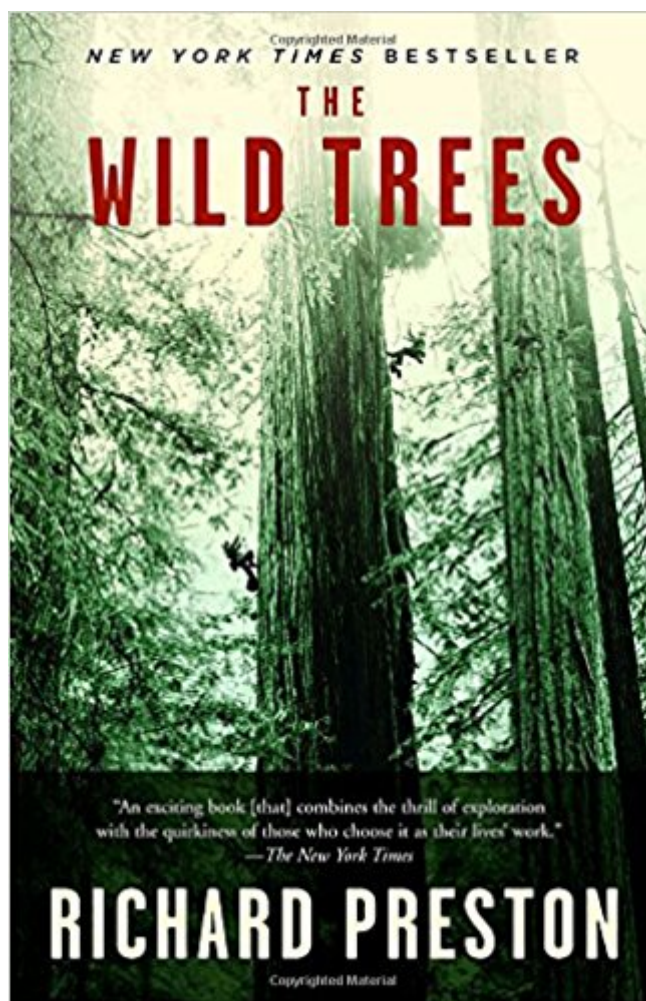


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# The Wild Trees: A Story Of Passion And Daring



## 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 Antoine, 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: 4.6 out of 5 stars 306 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #36,900 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #16 in [Books > Science & Math > Agricultural Sciences > Forestry](#) #24 in [Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Plants > Trees](#) #40 in [Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Natural Resources](#)

## Customer Reviews

[Signature]Reviewed by John VaillantIn this radical departure from Preston's bestsellers on catastrophic diseases (The Demon in the Freezer, etc.), he journeys into the perpendicular universe of the world's tallest trees. Mostly California redwoods, they are the colossal remnants of a lost world, some predating the fall of Rome. Suspended in their crowns, hundreds of feet above the forest floor, is a primeval kingdom of plants and animals that only a handful of people have ever seen. Now, thanks to Preston and a custom-made tree-climbing apparatus called a "spider rig," we get to see it, too. According to Preston, it wasn't until the 1980s that humans made the first forays into the tops of "supertall" trees, in excess of 350 feet high. The people who pioneered their exploration are a rarefied bunch—equal parts acrobat, adventurer and scientist. The book revolves around botanist Steve Sillett, an exceptional athlete with a tormented soul who found his calling while making a borderline suicidal "free" climb to the top of an enormous redwood in 1987, where he discovered a world of startling complexity and richness. More than 30 stories above the ground, he found himself surrounded by a latticework of fused branches hung with gardens of ferns and trees bearing no relation to their host. In this Tolkienesque realm of sky and wind, lichens abound while voles and salamanders live and breed without awareness of the earth below. At almost the exact moment that Sillett was having his epiphany in the redwood canopy, Michael Taylor, the unfocused son of a wealthy real estate developer, had a revelation in another redwood forest 200 miles to the south. Taylor, who had a paralyzing fear of heights, decided to go in search of the world's tallest tree. Their obsessive quests led these young men into a potent friendship and the discovery of some of the most extraordinary creatures that have ever lived. Preston's tireless research, crystalline writing style and narrative gifts are well suited to the subject. Sillett, Taylor and their cohorts, who include a Canadian botanist named Marie Antoine, are fascinating, often deeply wounded characters. Their collective passion and intensity have illuminated one of the most vulnerable and poorly understood ecosystems on this continent. Preston adds a personal twist by

mastering the arcane tree climber's art of "skywalking" and partnering with Sillett and Antoine on some of their most ambitious ascents. As impressive as this is, Preston's cameo appearance disrupts the flow of the main narrative and somewhat dilutes its considerable power. John Vaillant is the author of *The Golden Spruce: A True Story of Myth, Madness and Greed* (Norton) and winner of the Canadian Governor General's Award for Non-Fiction (2005). Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Richard Preston, whose previous nonfiction thrillers include *The Hot Zone* (about the Ebola virus) and *The Demon in the Freezer* (about smallpox; \*\*\*1/2 Jan/Feb 2003), takes a botanical detour in *The Wild Trees*. Most critics praised this noteworthy, if somewhat less sensational, effort. Yet while some relished the offbeat characters, the action-packed sequences, and Preston's personal climbing experiences, others found fault with Preston's detailed descriptions of his subjects' personal lives, his overdramatization of mundane stories for effect, and his self-important account of going "native" (Cleveland Plain Dealer). Many were also surprised that Preston had little to say about protecting the remaining redwoods despite their continued endangerment. Copyright © 2004 Phillips & Nelson Media, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

If you haven't seen a redwood tree but want to, I recommend you read this book. And if you have been in the presence of redwoods but don't know that much about them I also recommend you read this book. I wrote many notes in the margins, and since finishing it, I have been researching tree climbing schools. I want to experience more of what I learned about reading Richard Preston's account of being in the Redwood canopy...a whole other world above our heads. The book is inspiring and embodies the passion the author has for his subject.

I love all kinds of books about the natural world around us but this one is truly outstanding. I bought it on a whim but was riveted by this story from beginning to end. It's a brilliant mixture of science, personalities, and climbing descriptions with a perfect overlay of heart pumping adventure. I agree with the reviewer who said it should be on every 'must read' book list in our schools. What a wonderful way of being introduced to the nature of trees and all their secret ecosystems, the way people follow their passions not matter how strange they may seem to others, and the interaction

between the main characters as well as the networking they do with others in different parts of the country and world. Nothing seems impossible. I highly recommend this book.

Reading this book has introduced me to yet another new world on our planet earth. Amazing that a tiny aquatic creature, copepod, is found not only in the ocean, but also living in the redwood canopy, some 30+ stories above the ground. Amazing that a redwood tree can sustain lightning strikes from above and forest fires from below, and still continue to survive to an age of somewhere between two thousand and three thousand years old. Amazing that other species of trees and bushes are growing on the massive limbs of the redwood tree, hundreds of feet above the ground. Amazing the number of newly discovered lichens that live in the canopies of the redwood tree. Sad that we humans have cut down close to 96 percent of the primeval redwood forest. Reading this book has really made me think about the web of life on our planet. In our present day health issues of cancers and antibiotic resistant diseases, is it possible that the next major cure will remain out of reach, because we drove the source of the cure into extinction? In the simplest term, when a habitat is destroyed, the plants, animals, and other organisms that occupied the habitat have a reduced carrying capacity so that populations decline and extinction becomes more likely. Perhaps the greatest threat to organisms and biodiversity is mankind. Life is a choice. We can do better. For redwood trees, the best time to plant a tree is 2,500 years ago. The next best time is today.

Preston does a great job of conveying a sense of what it's like to be in the Redwoods, and it helps you to understand why some people became obsessed with exploring these big trees. I read this book a few months before making my first trip to the region and felt prepared for the experience.

Excellent book about trees and the stories of the people dedicated to appreciating and studying these valuable beings - the redwood trees.

I liked the fulfillment of Michael Taylor's dream, The scientific responsibility of Steve and his love and respect for these living giants. The love and shared support of his wife. I love the outdoors, and enjoy nature to the fullest, but more than anything, I love the redwoods. The same day that Larry Mantle interviewed Richard Preston on NPR I bought the book. I just finished my third reading and watched the National Geographic film about measuring the HYPERION. I have a hard copy and a Kindle edition. The fact that the author participated in the climbing of the trees makes it even more interesting. I would recommend it to everyone, and specially to young readers. It should be part of

Science curriculum in schools, on a very enjoyable subject.

Fascinating account of the men who explored a world of trees I didn't know existed.

Well told biographic tale of following one's passion. Very interesting tidbits on the quirky network of tree climbers, tall trees, and their ecosystems.

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