

## WEBSTER SPRINGS SYCAMORE

Will Blozan<sup>1</sup>, Jess Riddle<sup>2</sup>, and Ron Busch<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> President, Eastern Native Tree Society

<sup>2</sup> Eastern Native Tree Society

I was reading through Colby Rucker's list of big trees by state in preparation for the trip to Pennsylvania for the Cook Forest Rendezvous. I was interested in West Virginia since we have almost no tree data from the entire state, aside from Cathedral State Park. I came across Colby's description of the Webster Springs Sycamore, a massive tree listed as the "largest tree in WV" and the "largest sycamore in the world." Colby also inferred that based on wood volume, it may be "one of the largest trees in the East." Curious, I proposed to my travel mates (Jess Riddle and Ron Busch) that we try to find it and take measurements. On our way back from Cook we found the tree.

We were impressed that there was actually a brochure (titled simply "Big Sycamore") about the tree in the West Virginia Welcome Center off the interstate. The photos were impressive and the directions easy to follow (even though the map indicated that the roads were straight!). Driving though blinding snow and hill after hill of nauseating twists, we arrived at the cute town of Webster Springs, West Virginia. The brochure map gave directions up a dirt road along the Back Fork of the Elk River. The road ended in a turn-around with a suspension bridge over the river and several interpretive signs. The "Sycamore Park" had a pavilion and picnic/BBQ areas and a sign that read:

Total height	139.0 ft
Circumference	24.7 ft
Height to forks	86.5 ft
Approximate age	500 yrs
Hemlock in forks	7.4 ft tall
Crown spread	100.1 ft

Overall, the information was quite accurate, but the epiphytic hemlock was dead. The girth listed above was taken at 4.5-ft upslope, and the midslope girth was substantially bigger. Here are our numbers:

Total height	144.3 ft
Circumference (mid)	28.7 ft (344 in)
Height to forks	78.3 ft
Crown spread	102.0 ft



*View looking up the Webster Sycamore, highlighting the lack of a top and handful of live branches in the crown of the tree. Photo by Will Blozan.*

These numbers produced an American Forests big tree score of 514 points. This is the first Eastern single-stemmed hardwood ENTS has verified to over 500 big tree points as far as I can recall. I do not know the numbers of some of the Georgia live oaks, though. Only baldcypress (the Senator Cypress, for one) beats it. Perhaps cherrybark oak has a slim chance of reaching 500 points somewhere, but sycamore may be the only Eastern hardwood consistently capable of 500 big tree points.

What was so surprising was that this tree is a forest-grown specimen not in a floodplain forest. In fact, it was in a mountain cove forest at ~1800-ft elevation



in a cove hardwood forest. Red elm, basswood, shagbark hickory, umbrella magnolia, and tuliptree accompany the tree, which is growing out of a rich bed of wildflowers. I suspect the soil is neutral or basic in acidity and may be limestone derived.



*Jess Riddle at the base of the Webster Sycamore. Photo by Will Blozan.*

We took numerous girth measurements and range-finder girths at various points on the trunk to obtain an estimate of volume. Jess and I estimated on-site that it would be close to 3000 ft<sup>3</sup>. We were not far off, as a figure of 3009 ft<sup>3</sup> was obtained by entering the numbers into a spreadsheet. The point on the trunk

just below the first limbs was 19.1 ft in girth at a height of 60 ft. The point of breakage (78 ft)—which was a huge portion of the crown—was still over 13 ft in girth. The tree was likely close to 3500 ft<sup>3</sup> before breakage—if the top was intact. Currently, the crown is represented by just four limbs (see photo). Some of these limbs are tentatively attached to decayed wood with no living bark above them. The height of the Webster Sycamore at its prime may have reached 160 ft.

I feel this tree, with its tentative perch and strong lean on a thin shell of wood, should be climbed and mapped before it falls. It is truly a massive specimen—joining the ranks with tuliptree as a forest giant. Will it surpass the volume of the Sunderland Sycamore? Any other big contenders? Sounds like a worthwhile project to me!

**Webster Sycamore location:  
UTM 17 556093E 4263469N  
1800 ft in elevation**



*Will Blozan in the base of the Webster Sycamore. Photo by Will Blozan.*