

## **The Apple Tree in the Wilderness**

**By Beth M.L.**

In September of 2013 my husband George and I pitched a tent in Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park, amongst the giant coastal trees of Northern California. We felt like tiny beings, hiking the trails under a canopy of 300-foot giants, in one of the West's last remaining wild places, where old growth virgin forests are forever protected from the ravages of timber harvesting.

In the heart of the undeveloped interior of Jedediah Smith, there is one grove of sacred ancient trees with massive trunks, so unique and with such sensitive habitat, that until recently its location was kept secret, only known to park officials and employees. It wasn't until 1998 that a forestry professor, bushwhacking through the heart of the park, discovered what is now called The Grove of Titans. Still growing and thriving here, are three of the ten tallest trees in the world, including The Screaming Titans, two Redwoods fused together which measure thirty feet in diameter at the base. We felt lucky to have snagged a campsite at Jedediah Smith, where the magic began the moment our temporary canvas home was securely staked into the ground.

I have done a fair amount of camping, in forests and high alpine meadows, in good weather and stormy weather and each adventure has been memorable...an escape from the urbane boundaries of daily life, to a place where Earth, Sky and Mother Nature rule. Enjoying the last day of our camping trip in the Redwoods, I was already convinced that we were having the most delightful experience ever. Then something amazing happened. It was a moment in time, so profoundly beautiful, simple and unexpected, that whenever I think back on it, a feeling of great happiness washes over me.

Just beyond our campground was a gentle knoll with a view looking out across a meadow, where one solitary bowed and sickly-looking tree seemed to be still alive, but barely. With camp chairs, cheese and wine in hand, George and I positioned ourselves on top of that little hill, to rest and enjoy our wilderness version of Happy Hour, after a full day of walking in the woods.

The last golden rays of afternoon light were streaming through the treetops and tall grasses moved in rhythmic waves as the wind blew them this way and that. On our perch at the edge of the forest, we sat quietly enjoying the end of day when suddenly a creature popped out of the grass, making furtive circles around the base of the tree in the meadow. From our vantage point, some distance away, it was unclear exactly what kind of animal this was. But we got a good look at him as he leapt through the grass to a little clearing, where he stopped and appeared to be chewing on something hard. A fox! How cool. After one more trip back to the tree, he disappeared into a tangle of shrubs. Wow, time to clink plastic glasses and make a toast to local wildlife.

While still talking about how remarkable a sight this was, three Black-tailed Deer, a doe with two fawns, came bounding towards the tree, and then heads down, proceeded to forage for the same thing the Fox was after. The fawns chased each other, stopped to rub noses and when their mother called, the three of them bounced their way back into the woods. That solo tree in the middle of nowhere. Why so popular?

Feeling like it was about time to head back to camp and start a fire to cook dinner on, I began to gather our food and beverage. George said, "Look, there's a bear coming towards the

tree.” First thing he did upon arrival was rub his back on it. Up and down and up and down. Then he turned and grabbed onto a low branch, swinging it around, shaking the whole tree violently, releasing a bunch of what I finally recognized as apples. They flew off branches in all directions. Enough for him and enough for tomorrow’s foragers. Then he sat down and devoured a couple. No time to linger however, as twilight was approaching. We watched him cross the meadow, a blur of dark fur receding towards the shadows of tall trees.

Next morning as we were packing up our gear, preparing to leave the campsite, a park ranger drove by and I stopped her to tell her about what we had seen the night before. I said it was like we had purchased tickets to a nature show. There we were in our little camp chairs, watching a parade of wildlife, each species arriving at their appointed time, to pick apples. “Yes, you’re lucky to be here now!” exclaimed the ranger. “The meadow is part of the original frontier homestead, and the site of an apple orchard. That tree is the only survivor. So you got to see the animals harvesting fruit. They’ll work that tree ’til the last apple drops. Who doesn’t love apples?”

A tree of life past its prime, bruised and broken  
Standing like a lone sentinel refusing to abandon its post  
Still bearing fruit because every being needs purpose  
And connection