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### A Guide To Hunting Alligators In The Southwest

By Erica Ryberg

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For those interested in hunting 'gators or other tree species, the Four Corner states all have big tree registries. According to Arizona tree hunter David Thornberg, it's worth it for the scenery and exercise alone and, he said, "It's easier than hunting elk."

It's also cheaper and you have the added bonus of being in a class almost by yourself. "I

Steve Rouette sometimes spends days on the hunt. It's deadly serious. If he comes home empty-handed too often, his two kids don't eat. But that's never a problem. For one thing, his quarry can't move around much - it's already dead. Even if it weren't, it still couldn't run; Steve Rouette hunts standing dead alligators. Junipers to be exact.

Even with the upper hand, Rouette, an artisan furniture maker, risks life and limb wrestling full-sized alligator junipers into the back of his 30-year-old Pinzgauer truck.

"When you're knocking down that kind of tree, you're trying to get something that weighs 2,000 pounds on the trailer with pulleys and levers," said Rouette during an interview in his Prescott, Arizona shop on a recent morning. "If something goes wrong, you're three hours off the pavement and you're probably not going to make it."

It was cold outside, but Rouette kept it warm in his Quonset by burning the leftovers from his hunting expeditions. He's one of the few craftsmen who works with alligator juniper, a tree that's starting to gain credibility as one of the oldest and grandest trees of the desert Southwest. According to Rouette, equally grand is the challenge of turning juniper wood into furniture.

"The stuff is really nasty to work with. It's just really not very agreeable," he said. "When you run it through the table saw, you've got to wear a face shield because you know it's going to shatter and throw knots, and then when you do finally get a roughed-out piece you've got to stabilize it with epoxy and steel. It's just a royal pain in the ass. But there's nothing else like it. It's just amazing stuff."

\* \* \* \*

Alligator junipers (*Juniperus deppeana*) grow in Arizona, New Mexico, Texas and Mexico. Named for their plate-like bark, they cling to rocky, hostile soil at high elevations, refugees from the last ice age. Once upon a time, they dominated the valleys, but as the globe warmed, they inched their way higher and higher up the desert slopes onto the ridges and hilltops - sky islands in a sea of blazing desert. The old ones sprouted during the Roman empire and when they found the right conditions, grew downright monstrous in size. The largest AJ have trunks the size of Rouette's vintage pickup and can be 65 feet tall and 75 feet around the crown.

On the Arizona Registry of Big Trees, only two individual trees score more points for size than the AJ - a sycamore and a cottonwood, riparian plants sucking moisture from creek bottoms. For perspective, fewer than 15 percent of the trees on California's big tree list were bigger than the alligators registered in Arizona. Alligator junipers are the sequoias of the Southwest forests they inhabit.

According to David Thornberg, a tree hunter who registered one of the giant junipers, many of the biggest AJ's don't even make it into the registry because their trunks split below four and a half feet, the required height for measuring trunk girth. "There's quite a few big junipers," Thornberg said. "You get up on these ridges and you find a lot of them that are six feet in diameter."

One of the most remarkable trees he's come across is La Casa del Arbol - The Tree House. Located north of Williams, Arizona at the base of Pouquette Hill, sheepherders incorporated a massive, living AJ into the structure of a small cabin. Built in the 1930's, the house stayed in use through the 1980's.

"Over a period of years, several sheepherders that worked for the family built the little house using one long horizontal limb as the long beam from which rafters are hung. Another limb of the tree is actually one of the end rafters for

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the roof," said Dave Pouquette, a Williams Realtor whose family owned the sheep ranch.

The tree has an asymmetric, fluted trunk shot through with the great silver veins of the bark-free wood characteristic of ancient junipers. Its canopy towers over the nearby Ponderosa pines and that lateral branch near the ground wraps around the little house like a protective arm. The tree so dwarfs the house that locals call it the "Gnome Home."

\* \* \* \*

The Tree House is one of the few junipers that has attracted any attention. Part of the reason AJ's fly under the radar is that nobody knows exactly how old they are. Botanist Bill Litzinger has spent years gathering data to age alligator juniper trees. According to Litzinger, once the trees get to the age where they start to flute and lose bark, the best experts can do without cutting them down to count rings is put them in classes according to canopy spread and numbers of rings on the cut limbs.

"Any of these trees around here were growing around the time of Christ, and certainly most of these trees were growing before Europeans got to the continent," said Litzinger. "My understanding is that they don't even get fluted trunks until they're 600-800 years old."

Giant, wayward and awkward, the junipers kept growing even after settlers felled many of their arboreal counterparts for lumber.

"It's not a good lumber species," said Gary Wittman, a National Forest Health Program Leader in Prescott, Arizona. "When the heavy logging occurred in the late 1800's, juniper wasn't what they were looking for. What they were looking for was timber to build their mining town."

And Litzinger said that even fire is no match for an ancient juniper.

"These guys have an ability to withstand fire because of their bark," he said. "So when they get to a certain age, they're protected."

While smaller alligators are popular for firewood not only among legal cutters but among poachers, trees bigger than four feet across have by and large escaped the teeth of the saw. Nonetheless, the exceptions are heartbreaking. Prescott College environmental studies professor Doug Hulmes has lived for 30 years in Prescott, Arizona. During that time, he has come across more than one site where poachers had recently felled live ancient junipers.

"I've seen the stumps of cut-down trees that indicate they were more than a thousand years old," he said. "These are called 'monarch junipers' in recognition of their size and age. Those trees were around since the Anasazi period, until they were cut down by people who don't have a clue how old they are."

Unfortunately, the natural protection that alligators enjoy doesn't have a regulatory counterpart.

"If you're selling a lot of fuel wood and you get caught, it's not a deterrent," Wittman said.

Even when poachers don't make off with the entire tree, they can destroy the aesthetic integrity of a tree that likes to grow half-dead and half-alive. The effect wasn't lost on Edward Abbey, who in *Desert Solitaire* described one of the trees near his cabin. "My juniper, though still fruitful and full of vigor, is at the same time partly dead," he wrote. "One half of the divided trunk holds skyward a sapless claw, a branch without leaf or bark, baked by the sun and scoured by the wind to a silver finish."

The dead branches have long lured wood cutters who take the limbs but leave the trees. As a result, few trees lack the tell-tale scars, which can be as large as three feet in diameter. In extreme cases, as branches die and cutters make off with them, the tree looks more like a botanical rendering by Dr. Seuss than the natural opus it started out as. "You get these trees with just a tuff of green up high," Wittman said.

\* \* \* \*

On occasion, Rouette, who does all of this wood gathering under permit, has turned in poachers, often with disappointing results. "We turned this guy in a few years back, who cut them down green and came back to collect them later. He barely got a slap on the hand," said Rouette.

The theft bothers Rouette, who says at times he can't bring himself to cut down a juniper, even if it's dead.

"They're so damned beautiful when they're standing. I have a couple out in the forest - they're dead standing and I could make a lot of stuff out of them," he said. "But I leave them, because they're just too cool."

The wood that Rouette admires in the wild changes little when he incorporates it into his furniture. Most of his pieces have a waxy edge, leaving exposed the unfinished silver from tree's exterior.

"Leaving those edges adds a whole new dimension to the wood," he said. "It's got so much character and aesthetic integrity. It's sculpted by the wind and by the elements."

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