

## People and Place

Exploring the History, Natural History,  
Ecology and Geology of the  
Chesapeake Bay Watershed

By [Hayden Mathews](#)



Rockwell Kent, 'Child Under Tree, Virginia'

### May 2009 Remarkable Trees

My wife and I had the great good fortune to attend a recent lecture at the Blandy State Arboretum by Doctor Jeff Kirwan, the head of the Virginia Remarkable Trees Project at Virginia Tech. Having received the beautifully illustrated book ['Remarkable Trees of Virginia'](#) that Jeff co-authored with Nancy Hugo back in December, I knew that we were in for a treat – how big a treat, I did not guess.

Jeff's lecture was the same one that he uses when he goes around the state speaking at elementary schools. What shone through in every slide and every story provided with the images, was the love, respect and abiding relationships that people forge with trees especially those that are 'jaw droppers' – so big, majestic, and magnificent that we just step back and gape in admiration. With his great love of trees and his bedrock belief that kids need to get out into contact with these trees clearly conveyed in his commentary, it's small wonder that the kids he speaks to respond with the enthusiasm he describes. He reported showing elementary school classes a sequence of slides of children their age running over to a HUGE White Oak and climbing onto a lower branch that is bigger around than they are and having the students rise up out of their chairs cheering.

By generating this kind of enthusiasm while teaching an awareness of how much trees contribute to our environment, Jeff hopes to combat the phenomenon he calls 'landscape amnesia': a whole generation of children is growing up assuming that the landscape they know is the same one that their great, great, grandparents knew save for the Wal-Mart's. With no competing basis of comparison, kids will believe that our forests of 2009 are of the same caliber and complexity as those of the past century and take our current forests in the Mid-Atlantic States as the picture of what forests are and what forests should be. Jeff wants to give kids and their parents a taste and reminder of what used to be here and if we put our hearts and minds to it, could be once again.

All of this brings me around to remarking that it is worthwhile for each of us to take note of the trees that grace our communities and forests and to look for those that are, as the book calls them, remarkable. If we stop and think about it, almost all of us can bring to mind a particular tree that has special meaning for us. We may not know what kind of tree it is, or whether it is a native or not, but we know that it stands apart from the rest by dint of some special memory that we have of it or just the way the tree makes us feel.

While I have many favorite trees, there are several that I would classify as remarkable.

The first is the Carter Oak, a very large White Oak is located in Millwood, Virginia. With huge, magnificent limbs that dip down to the ground and rise up in apparent disregard for the laws of gravity, truly a remarkable tree. I had driven past it for years seeing only a few limbs above the wall when I decided to pull in and see it first hand – Wow! What tree. This picture which shows only a portion of the and two of the lower limbs gives you some idea of size.



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The next tree is a Sycamore by the old stone bridge Aldie, VA that almost certainly predates the Civil War. With a trunk diameter that I would estimate at 4.5

plus and height that I would estimate at well over 80 feet, this tree likely witnessed Colonel John S. Mosby, 'The Gray Ghost', riding across this bridge on his many raids in this area during the war. Standing as it is next to the narrow stone bridge, few persons notice it as

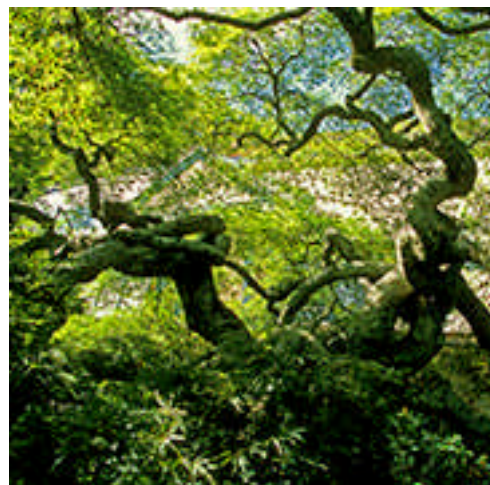


they attempt to cross in their cars without hitting the bridge or on-coming traffic. I noticed the tree myself only after stopping to tour Aldie Grist Mill that stands just west of the stone bridge and as I did so, realized how much I had been missing while driving through the town. This was yet another reminder of how much more I can learn and see when I leave the car and take the time to walk. Not only do my muscles create a physical sense of the place (...."I don't remember a hill being here.....") but I have the luxury of being able to stop and closely examine things.

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And my last favorite of this trio is really two trees: a pair of Japanese Cut Leaf Maples (aka a 'Smoke Trees') that grow next to the old (early 1800's) greenhouse/hothouse at Oatlands Plantation south of Leesburg, VA on Route 15. These trees enchant children as each forms a 'house' of leaves under which kids can and peek out,

never having entirely grown out of my childhood fascination with trees like this, it enchants me as well. The limbs in winter are so marvelously twisty and contorted that they look though they might be harboring oriental dragons inside. These trees are in a word, magical.



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So find a copy of 'Remarkable Trees of Virginia' with the renewed enthusiasm the book will instill in you, set about finding your own remarkable trees.

## [Hayden Mathews](#)

A knowledgeable, amusing, and passionate interpreter of the natural and cultural history of the Chesapeake Bay region, **Hayden Mathews** has been hiking, paddling and photographing in the tri-state area for over 30 years and has been offering tours, talks and workshops in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area since 1997. His talks, tours and workshops use photographs, poetry, prose, music and fine arts images to interpret the many facets of the Bay including its history, natural history, ecology and geology and the forces and events that shaped both the lands and waters that have sustained people since their arrival in this area 15,000 years ago. Through his programs, Hayden seeks to build lasting, personal connections between people of all ages and the places they live by using both experiential and informational approaches. A staunch supporter of the *No Child Left Inside* movement, he is especially interested in getting parents and children involved in regional explorations that provide education and entertainment for the entire family. From 1997-2001, Hayden offered very popular on-river interpretive tours on the 42 foot Sailing Dory, 'Potomac' which ran between the National Colonial Farm and Washington's Mount Vernon. In the spring of 2001, Hayden formed **River Stories** to allow him to continue his interpretive programs as a personal business and recently launched a River Stories web site at [www.bayhistory.net](http://www.bayhistory.net). Hayden caught "the Geo-Eco-History bug" from Drs. Jim O'Connor and Philip Ogilvie respectively the former Geologist and former Archivist of Washington, DC, when he took their courses on Potomac history and never thought to look for a cure. Hayden has also served on the EcoStewards Board of Directors for the past 14 years.