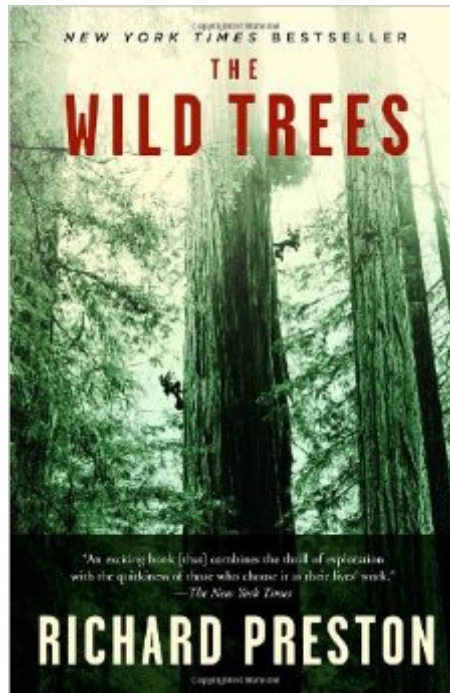


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The Wild Trees: A Story Of Passion And Daring



Synopsis

Hidden away in foggy, uncharted rain forest valleys in Northern California are the largest and tallest organisms the world has ever sustained—the coast redwood trees, *Sequoia sempervirens*. Ninety-six percent of the ancient redwood forests have been destroyed by logging, but the untouched fragments that remain are among the great wonders of nature. The biggest redwoods have trunks up to thirty feet wide and can rise more than thirty-five stories above the ground, forming cathedral-like structures in the air. Until recently, redwoods were thought to be virtually impossible to ascend, and the canopy at the tops of these majestic trees was undiscovered. In *The Wild Trees*, Richard Preston unfolds the spellbinding story of Steve Sillett, Marie Antoinette, and the tiny group of daring botanists and amateur naturalists that found a lost world above California, a world that is dangerous, hauntingly beautiful, and unexplored. The canopy voyagers are young—just college students when they start their quest—and they share a passion for these trees, persevering in spite of sometimes crushing personal obstacles and failings. They take big risks, they ignore common wisdom (such as the notion that there's nothing left to discover in North America), and they even make love in hammocks stretched between branches three hundred feet in the air. The deep redwood canopy is a vertical Eden filled with mosses, lichens, spotted salamanders, hanging gardens of ferns, and thickets of huckleberry bushes, all growing out of massive trunk systems that have fused and formed flying buttresses, sometimes carved into blackened chambers, hollowed out by fire, called "fire caves." Thick layers of soil sitting on limbs harbor animal and plant life that is unknown to science. Humans move through the deep canopy suspended on ropes, far out of sight of the ground, knowing that the price of a small mistake can be a plunge to one's death. Preston's account of this amazing world, by turns terrifying, moving, and fascinating, is an adventure story told in novelistic detail by a master of nonfiction narrative. The author shares his protagonists' passion for tall trees, and he mastered the techniques of tall-tree climbing to tell the story in *The Wild Trees*—the story of the fate of the world's most splendid forests and of the imperiled biosphere itself. From the Hardcover edition.

Book Information

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: Random House Trade Paperbacks; Reprint edition (February 12, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0812975596

ISBN-13: 978-0812975598

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.7 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars See all reviews (261 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #24,580 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #10 in Books > Science & Math > Agricultural Sciences > Forestry #12 in Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Plants > Trees #22 in Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Natural Resources

Customer Reviews

Kids climb trees. Then they grow up and climbing trees is one of the things of childhood they put away. Except some don't give it up. Some keep it as a hobby, and some even make academic careers from climbing trees. Richard Preston is the hobbyist kind. He is better known as a nonfiction author of such bestsellers as *The Hot Zone* and *The Demon in the Freezer*, scary nonfiction books about dangerous diseases. He has turned his attention to tree-climbing, done by him and by professional and amateur tree enthusiasts in *The Wild Trees: A Story of Passion and Daring* (Random House). There are still scary stories here, because this isn't the sort of tree climbing that kids do. These climbers take special equipment and haul themselves up the redwoods, 35 stories high. Sometimes they fall, but the risk of the endeavor does not seem to be the attraction. They have a romantic obsession with the big trees; some of them have harnessed the obsession into academic papers and college careers, but others just climb to do so. The tree canopy sounds like an enticing place, as Preston describes it, "a world between the ground and the sky, an intermediary realm, neither fully solid nor purely air, an ever-changing scaffold joining heaven and earth, ruled by the forces of gravity, wind, fire, and time." Understandably, most of us aren't going to visit there, and most of us aren't going to meet the climbers who are smitten by the canopy, but Preston's lovely, enthusiastic descriptions of the climbers and the climbed make this an enticing report from a foreign world. Botanists estimate that the bigger ones are over two thousand years old.

With the publication of *The Wild Trees*, Richard Preston has added one more magical book of nonfiction to the impressive list of books he has written. This book, an exploration of the miniature world of the coast redwood trees of northern California, will imprint on your mind an indelible picture of the bounteous nature. These gentle behemoths, the largest and tallest living things on our planet, the "blue whales of land", are awe-inspiring indeed. But they are also fragile, says the author. The largest of these trees has a thirty feet wide trunk, and it is more than three hundred fifty feet tall. The author explores the world of these wild trees with the help of Steve Sillett and Marie Antoine, a

couple, both of them botanists, and Michael Taylor, a son of a wealthy real estate developer, and a small group of botanists and amateur naturalists. This book will open your eyes to the grandeur of these trees. And it will show you the small world of insects, mosses, lichens, wandering salamanders and other small animals, ferns and plants and bushes such as huckleberry and even small trees, all living and thriving on the branches and trunks of these coast redwood trees. Exploring the canopy of these wild trees is an arduous task indeed; to climb a tree one must carry a heavy load of very long ropes and climbing gear. The author took lessons in climbing a tree at a tree-climbing school in Atlanta. While we can all rejoice that quite a few of these sequoias are allowed to live for now in Northern California and also a couple of other parts of our country, we should always remember that ninety-six percent of the ancient redwood trees have been felled by the logging industry.

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