

# Ancient trees at Teal Slough

BY REBECCA LEXA

The Northwest coast was once covered with huge trees — western red cedar and Sitka spruce, Douglas fir and western hemlock.

Imagine, if you will, endless forests full of towering giants that overshadowed the ferns, mosses and huckleberries. There might be spots here and there where wind or landslides had torn away all the trees years ago, leaving a meadow or some red alder trees to repair the damage. But much of the land away from the ocean would be wide swathes of old-growth forest.

Not anymore, of course. Decades of clear-cutting have left the land denuded, or covered in young forests that lack the diversity of species and age they once had. From the Astoria Bridge, you can see bare hillsides stripped of trees and vegetation.

There still remain a few small patches of old-growth forest north of the Columbia River. The Don Bonker Cedar Grove on Long Island in Willapa Bay is the better part of 300 acres populated by 1,000-year-old cedar trees.

Bonker, a former Washington state congressman, was instrumental in getting the grove added to Willapa National Wildlife Refuge so it would be protected in perpetuity.

Further east in the Willapa Hills, remnants of old growth remain in Ellsworth and Hendrickson canyons. All of these take some effort to get to, though, whether by car or boat, with some walking besides.

An easier chance to see ancient trees can be found at Teal Slough. Located just a mile north of the old Willapa National Wildlife Refuge headquarters on U.S. Highway 101, the forest is just under 150 acres and has one 1/2-mile out-and-back trail.

The first portion of the trail consists of old, graded logging road up a small hill. Then, at the top, the trail flattens and narrows. Other than a few roots and rough spots, it poses few challenges for most hikers, though people with mobility or balance issues may want to take a bit of extra care.

Despite its short length, the trail wends its way past several stunning old-growth western red cedar trees, some of which are over 1,000 years old. Many have younger western hemlock companions that grow supported by the



Photos by Rebecca Lexa

**LEFT: A tall Sitka spruce rests in the forest, with sprigs of new life at its base. MIDDLE: The wide trunk of an old-growth cedar tree. RIGHT: Mushrooms sit between a nurse log near Teal Slough, within Willapa National Wildlife Refuge.**

sides of the cedars' massive trunks.

Storms have snapped the tops of the trees off over the years, but their height, as well as girth, remain impressive. A few small loops off the main trail get you closer looks at some of the best of these giants.

You'll notice the undergrowth is full of plenty of young "doghair" trees, along with ferns and shrubs. This forest was slated to be logged in the early 1990s. Bulldozers had already cleared away the undergrowth around the trees. What's there now has since grown back.

Local historian, photographer and top-notch storyteller Rex Ziak spearheaded efforts to save the ancient trees, including sending the company that owned them a photo of one of the giant old cedars as well as a rope equal to the circumference of its trunk.

Like the cedars on Long Island — and almost the entire island itself — Teal Slough ultimately became a valuable part of the refuge.

But cedars aren't the only old-growth trees here. A few massive Sitka spruce trees are several centuries old, and these are quite rare post-World War I.

When early planes were made from wood, Sitka spruce was deemed superior for its strength and light weight, and the U.S. Army sent people out into coastal forests to find as many large Sitka spruce as possible to be chopped down and made into planes.

Somehow, those at Teal Slough were overlooked, and are now beacons of imagining what forests must have once been like.

To get to Teal Slough, head north from Astoria on U.S. Highway 101 and continue along the east side of Willapa Bay until you pass the Willapa National Wildlife Refuge

headquarters. Go about another mile until seeing a driveway just past the slough. If you get to the bridge over the Naselle River, you've gone too far.

Park at the mouth of the driveway but don't block the gate just up the hill. Then, walk on up the trail to enjoy the trees and other natural

wonders. Please remember that dogs are not allowed within the refuge, and taking natural or archaeological artifacts is prohibited.

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