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Collecting A Whitebark Snag for Visitor Center Display

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An educational display entitled "Whitebark pine forests—High country tapestry of life" is being assembled at the Montana Natural History Center (MNHC) in Missoula. It will include a whitebark pine snag and several animal specimens (two grizzly bears, a Clark's nutcracker, and a red squirrel), arrayed in front of a large photo of whitebark pine habitat.

Collection of the whitebark pine specimen turned out to be quite a challenge. We had to locate a snag that showed the beauty of aged wood and the crown structure of whitebark pine, but it had to fit into an indoor space 13 feet wide and 15 feet high. We had to find the specimen in a place where removal was acceptable and practical, and we had to get it from the collection site to the Natural History Center without breaking it apart.

The closest whitebark pines to Missoula are on Point Six, a rocky summit a few miles north and rising more than 4,500 feet above the city. Fortunately for us, Point Six has excellent road access because it is part of the Snow Bowl ski area and hosts a huge National Weather Service satellite receiver. The area accessed by the road is on the Lolo National Forest where harvesting specimens is permitted. On June 21st, when deep snowdrifts still blocked the last half-mile of road, Steve Arno and I went searching for the perfect snag—beautiful, small, and close to the road.

"Small" turned out to be the most challenging aspect of selection. Hundreds of snags towered above us as we explored the hillsides around Point Six, but the smallest were 25 to 30 ft tall. To fit one of these under a 15-foot ceiling, we could either cut off the top and lose its intricate branching and lichen garlands, or we could cut off the bottom and have a specimen that resembled a very tall, dead bush. We marked several snags but were undecided about which could be collected safely and removed with the crown intact.

A later field trip with John Waverek and Gary Lynam of the Lolo National Forest

confirmed that the marked specimens were on National Forest land and that removal was acceptable. On this trip, we located a cluster of snags standing among live subalpine firs within the "V" of a road switchback. They were small relative to the rugged sentinels originally considered, but they would be imposing when displayed alone, indoors.

How can you drop a snag without shattering its crown? This problem stalled the project until August, when Martin Cook, a tree surgeon from Able Tree Service in Missoula, agreed to do the work. September 7 was selected as "collection day."

We decided to collect four snags in hopes that at least one would arrive at the Natural History Center unbroken. Martin and his assistant drove to the snag location with a pickup and their 25-foot trailer equipped with a long-armed grapple loader. They set up cables between live trees to secure each snag, cut and lowered it gently to the edge of the road, wrapped the bole to protect the bark from the grapple, then loaded it onto the truck. They secured the load with webbing rather than cables and chains (again protecting the wood), then drove slowly back to Missoula to minimize bumps and breakage. Damage to the snags was minimal. They arrived intact, with bark unscarred and most of their chartreuse lichens still in place.

Gabrielle Sivitz, the Natural History Center's display manager, is now working to secure the most dramatic of the four collected snags inside the Center. She will also include portions of the other snags, a large, hollow whitebark pine log, and squirrel midden material. Wendy Smith, graphic designer for KLB Exhibits, Inc., is finishing the floor plan and completing the graphics. Text was written last winter and reviewed by several members of WPEF. We are still seeking funds to produce the graphics once design is complete, but we hope to have the display completed by the end of January, when it will be ready for a visit from WPEF members to inspect during a break at their winter board meeting. If you're interested in progress of the exhibit or want to visit the Natural History Center on your own, please do! It is open Tuesday through Friday from noon to 5:00 and Saturday from noon to 4:00, and is located at 120 Hickory Street, near McCormick Park, south of the Orange Street Bridge in downtown Missoula. ■