



# You Need To Know This

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Old or new, these are MUST READ (or must watch) pieces of media. Books, video, radio and other media featured here are items we consider essential to your knowledge about our forests, our environment, and the humans who influence each of them. Stay informed about the environment. And tell us about "Must Knows" you find.

## ***The Wild Trees: A Story of Passion and Daring***

by Richard Preston

Random House Press, New York, 2007, 294 pages

*Review by Jim Walker: District Leader*

The most impressive sights I have ever seen are the redwood forests. Unlike our eastern forests, which have been so thoroughly cut as to obliterate even the memory of what they were a few centuries ago, the remaining redwood forests, which still cover very large areas, have stood essentially unchanged for many thousands of years.

It is almost impossible to take a good picture of a big redwood, one that conveys even a small portion of its immensity and grandeur. It is equally difficult, if not more so, to adequately describe such a tree. Even standing at the base of a big redwood, which may be over 350 feet tall, it is usually impossible to see the top. Only the massive trunk and its lower branches are visible from below. The only way to really get to know the whole tree is to climb to the top.

That is what a foolhardy, death-defying kid named Steve Sillett decided to do on the spur of the moment one fall day in 1987. Sillett is one of the main characters of Richard Preston's nonfiction narrative *The Wild Trees*. The story of his first climb of a 300-ft redwood, without the benefit of a rope, is legendary. By legendary, I do not mean to imply that Preston's masterful telling of it is in any way factually untrue or even embellished, only that the story is a fantastic, incredible one, well-known to all redwood researchers and serious tree climbers.

Sillett later learned to climb trees more safely, with ropes, and is now the preeminent scientist studying the redwood canopy. Much of *The Wild Trees* is devoted to describing the amazing, diverse ecosystem he found there.

The other main character of the book is Michael Taylor, who does not climb redwoods, but spends most of his time bushwhacking through nearly impenetrable vegetation, blocked by huge fallen trunks, on extremely challenging terrain, looking for the world's tallest tree. When he finds it, he keeps looking, because he knows there must be a bigger one somewhere.

Sillett and Taylor eventually found each other and were the two participants in the "Day of Discovery," May 11, 1998, when they discovered a whole grove of the world's biggest redwood trees, which they named the Grove of Titans, "at the bottom of a hidden, notch-like valley deep in Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park."

Here Preston's account is not completely truthful. First, he says that the grove "was previously undiscovered." This is true only if "discovered" means "reported and publicized." It is certain that many people had seen the Grove of the Titans before the Day of Discovery. Second, Preston claims, "The exact location of the grove is known only to a handful of biologists, who climb the trees and study the ecology of the grove. They guard the knowledge of its location with the jealousy of a prospector who has found a mother lode."

The first sentence is untrue. I know where the Grove of the Titans is and have seen it myself, as have many others. And despite the jealous guarding of its location, you too can find it. All you need is a map of Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park and the clues to be found in *The Wild Trees*.

On the Day of Discovery, Sillett and Taylor parked somewhere along Route 199, which runs through the northern part of the park. Then came: "an hour and a half of clawing up the stream ... two hours to cover a mile and a half ... two hours later ... getting on toward noon ... some two hours later ... they had been going for seven hours ... on and on, for three hours ... an hour later ... the sun began to set." When they finally made their discovery, "The stars were beginning to come out, and Venus was up." And yet, "At nine o'clock at night on the Day of Discovery, they were stuffing themselves on cheeseburgers at a Carl's Jr. in Crescent City." Use these clues and look at the map to learn the location of the Grove the Titans.

*The Wild Trees* is a book that changed my life. When I read it, I decided that I wanted to learn to climb trees. I did not have far to go, since Peter Jenkins, the father of recreational tree climbing and founder of Tree Climbers International, teaches tree climbing in Atlanta. I have been getting high up in trees for over three years now. It is thrilling, but not nearly as dangerous as Preston would have you believe. Last year I accomplished my goal of standing at the top of a big redwood (not in the Grove of Titans). I recommend this book to anyone who loves trees.

Sound interesting? Get the book from Amazon.com with [this link](#).

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