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Friends of White's Woods leads big tree walk

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Friends of White's Woods members Sara King and Jessica Jopp led a White's Woods Nature Center Big Tree Walk on Tuesday, June 16. The walkers stopped to measure and admire some of the biggest, oldest trees in this forest.

Not far from the old quarry, the hikers admired a tree that has been in our forest for more than 200 years and showcases numerous big tree characteristics. This red oak measures 9.3 feet in circumference and its bark is "spooning," or thinning and curving. "Spoonings" is a part of the tree's natural aging process that is driven by significant trunk expansion and the reduction of elasticity in the bark. This tree also exhibits natural pruning: It drops lower branches as the tree grows taller and moves toward sunlight.

Staghead branching could also be observed with this heritage tree. "In order to preserve the vital parts of the tree," according to nature writer Emma Reardon, "the extremities start to die off, enabling light to reach the inner crown and stimulate new growth in dormant buds. The outer branches are hardy and remain, looking like wooden antlers standing proud and erect — often for decades or even centuries."



Jessica Jopp measured an old red oak in White's Woods on a recent Big Tree Walk.

Among the other trees observed included a 147-foot-tall tulip poplar, a tree that is taller than 16 of the 20 tulip trees identified as Pennsylvania Champions, and a huge, old northern red oak

with a circumference of 13.4 feet. At 118 feet tall, this White's Woods red oak is taller than any red oak in nearby Cook Forest.

Dale Luthringer, Cook Forest Department of Conservation and Natural Resources forester and education specialist, showed FWW how to identify and measure big trees. Luthringer refers to our state's oldest trees as "witness trees," because they have lived through so much of our state's history. The oldest trees in White's Woods were getting their start at about the same time as our community: Indiana, Pa., was incorporated in 1816. By 1820, when our now-oldest trees were seedlings, Indiana County had 8,892 residents.

Precisely because of their age and size, White's Woods' big, old trees provide homes for wildlife and absorb huge amounts of atmospheric carbon.

The Big Tree walkers also looked at a number of nursery trees — fallen logs that provide new seedlings with extra moisture, nutrients, warmth, access to sunlight and even protection from disease. The walk concluded with a check on some of the 180 tree tubes that FWW has installed to protect new White's Woods seedlings.

The Old Growth Forest Network invited White Township to enroll White's Woods, a mature second-growth forest, into their nationwide network based on a DCNR-forester evaluation.