

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

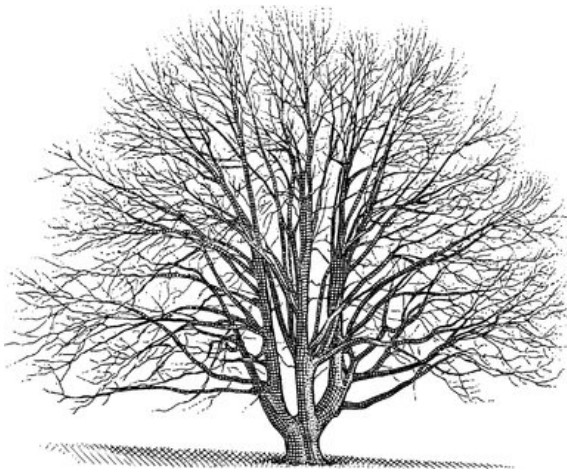
## Big-Tree Hunters Battle to Topple Records of Forest Titans

Measurement enthusiasts search woods for largest specimens; challenging Klootchey Creek Giant

By KAT LONG

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Daniel Karpen crashed through a thicket in Long Island's Gardiner County Park toward his prey—an unusually tall Northern bayberry tree. He wrapped a tape measure around the trunk and calculated its diameter at 6.7 inches.

Then, shuffling 20 feet away in a pair of bright yellow wooden clogs, he put a small measuring device—a clinometer—up to his eye.

"Twenty-seven feet," he said, noting the tree's height and other dimensions on a scrap of paper. "That could be a new champ!"

Mr. Karpen is a big-tree hunter, one of hundreds of those passionate about woodlands who measure and catalog the biggest trees in America, species by species. Some are arborists, foresters or environmental advocates. Others just love really big trees.

These days, an effort to re-measure a previous generation of champions has dethroned venerable specimens and sharpened competition.

American Forests, an environmental organization that maintains the [top-tree registry](#), issued a new, 86-page handbook of measuring guidelines and created a SWAT team of experts to inspect leading entries and verify calculations. Rerankings can bring out strong emotions.

"We have to be diplomatic," said Bob Leverett, one of the authors of the new measuring guide, which replaced a three-page manual. "There are politics involved."

The sport began in 1940, when lumber-company employee Joseph L. Stearns urged forest lovers to locate and preserve the biggest trees within America's dwindling old-growth tracts. The following year, American Forests began publishing its annual National Register of Champion Trees. The first year's official record contained 77 champs.



Each year from March through National Arbor Day—April 29 this year—American Forests takes nominations for challengers to the more than 400 native and naturalized species in the country. Winning trees are identified by points that come from a calculation of girth, height and crown size. The victors remain in the register until toppled by a bigger rival.

Small-tree species have their relative mammoths: The American snowbell—usually 8 to 15 feet—has co-winners at 19 and 20 feet tall.

The hunt “just becomes a way of life,” says Fred Breglia, the executive director of an arboretum near Schenectady, N.Y. “I can’t go on a hike, drive, or leave my house without looking for them.”

What became known as the “Sitka Spruce Slug-Out,” beginning in 1986, showed the lengths tree-baggers will go to claim the title. For years, a 204-foot Sitka spruce in Oregon dubbed the Klootch Creek Giant wore the crown. But then Robert Van Pelt, a forester in Washington state, found the 191-foot Lake Quinault Spruce in Olympic National Park—smaller, but fatter than the Giant.

The discovery set off a battle that came down to the trunks. Because each tree grew atop a fallen log, it was difficult to judge the right point on the trunks for gauging circumference, Mr. Van Pelt said.

He and the Giant’s nominator, Maynard Dawson, who died in 2012, together measured both trees on the same weekend with the same tools. Eyewitnesses verified the proceedings. Mr. Van Pelt said his tree edged out Oregon’s by 20 points.

To quell the still-simmering rivalry, American Forests brokered a peace deal and named them co-champs. A storm sheared the Oregon colossus in 2007, leaving the Lake Quinault tree the sole owner of bragging rights.

The Colorado Tree Coalition's "bring home the blue" contest offered \$500 to the hunter who could find a new champion blue spruce, its state tree, within state lines and take the title back from Utah. "That could pay for my plane ticket," Will Blozan, an arborist in North Carolina, said he remembered thinking in the summer of 2014.

It didn't take him long. In an unexplored forest near Durango, "I walked down a creek, and boom, there was the champion blue spruce," he said, a 165.5-foot monster. But days later, another big-tree hunter, Matt Markworth, discovered a blue spruce 15 feet taller.

The Colorado group cut \$500 checks for both Mr. Blozan and Mr. Markworth, though their point totals only qualified them as co-champs with Utah's incumbent.

"Utah's tree is awesome," Mr. Blozan said, "but it is what it is."

Mr. Markworth said he bought more measuring equipment with his winnings. "You can never have enough lasers and measuring tapes," he said.

Such battles have led to debates over correct measurement guidelines. Some hunters have cast doubt on champion trees they believe to be impostors. "The national and state registers are shot through with trees that have been mis-measured," said Mr. Leverett, who co-founded the online Native Tree Society, which maintains an active bulletin board.

The purported national champion red maple, for example, was listed at a "totally improbable" 179 feet tall in the early 1990s, Mr. Leverett said. "No red maple on the planet is probably that tall." After further evaluation, it was stripped of its title. The species' current No. 1 is 91 feet tall.

[American Forests' new, more-precise measuring guidelines](#) have tips for handling double-trunked trees and calculating dimensions with mathematical models. Pages 25 to 56 explain various ways to gauge height, from the "stick method" to the "sine-tangent method."

Don Bertolette, Alaska's Big Tree Coordinator (American Forests has one for each state), said he, Mr. Leverett and their colleagues hope to bring more scientific rigor to the study of superlative trees. With no disrespect to venerable specimens, he said, allowing badly measured champs to remain on the register would be unfair.

"We are moving deliberately in the dethroning process, and will look carefully at all trees about to be dethroned," he said.

In one case, a suspect sycamore of immense girth, upon re-measuring, turned out to be five trees merged into a single trunk. The champ was ousted, and its nominator wasn't happy, Mr. Leverett said.

To resolve disputes and verify measurements of nominated trees, American Forests dispatches an elite squad of 27 highly trained measurers known as the National Cadre. The Cadre has the final word on winners.

"I liken it to the military's special forces," says Mr. Leverett, who is on the squad. "Most people just like big trees. We eat, live and breathe measurements."