

Making the cut — Christmas tree hunting in the wild requires some prep work, and a good saw

BY ASHLEY LODATO

When I volunteered to write about venturing back into the woods to cut a Christmas tree, it was completely without guile.

But those of you who have been reading my column for a while may recall that I used to specialize in writing about the Christmas tree hunt. If your kids cried, or if someone stepped in a stream, or if your tree fell off the roof and broke in half on the drive home, or if it lost its needles as soon as you brought it inside, I wanted to know about it and write about it.

But since the era of social media, everyone's Christmas tree hunts look more like custom-built happy family fests, as opposed to opportunities to create lifelong memories forged over shared misery and struggle. Since I can sum up everyone's recent tree-cutting adventures with the proverbial "a good and photogenic time was had by all," my Christmas tree shtick seemed to be gasping its dying breath.

Still, in the interest of reportorial comprehensiveness, I decided to give it another go. Off into the woods I went.

Prerequisites

Or rather, off into the woods I went, after a whole lot of investigative journalism.

The first nut that needed cracking was the conundrum of the U.S. Forest Service Christmas tree permit. Actually, this is hardly a nut worth cracking; unless you're cutting by permission on private land, you need a permit. They're easy to acquire at Hank's Harvest Foods, Pardon's, and online. Also, they're only \$5. Five dollars, for a whole tree! They just don't make deals like that anymore, except, well, they do.

The second puzzle that needed solving was the "where" of journalism. Where would I find my \$5 tree? Given that my first and second choice tree-cutting locations are now completely decimated from the summer's fires, I faced a true dilemma. Not only would I need to locate a tree, I would need to locate a forest.

Fortunately, and despite what one might think after the past summer, there are actually some forests still standing in our area, filled with conifers upon whose branches nostalgia-laden ornaments of yore and twinkling environmentally-responsible-but-less-aesthetically-pleasing-than-incandescent lights could gaily



Ashley Lodato went on a tree hunt over the weekend.

dangle.

Permit? Check. Forest? Check. Handheld saw? After an earnest and lengthy critique of the benefits and drawbacks of various handheld saws courtesy of my husband, check.

I now faced my chief ethical concern: Given that thousands of our local conifers went, literally, up in smoke this summer, was cutting one of their brethren to decorate my living room for two weeks morally right?

For answers, I turned to the undisputed champion of forests, Smokey Bear. Smokey, speaking through his spokesperson, Methow Valley District Ranger Chris Furr, assured me that I could go cut my tree.

"I would definitely encourage folks to continue to cut their trees from their National Forests despite the large fire season," Furr said. "Many of the valley's unburned areas are overstocked with young trees, and you can harvest your tree without guilt." No guilt? My \$5 investment was delivering increasingly favorable returns.

In that Zen manner unique to Forest Service leadership, Furr suggested some ways that "you can be mindful as you look for that perfect tree this year." Now mindfulness practice was included in the price of my \$5 permit. Never before has a fiver provided so thoughtfully.

For the fir

Mindfulness when it comes to Christmas tree selection, Furr continued, involves species selection. "Douglas fir is a good choice," he said. "It is a species that is encroaching and out-competing Ponderosa pines in many of our dry forest sites. Fir isn't as resilient to fire as pine, so in the absence of frequent low-intensity fires that historically happened here it can take over."

(We pause now for a lesson in



Photos by Ashley Lodato

Douglas firs are a good choice for a wild-caught Christmas tree.

species identification. Whereas Ponderosa pine trees have long, pointy needles, Douglas fir trees have flat, blunt, friendly, soft needles. They also answer to "Doug," something no self-respecting Ponderosa would ever consider. Ponderosas have furrowed, scaly bark, while young Douglas firs — which are the kind we should be cutting for our Tannenbaums —

have smooth, gray bark.)

Once you've identified your favorite Doug, Furr said, "The second consideration is picking a tree from a group. This 'thinking' can help reduce the stress and competition for the surrounding trees." In short, Furr seemed to be suggesting that I could be a junior forester for an afternoon, completing an act of mindful for-

est management public service, at no additional cost. That \$5 was the gift that kept on giving.

Seen and sawn

Finally I ventured forth into the forest. After reminiscing about years past, when it took two hours to get the kids and the snacks and the hot drinks and tools ready for a meaningful

TREE TIPS

Permit vendors:

- www.fs.usda.gov/detail/okawen/passes-permits/foreproducts/?cid=fsbdev3_053596#vendors

Guidelines:

- www.recreation.gov/tree-permits/23ca18ca-ec54-11ea-8045-369699f3be2d

- Online permit: www.recreation.gov/tree-permits/23ca18ca-ec54-11ea-8045-369699f3be2d/order

Christmas tree-cutting adventure guaranteed to end with someone in tears, I took a moment to appreciate the sun glinting off the frosty, soft, flat needles of a fir tree crowded in the middle of a group of other firs. Target identified.

Using my ZÜBAT saw, which, as promised earlier in my saw briefing, delivered greater cutting speed with less effort due to its proprietary ergonomic comfort grip handle and professional, heavy-duty, mono-constructed blade, I sawed down that tree like a boss. In fact, I had done nothing quite as boss-like since last Thanksgiving, when I spatchcocked a turkey. This tree surrendered a lot easier than the breastplate of that bird, I'll tell you.

Two hours after I had begun my Christmas tree cutting adventure, I was home, in possession of a Douglas fir with a height well under the 15-foot limit.

As an added bonus and as a result of having been crammed in a stand with a bunch of other, more aggressive, trees, it is completely devoid of branches on one side, which is a prerequisite for installation in our living room. Total cost \$5. The experience of cutting it down? Priceless.



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