“Whoa! The tree core just shot out of the borer!” I laughed without realizing what followed... the sticky sap came spewing out all over me. Luckily, the increment borer was half way out of the Douglas fir before the sap attack happened. Unluckily, the Dougie that I was coring was over 130 cm DBH and wasn’t giving the borer up. By the time we were able to remove the increment borer, Dr. Emanuele Ziaco, Nick Miley, and I were covered in sap. Good thing we had a surplus of the contemporary dendroecologist’s best friend… 100% ethanol did the trick for our hands and arms! Our field clothes will stay field clothes forever.

I’ve been coring trees in the semiarid mountains of the Southwest as a dendroecologist for more than six field seasons and have never experienced a tree core exit an increment borer on its own. These were the lessons I wasn’t prepared to learn as Team DendroLab from University of Nevada, Reno embarked on its two-week expedition up the Cascade Mountain Range and into the depths of interior Washington. Our objective was to relocate at least ten International Tree-Ring Data Bank chronology sites and core the largest, oldest ponderosa pine and Douglas firs at those locations.

The thick haze from a wildfire surrounded us as we drove north to Yakima from Reno. It was the end of August, and the wildfire season was in full swing. We were lucky to reach our first sites near Mt. Rainier before the southern areas of Mt. Baker-Snoqualamie National Forest were closed to the public due to the wildfires. A few ridges near the top of Mt. Rainier were the only parts of the iconic mountain that we could see as we drove through the smoky Mt. Rainer National Park to our next potential sites near Cayuse Pass. That night we found a primitive campground along a Forest Service road on the west side of the Cascades, excited to relocate our next sites. In the morning, we drove up a ridgeline to relocate our sites, when Mt. Rainer in all its beauty was sitting behind the top of the pass, while the sea-faring fog was rising from the west.

You could just imagine the enigmatic Sasquatch cruising through the humid, productive ecosystems full of enormous trees. We joked around about its possible sightings, as all visitors of the temperate Northwest rainforests have the chance to do. Then we were off to the drier eastside of the Cascades near new and old Blewitt Pass. There, after scoping out both passes, we settled on coring a nice stand of Pondos (ponderosa pines), agreeing that we didn’t “blow it.”
Lake Creek Campground in Wenatchee National Forest was a nice treat after some fully-packed double site coring days. The following day we climbed up a high relief, steep mountain side to a ponderosa pine grove under some cliff bands that seemed like the best bet to core old trees. To our surprise, we had a difficult time finding some old Pondos in what appeared to be a recovering forest. We drove away from the site frustrated.

A few tacos from a food truck in Chelan made us feel better as we turned our attention east towards the small town of Republic. We finished our trip coring some stunning ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir stands where we found remnant coring holes in some of the trees, presumably from the dendrochronologists who first discovered the sites decades before.

The smoke was rolling down from British Columbia as our Great Northwest DendroExpedition was coming to an end. We had succeeded in relocating 11 ITRDB sites, and rewarded ourselves with a good dinner and a few locally brewed beers at Republic Brewing Company. A pleasant stay at a motel in town that night, followed by a lazy morning, was a good way to recharge for the journey back.

The drive through eastern Washington was astounding, especially driving by the colossus Colville Dam. I had mixed feelings about the incredible engineering project. On one hand, it stopped the natural flow of a keystone river. But with all the ash and other aerosols we had encountered on our field trip, I had to also consider the clean energy it produced and the community that was enhanced with the building of the dam. These difficult environmental and ecological conundrums will be in the forefront of management and policy strategies in our threatened national forests.

Our last night was spent in Redmond after crossing the Oregon border where we fell asleep watching old “The Simpsons” reruns.. exhausted. The next morning we had a pleasant breakfast with Nick’s father and drove back to Reno. It’s not only exploring forests in new mountain ecosystems that reminds me of why I chose to study forests, but also the companionship you form with the people you are with. In modern times of constantly battling over memory space between ArcGIS and R, it’s a tranquil pleasure to walk through iconic forests driven by the passion to save them.