

Trees of Western North America

By Richard Spellenberg, Christopher J. Earle, and Gil Nelson. 2014. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, NJ, USA, 08540-5237. 720 pages, 29.95 USD, Paper.

I like this book. First of all, it looks really nice. The cover design is attractive with good choice and placement of images and colours. Secondly, it feels good. It has a nice weight, enough to be taken seriously but not so heavy that I would never carry it around. That is to say, it's about the same weight as the newer field guides for other taxa, so if I wanted to take a tree book into the field, I might take this one. It also looks rather handsome sitting on my desk, so I might leave it there. Also, it fits in one hand, open. I have small hands, but the spine is just the width of the basin of my cupped palm. Its pages fall open far enough to see, without cracking the binding.

I am not a tree expert, and for the rare times I need to pin down a hard-to-identify tree with absolute certainty I know to look for a technical reference. The rest of the time I am in the audience for a book like this.

It contains an ample introductory section with lots of information about tree biology and features, and forests. The introductory section also includes discussion of taxonomy and nomenclature, which are important and, of course, very interesting. The language is neither too simple nor too technical, but just right for a well-read non-expert. Technical terms are included, and explained: "Leaves, twigs, fruits and other plant parts may be *hairless* (*glabrous*) or *hairy* (*pubescent*). The hairs, which in plants are called *trichomes*, take many forms ..." Italics theirs. It looks as though italicized terms appear in the glossary (yes, 'hair' is there) although I didn't see this explained in the text. I assume it's there somewhere.

This is a field guide for western North America, west of the 100th meridian. Being in the east, I had to be creative about field testing. However, I looked at

two common eastern conifers as if I didn't know what they were and tried to identify them using this book. I failed, and that's good. Neither Eastern White Pine (*Pinus strobus*) nor Eastern White Cedar (*Thuja occidentalis*) are in the book and, thanks mainly to the well-illustrated whole trees, I didn't manage to make them fit another species. I also happen to know of an unlabeled Ponderosa Pine (*Pinus ponderosa*) near my home and, even without the context of being in range, the illustrations and descriptions led me easily to the correct species.

The identification information, along with text, includes paintings of whole trees, leaves, bark, flowers, seeds and fruit, and occasionally twigs and buds. Similar species to rule out are discussed. The "Quick ID" tips may be all you need to zero in. For less overtly distinctive species found in both the east and west, it is apparent that the user really would want to be in a species natural or naturalized range in order to come up with an identification, to eliminate similar species. This was the case, for example, for Balsam Fir (*Abies balsamea*), White Spruce (*Picea glauca*), and Blue (Colorado) Spruce losing its blue cast (*Picea pungens*).

I've only mentioned conifers so far. It is winter here, now, and the only key in the book relies on leaves. Once you've got your leaf in hand, the book should lead you to the correct general section and, assuming you know your geographic location, you would browse to find what you are looking for. If you're used to using leaf scars and buds to identify leafless trees you may find yourself frustrated by this book.

I also considered the book for its use as an overview to the trees of an area. I pretended I was going to move

out west and wanted to know what I might expect. Asking friends to name places, I randomly chose two locations: Prince Rupert, British Columbia and Bismarck, North Dakota. By browsing, looking at range maps, and making lists, I came away happy that I had a good start on what trees and shrubs to expect. It was looking a bit bleak for Bismarck at first, as most of the species to be found there were further along in the book's taxonomic arrangement, while most of Prince Rupert's were in the earlier sections. The range maps include the species' entire range in Canada and the United States. They are not chopped off at the 100th meridian. They do end at the Mexican border, however. They also do not extend west of the Aleutian chain to Siberia, although I could only find one species that would.

The book includes both native and naturalized species (growing without help from humans). See, for example, the many *Acacia* and similar species in the southern United States. It includes species that are considered shrubs in some places, and cacti. On flipping through, the brightly coloured cactus fruits and flowers will grab your eye. Illustrations are paintings by David More. I find the style to be very good. It is that fine combination of precision and just the right touch of necessary impressionism. The colours, as printed, seem accurate.

I can recommend this book for the large and varied audience of those interested in trees. I will leave it to others to say how far it can go for the technical user.

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