

THE DAILY ASTORIAN

Arborists take tree to the limit



ALEX PAJUNAS — The Daily Astorian

Rich Scott, left, saws off a section from the trunk of a 110-foot Sitka spruce at Camp Kiwanilong in Warrenton as Mike Newby slowly feeds line into a Good Rigging Control System to help lower the suspended tree to the ground.

Tree specialists go the extra mile to protect area when cutting large Sitka spruce

By CASSANDRA PROFITA
The Daily Astorian

WARRENTON — If a tree is meticulously lowered to the ground over the course of 16 hours using a manual system of rope riggings so as not to harm the surrounding forest, does it make a sound?

Through creative thinking and trial and error, arborist Luke Colvin and his crew at Arbor Care Tree Specialists answered that question April 25 and 26 at Camp Kiwanilong as they successfully removed a 110-foot Sitka spruce trunk from a precarious position.

The December storms severed the 120-foot tree from its roots and left the enormous trunk wedged at a 60-degree angle between the ground and a neighboring tree-top.

Below the tangled branches of the two trees, the truncated spruce bowed under the pressure of its own weight: somewhere between 5,000 to 7,500 pounds.

Under normal circumstances, removing the spruce trunk might not have been such an epic event.

But surrounding the leaning trunk were three cabins, an old tree with a cavity full of baby raccoons, a body of water known as Long Lake and the dense, historic forest of Camp Kiwanilong.

The camp was scheduled to open its doors to dozens of children within two weeks of the removal, according to ranger Trinda Little, and some of those children would need to be sleeping in the cabins. Clearly, she said, they wouldn't be safe until the hazardous spruce was on the ground.

And she couldn't stand to put the baby raccoons' den in harm's way, either.

With clear instructions to remove the

spruce without disturbing the cabins, the surrounding trees or the baby raccoons, Little hired Colvin and his crew to do the job.

Colvin knew it was going to be one of the trickiest tree removal operations he'd ever attempted.

Both ends of the 110-foot trunk were essentially unsecured, and he had only a narrow strip of clear land on which it could fall.

"Usually when spruce trees are hung up in other trees, they're still attached to the root ball," he said. "With this one, once we cut the top free it's hung up in there with nothing supporting it. It's a big piece of wood, and it's really heavy."

Colvin devised a plan, bought \$4,000 worth of equipment and spent several hours with his crew setting up a system of riggings, winches and pulleys.

"You can't get any kind of machinery in there," Colvin said as the operation began. "We have to do it all manually using lines and rigging. If you had an excavator, you could just grab the tree and lower it down."

It wasn't until after he'd scaled the sloping spruce, lopped off its branches and cut a section of the trunk free from its neighbor that he realized the job was going to be even trickier than he'd thought. As he made the first cut at the tree top, the trunk lurched about a foot downward before catching on another branch.



'You can't get any kind of machinery in there.'

— Luke Colvin
Tree specialist



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Luke Colvin, owner of Arbor Care Tree Specialists, ascends the trunk of a 110-foot Sitka spruce leaning precariously against another spruce at Camp Kiwanilong April 25. The tree became a major threat to the cluster of cabins surrounding it when the December wind storms severed it from its roots, leaving the broken-off trunk angled into the ground.

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Tree: Equipment maxxed out

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"That moved quite a bit," he called out to his crew below from the upper reaches of the neighboring tree. "Check the whole system over there."

The fallen spruce was roped into three anchors — all nearby trees — designed to hold it in place as Colvin cut the trunk free. The third rope was wound around a winch with a crank.

The idea was to remove as much weight as possible from the spruce and then cut it free from the branches of its neighbor, allowing the winching system to slowly lower the trunk to the ground between the cabins and the raccoon den.

But the tree was heavier than Colvin thought it would be, and the winch was struggling to hold its weight. As crew member Mike Newby tried to tighten the grip on the fallen spruce, he called out to Colvin.

"When I try to crank it, it's slipping," he said. "It doesn't even have as much weight on it now as it's going to have once you cut that top off. We're going to be putting more and more weight on that thing, and we're, like, at its limits right now."

As Colvin hung in the branches of the neighboring tree, he and his crew

discussed their options. Deciding the trunk was still solidly hung up in the tree, he made his way down.

"I don't want to die today," he said. Later, he explained: "The equipment we have is maxxed out. We are gonna have to go home, get some more gear and devise a new plan."

Extra anchor

The next day, the crew set up an extra anchor at the top of the tree and changed its approach to reducing the trunk's weight load. Instead of cutting pieces from the top, they sawed chunks off the bottom.

"The biggest advantage to the way we decided on was I didn't have to be in the tree," said Colvin. "We were pushing all this equipment to its limit. It's not fun to be in it and attached to it while you're maximizing the equipment."

The first pieces off the bottom each cut out between 300 to 500 pounds of wood. After each cut, the beefed-up anchoring system held the trunk suspended in midair. Eventually, when the trunk was small enough to fit in the confined space, the crew lowered it to the ground.

"It came down so softly, I couldn't believe it," said Little. "The tree came



ALEX PAJUNAS — The Daily Astorian
Rich Scott finishes off a cut on the base of the storm damaged Sitka spruce Saturday, April 26 at Camp Kiwanilong. Scott and other workers with Arbor Care Tree Specialists used a pair of lines to pull the tree vertical while sawing sections off the bottom until it could be safely lowered to the ground.

down very softly and missed all the buildings and the lake and my raccoon tree. Really, to tell you the truth, I cried. It was a huge relief to have it come down successfully and not have it damage anything around it.

"Now my children are safe out in that part of the woods, and I don't worry about it anymore."

Without access to machinery, Colvin said removing the spruce put his

company to the test.

"There's no question it's the most technical removal we have ever encountered," he said. "It might go down as technically the most difficult removal my company will ever do. If we could have brought in a crane or an excavator or something, it would have been quick and easy."

Colvin, who has made himself a steward of the trees at the camp, said



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Mike Newby, removes any slack from the rope running through the Good Rigging Control System strapped onto the trunk of a Sitka spruce tree. The system allows for the removal of problem trees without having a person in the tree cutting. Instead pieces could be cut from the bottom.

he spent twice as much on equipment as he charged for doing the removal.

"I wouldn't have done it for anybody other than Camp Kiwanilong," he said.

Colvin has launched an educational program called "Arborists at the Arboretum" to protect and maintain the unique collection of trees at Camp Kiwanilong, which were planted during the historic effort by the Civilian

Conservation Corps to secure the North Coast dunes in the 1930s.

Twice a year, Colvin recruits other arborists to work on the camp's trees. At 9:30 a.m. May 31, the group will hold a clinic for landowners on identifying hazard trees. Afterward, they will spend several hours mitigating and reducing tree hazards on the campgrounds. A donation of \$2 or two cans of food are requested from those wishing to attend.

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