

BOREAL BITS

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HOW THE CHRISTMAS TREE SAVED THE GIANT

"It is untrue that equality is a law of nature. Nature has no equality. Its sovereign law is subordination and dependence." Vauvenargues (1715-1747)

As a result of red squirrel feeding on a white pine cone, a seed was loosened and drifted to the ground far from the parent tree.



It germinated in a fertile area shared by a quaking aspen, a balsam fir and a white spruce. A deer destroyed the aspen during the rut early one winter, and that left the other two to compete with the slower growing white pine sapling for sunshine and nutrients. But nature, ever in change, was not finished yet.

The next spring a few small, nondescript moths landed on terminal

buds of the balsam fir. They laid eggs that hatched into small caterpillars and while they didn't do any damage that year, they hid themselves away in the buds that would be the next year's growth. The following spring the voracious caterpillars destroyed all new growth on the spruce, pupated, and emerged as adults that laid more eggs. After four years of this type of assault the fir tree died; there were no new needles to replace the old and ravaged growth.

Luck, and surely it could be nothing else, was with the pine. Now the competition was down to one tree, the white spruce. Both trees had miraculously avoided devastation by insects, destruction by the fire that swept through the forest ignited by lightning and kindled by acres of dead and dying balsam fir and white spruce. But the deaths of the aspen and fir spurred rapid growth in the white spruce as well and its thicker, heavier foliage created even more shade to the detriment of the pine. The spruce stood tall, handsome and imposing, evenly balanced, a credit to its species. It was more than twice as tall as the gangly white pine. But perhaps the white spruce was too perfect; perhaps the spreading skirts of verdure cost it its life for woodcutters from the nearby town in search of the perfect Christmas tree had marked the 'perfect tree' the previous August. In early December two cutters with a whipsaw cut the spruce and two Clydesdales hauled it from the bush on a sledge. The next day it was erected at the busiest intersection in the burgeoning northern frontier town standing half again as tall as the highest building and serving as a beacon of merriment for the holiday season.

The removal of the spruce tree was the last obstacle for the young forest monarch. Avoiding devastating conditions over the seasons, it grew tall, robust and strong. It was a healthy tree and did not suffer unduly from the voracious appetites of insects, the violent vagaries of weather or overwhelming fungal invasions. It continued to flourish; its bark thickened, its canopy broadened, and it achieved a height that towered over the



rest of the forest, matched only by others of its kind. Small mammals found protection and lairs among its root structure. In its crown, a bald eagle pair built a nest and raised many pairs of young until a violent wind shear struck, ripping the huge nest from the tree. The same windstorm destroyed many white pines, but this one remained; its limbs were too strong to break and its roots too deep to upheave.

And so, for now, after almost two hundred years, the white pine tree reigns as the forest monarch. Year after year it watches the parade of seasons, the loons paddling on the lake, the hares doing their silly dance on late winter nights and the wild cherry blossoms bathing the trailside in spring. And it is only by chance that the tree managed to survive to maturity. The many times great-granddaughter of the deer that had saved it from the competing aspen all those years before, stood in its shade one hot July day. It could not have known that were it not for this incident, the devastation of the spruce budworms, the early settlers and countless other acts of pure chance, this pine would have perished.

So it is with nature.

(Photos by PB)