system at: <https://openforest.fs.usda.gov>. You can buy up to five Christmas tree permits for \$5 each, and I ended up getting two — one kid's tree and one adult tree for \$10.

While you're on the site, make sure to scan the rules, including: only take trees 15 feet or shorter and take the whole tree. Cutting off the top half is prohibited, but happens frequently when lazy tree hunters find a big tree and cut off the top eight feet, leaving a sad-looking half tree behind.

Also, I highly recommend either printing or taking screen shots of a section that helps with tree identification. You're allowed to harvest noble, pacific silver, Douglas and grand firs. You're not allowed to harvest whitebark pine, western white pine or Pacific yew.

To help tell them apart, there's a handy section that describes and has pictures of each species. I take screenshots so I have that information on my phone when we're outside cell phone range.

Finally, look at the map showing where harvest is allowed. It's most places in the forest, with exceptions for wilderness areas, near paved roads, trails and around campgrounds. Make sure to bring a Forest Service map for proper navigation.

Note: If you don't get your permit online, you can purchase it at Forest Service ranger stations or many local businesses.

Costs
Permits (2): \$10

Gearing up for the snow and picking a location

There are millions of trees in the forest, but to find the much-beloved noble,



Exploring snowy roads to find a Christmas tree in Willamette National Forest.

ZACH URNESS / STATESMAN JOURNAL

pacific silver or grand firs, and you generally have to explore higher than 3,500 feet.

This time of year, that often means heading into the snow.

So, I loaded up our 4-wheel drive SUV, brought chains along, and prepared for winter driving. We decided to target Forest Service roads around Big Springs and Maxwell Sno-Park off Highway 22 east of Detroit, which sits right around 3,600 feet.

If the snow is deep, buying a snow-park permit online is recommended through the DMV website. They offer great winter access and recreation across the state and cost \$25 for a full year or \$5 for one day. That way, you can park at the snow-park lot and simply head out in safety.

Luckily for us, there was only a few inches of wet snow and were we able to travel onto lightly snow-covered forest roads, which makes hunting easier but slightly more dangerous if you get stuck. We had a shovel, chains, and 4-wheel drive so felt confident.

Gas fill-up cost \$50, and after burning about a half tank total, went spend about \$20 to \$25. We also paid \$22 for Subway sandwiches and cookies in Mill City and brought a thermos of hot chocolate — a surefire way to keep kids happy.

Costs
Gas: \$20 to \$25
Food (optional): \$22
Sno-Park permit (optional, but recommend if deep snow): \$5 per day, or \$25 for full season

Finding the perfect tree not easy

Once we were above 3,500 feet and on Forest Service Roads we felt safe in traveling, we drove to promising-looking spots and then jumped out to search and play in the snow.

The kids, outfitted in heavy jackets and snow pants, paid attention to our

tree hunt for about 10 to 15 minutes before deciding that a snowball fight was a better option.

It was just as well.

Maybe I'm a perfectionist, but it always takes a lot of searching to find the right tree. We were seeking a smaller, 4- to 5-foot tree, and a larger 8 foot tree, but that perfect blend of height, species, fullness and Christmasy-ness isn't easy to locate right away.

So I joined the snowball fight, and built a snowman with the kids before enjoying some sandwiches and hot chocolate.

Then, we headed back into the car and looked out the window for promising spots. It arrived around 3,700 feet as we came across an open area, outside the main canopy, where the trees were fuller and there were plenty of noble, grand and Pacific silver to choose from.

People had clearly targeted this area, as we found a few stumps. But after some searching, we found a perfect kid's tree — a wonderfully shaped noble fir. The kids grabbed the handsaw and got to work, with 5-year-old Lucy giving cutting a shot before her buddy Uriah took over. Three-year-old Rollie provided emotional support.

Eventually, we got it down and the kids hauled part way back to the car before another snowball fight broke out.

Yet finding the ideal "big tree" — the centerpiece of our Christmas — was tough. As the kids played, I searched the forest, coming across a number of "almost perfect" noble firs. There was always some flaw — too skinny, not enough branches, too tall or short. In the wild, the perfect tree is hard to find.

With time running down — and the 3-year-old sowing the seeds of mutiny — I chose a nice, full-bodied Pacific silver fir almost exactly eight feet tall. It wasn't as luscious as the type you'd find at Christmas tree lots or a U-pick spot, but it was a handsome devil. We strapped both trees atop the truck before heading home.

fore heading home.

So, is it worthwhile?

Both trees that we brought home weren't as perfectly symmetrical as you'd get commercially, but the wife and kids were very happy.

The kids most of all, after a day in the snow.

We spent about \$82, including everything, but we could have done it for as little as \$30 without the stop at Subway and sno-park permit, which we didn't end up needing.

But keep in mind I already had a lot of stuff like a shovel, tire chains and a handsaw, plus snow clothes for the kids, so we didn't need any extras.

In the end, this type of adventure isn't about saving money. We did get two trees, but we also built two snowmen, had four snowball fights and drank one thermos of hot chocolate.

Christmas tree hunting in the national forest is about the experience and not the price.

Although the price — way below \$78 per tree — doesn't hurt either.

Cost breakdown

Permits for two Christmas trees: \$10

Gas: \$20 to \$25

Three sandwiches and cookies from Subway (optional): \$22

Sno-Park permit (optional but recommended in deep snow): \$25 for full year, \$5 for the day

Total: \$30 to \$62/\$82

Gear you'd also need/want

Handsaw
Measuring tape
Straps/rope to get tree onto car
Warm clothes
Tire chains
Thermos of hot chocolate
Shovel

Before you go

Call or stop at a Forest Service ranger station for tips on best places to find trees

Check road conditions at TripCheck.com. You can see how snow is along the road at various locations, which should let you know what to expect driving wise on non-plowed Forest Service roads.

Check weather at National Weather Service

Brings a US Forest Service map
Plan for a full day trip

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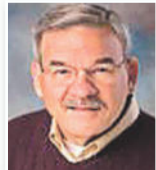
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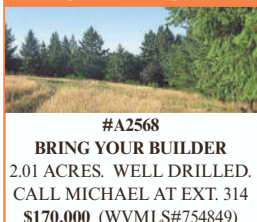
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