



SEQUOIA & KINGS CANYON NATIONAL PARKS

& SEQUOIA NATIONAL FOREST/GIANT SEQUOIA NATIONAL MONUMENT

LATE SUMMER GUIDE 2011



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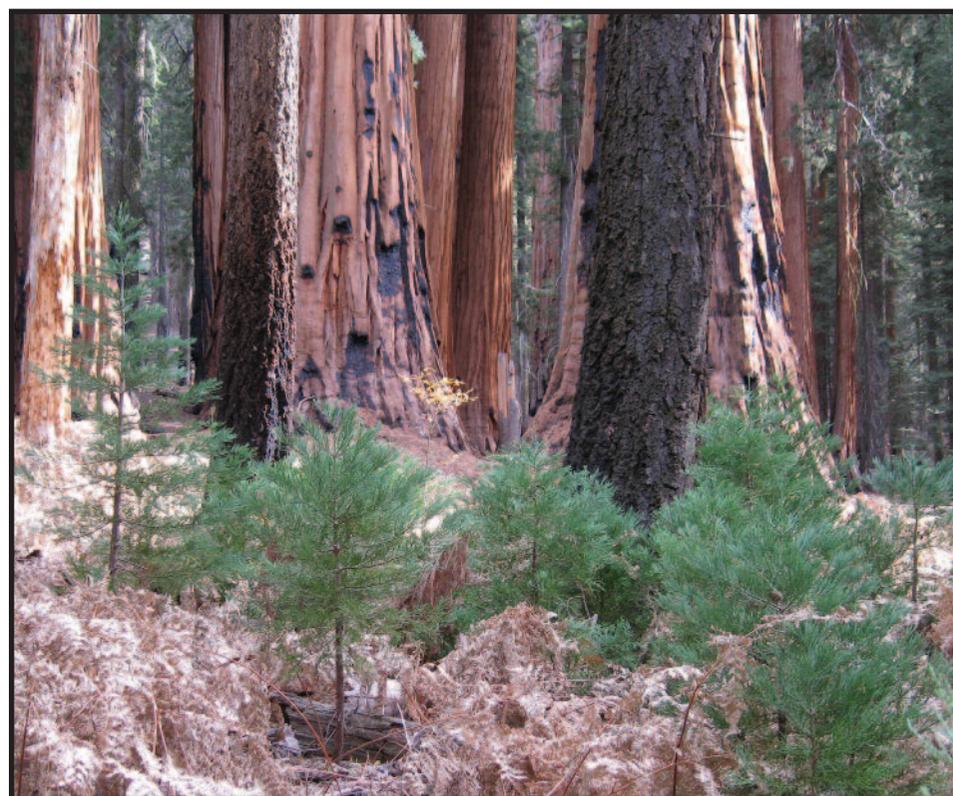
Sequoias, fire, and the next generation

It is impossible to walk through a sequoia grove without being awestruck by the beauty of the great giants: General Sherman, the Grant Tree, the Parker Group, the Lincoln Tree, and the many other sequoias that people have come to know and love. You can find a joy and a peace while wandering through sequoias that feels unlike anything else.

Another wonder awaits you in many of the parks' sequoia groves. Whether walking through the East Fork Grove, Redwood Mountain Grove, or in many locations in Giant Forest, with an observant eye you can spot crops and thickets of small sequoia saplings.

Young sequoias are distinctive in their bright green and sharp, scaly needles. Seedlings look stunted and scraggly, but they take on a graceful spire shape as they mature into saplings. They often grow in dense clusters near streams, wet meadows, and sunny gaps in the forest canopy—a testament to this tree's thirsty and sun-loving nature. They also grow almost exclusively where fire has burned recently.

Virtually all these young trees result from prescribed fires completed over recent years. Giant sequoias are fire-adapted; they thrive with natural fire cycles. Fire opens the cones, releasing the tiny seeds to the nutrient rich ash and mineral soil below—the ideal conditions for this tree's germination. Fire thins competing plants while opening the



Ten years ago, these sequoia saplings sprouted after a prescribed fire. The young tree on the left is starting to take on the conical shape standard to older saplings.

NPS Photo: D. Schweizer

canopy above to sunlight.

The odds are strongly against a sequoia seed germinating and growing to maturity. Thousands of seeds scatter after fires, yet most of them will not even take root. The very small number that do, however, still have a lot to contend with. Drought, competition for water and nutrients, floods, and fire all take a toll on these young trees. Occasional dense clusters of saplings can be seen ten years after a fire, but very few of them will last much beyond that.

They cannot all survive if one is to survive. Natural processes wean out the weaker trees and those with less sunlight or less access to water sources. Trees of the same age often vary in size after just a few years. Only those in prime locations grow well. For example, General Sherman stands as the largest — but not the oldest — sequoia. Its size can be attributed in part to the luck of having started in an excellent spot.

Walk along the Congress Trail in Giant Forest or in Redwood Mountain Grove to enjoy sequoias both young and old. While admiring the youngsters, try to determine which will be survivors. Which of these saplings will live through droughts and fires? Which will grow tall, drop their lower limbs to help protect themselves from future fires, and drink deep of the mountain waters? Somewhere out there is the next General Sherman Tree.

~ Deb Schweizer