

The End of a Reign

The Story of the Former National Champion White Fir

By Jeran Farley – Urban & Community Forestry Coordinator, State of Utah

This story begins back in July of 2013. I was a member of the state big tree committee and had the privilege of hiking up Loafer Canyon, near Salem, UT. The purpose of our hike was to measure a large white fir (*Abies concolor*), which BYU arborist, Max Darrington, was familiar with. We hiked a steep trail through extremely lush undergrowth. Thimbleberry and baneberry shrubs were loaded with dazzling pink and red fruit, and myriads of butterflies hovered in the humid air. As I gazed up at the towering white firs around us, I wondered, with anticipation, how much larger a white fir could actually grow. As we emerged into a small clearing, the answer was soaring above me, and above the rest of the forest for that matter. The most striking aspect of this white fir was its hulking trunk and massive limbs. The surrounding firs looked like saplings compared to this giant. The trunk was over 20 feet in circumference and the tree topped out at 101 feet, with a 56 foot spread. We quickly realized that this was not only the largest white fir in the state of Utah; it was the largest white fir in the entire United States. Subsequently, it became the new national champion.



This magnificent white fir reigned as national champion until the day that I heard some disturbing news. On September 6, 2018, a small fire in the Uintah National Forest, in Juab County, quickly became a blaze. Designated as the Pole Creek Fire, it moved into Utah County and eventually annihilated 101,875 acres. On September 14, I received news that the fire had reached Loafer Canyon and possibly damaged the national champion white fir. To my dismay, this report was later confirmed by Max Darrington, who had hiked up to the tree shortly after the fire was out.

On November 19, 2018, three days before Thanksgiving, I assembled a group, led by Max, and we hiked up to the tree. As we drove up the canyon, we discovered that snow had already fallen in the high elevations. As we ascended the steep and icy trail, we quickly entered the area destroyed by wildfire. This was not the forest I remembered. All that remained of the towering fir trees were stark black poles, stabbing the crisp blue sky. No longer surrounded by thick undergrowth, we could now see the contours of the surrounding hills, appearing like an alien landscape. As we scaled the last slope, my eyes met a depressing sight. A charred husk was all that remained of the once grand old champion fir tree. The bulk of its towering crown had already crashed to the ground in a shattered black heap. It thrust its remaining gnarled limbs skywards, as if submitting to its fate. I admired the tree, which, although dead, was still an impressive sight. Next to the massive trunk, smoke wafted out of a large branch that lay on the ground. I thrust my hand into the cavity and felt soft ash that was warm to the touch. I realized that parts of this tree must still be smoldering inside, two months after it was destroyed by fire.



Hiking back down the mountain, as I tried to refrain from sliding on the slippery black ash under the thin crust of snow, I reflected on the events that transpired in this forest. This tree was immensely larger than any other tree in this forest. It must have avoided countless wildfires and other destructive events in its past to attain this unique size. Wildfires are a natural function in a healthy forest, yet, they can also cause terrible destruction. We usually focus on our manmade structures that are destroyed in wildfire, which is certainly tragic. Yet, there are natural marvels that are also destroyed, many of which we may not even be aware of. A question surfaced in my mind: “Was there anything we could have done to protect this centuries-old tree from its fiery demise?”



**Back: Jeran Farley, Meridith Perkins, Darin Nerdin, Tony Dietz
Front: PJ Abraham, Max Darrington, Heather Church - July 23, 2013**



Jeran Farley & Max Darrington – November 19, 2018