



Doerner Fir

It's Oregon vs. Washington for the Douglas fir crown.

The timber industry in Oregon has had no better friend than Mark Hatfield. As governor from 1959-67, and then as Senator from 1967-97, he sponsored one bill after another that mandated the wholesale liquidation of ancient forests on public lands. With perverse irony, he delighted in goading his Washington colleagues about the superior size of Oregon's Douglas fir trees.

In 1962, Oregon's "Clatsop Fir" was toppled in the Columbus Day storm and a Washington tree claimed the national title. "I want to assure you that your champion's crown must perforce rest uneasy in view of the obviously more favorable habitat for growth of large trees in Oregon," Hatfield wrote to Washington's governor. "Surely there is a tree somewhere in Oregon's magnificent forest lands which is of equal or greater stature than the Clatsop Fir. As soon as this tree is found you will be notified."

It took 13 years before a new record Doug was located in Oregon — which promptly blew down in another November storm. It wasn't until 1991 that the Doerner Fir, which dwarfed the Washington competition, was discovered west of Roseburg.

Enter Bob Van Pelt, an obsessive record stalker, who located the current national champion on the Olympic National Forest in the late '90s. Today, Washington retains big tree bragging rights, although Van Pelt agrees that Oregon *should* have the largest tree, but for the fact that the ideal growing conditions found in Oregon's coastal valleys are also the scene of the most intensive clearcutting on earth.

It's a long drive to see a second-place finisher, but the Doerner Fir is worth the trip. To get there, drive I-5 south of Eugene for 65 miles. Take the Roseburg Garden Valley exit (#125). Take a right off the exit onto Garden Valley Boulevard. At the first light, take a left and buy a Coos Bay District/Siskiyou National Forest Recreation Map from the Roseburg BLM headquarters.

Continuing west on Garden Valley Boulevard, stick to the left lane and turn left onto Melrose Road, two miles from the freeway exit. Travel Melrose Road for five miles to a T-intersection and take a right on Flournoy Valley Road (Douglas County Route 51). Take 51 for six miles and make

a right on the Coos Bay Wagon Road. In 6.1 miles, stay right on Burnt Mountain Road (BLM Road 28-8-16.0). In 7.3 miles, stay left on 28-8-16. In 4.7 miles take a left on 27-9-21 (sign for Brummet Creek).

Up to this point, the roads have been paved and easy to drive (watch for log trucks). 27-9-21 is a single-track gravel road with several rough spots, but doable in a passenger car. Stay to the right and find the trailhead in 4.3 miles. The trail is about a half mile long and poorly maintained. It's not a strenuous hike, but you'll have to navigate around lots of downed wood.

Don't be intimidated. Buy the map and make the trip; you won't regret it. The big tree aside, this trail will take you through some of the finest cathedral forest in the Coast Range. Signs along the trail claim that Oregon still holds the record.

Champion trees are determined by a complicated formula that awards points based on height, trunk circumference, and crown spread. The Doerner Fir is 329 feet tall, 48 feet taller than the record Washington tree. It's 11.5 feet across, 2 feet skinnier than its counterpart to the north. Our tree's crown is also slightly less broad.

The Doerner Fir contains enough wood to build five homes and weighs more than two fully grown blue whales.

The big tree competition's not over — and Canada may be the team to beat. In 1998 Van Pelt located a new record, a Douglas fir in British Columbia that is a staggering 14 feet in diameter. There are a number of largely unexplored — and unlogged — coastal valleys in B.C. that will undoubtedly yield new tree records, although surely none as impressive as those that fed Oregon's mills in days past. The tragedy of old-growth logging in Oregon hasn't run its course yet, either. Not three miles from the Doerner Fir (off the 28-9-3 spur), the Coos Bay Bureau of Land Management District is proposing the East Fork Coquille timber sale, which would log trees more than eight feet in diameter and 450 years old. There are currently thousands of acres of old growth on the chopping block on BLM lands throughout the Oregon Coast Range.

In the past year, Washington federal forests have ceased all logging of ancient coastal Douglas fir.

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