Collecting Giant Cypress Larger, Faster, and Easier

by Bill Butler

I have been collecting bald cypress for the past 14 years. I was introduced to the techniques involved by fellow GNOBS club member and former president of the club, Gary Marchal. The techniques we used were detailed in a GNOBS January 1989 newsletter article by Jimmy Littleton (through his work with the legendary Vaughan Banting). I myself have expanded on this article by producing a recommended supplies list.

On my first dig with Gary in 1996, I pulled two trees from the swamp. The larger of the two had a 28-inch base and took the two of us an hour to remove from the water and muck. This is exhausting work in 50-degree air and even colder water. Gary mentioned that a chain puller could be used to extract even larger trees. The downside is that the device is heavy and slogging in and out of the swamps is hard enough when carrying freshly dug cypress trees. “Any tree can be dug with enough people and the right equipment,” Gary said.

The end of January through the beginning of February is the best time to dig bald cypress out of swamps. Leaf buds are just beginning to swell, which is the best time for the tree. Cold-blooded creatures such as snakes and alligators are still hibernating, which is the best time the adventurer. Even the insects are absent. Other than birds, the only animals I’ve ever seen was one raccoon who quickly scurried away.Butler002

The puller has an anchor hook, a cabled hook, and a winch handle. The nylon rope is anchored to a nearby tree using a square knot (this proves to be a mistake). The target tree on the right, is attached using a nylon tie-down strap which has a hook at one end and a loop at the other.

This past November, I found a “Winch Cable Puller” at Harbor Freight tools on sale for just $10. Remembering Gary’s advice, I bought oneand decided to give it a try.

Since my first trip in 1996, I’ve added some key pieces of equipment to my supplies. If the goal is to collect one tree near the edge of the swamp, all that is needed is a short carpenter’s saw. However, to go deeper into the densly forested swamps, not get lost, and easily extract the heavy trees, I’ve added a GPS receiver, and a floating tub to the equipment list. The addition of a 7-pound winch puller was significant, but manageable.

This is a 2-foot by 3-foot utility tub modified with a tow rope. It lightens my load while slogging around. It also is used to float out the trees which are collected. I call it my equipment barge. I've expanded beyond my original equipment list of "one saw".

On this year’s trip into the swamp, I extracted four trees. I used the winch puller on each one. On the first tree, I began by using the tried and true standard of cutting beveled cut around the tree using a short carpenter’s saw. The next step, traditionally, is to push and pull on the tree to expose deeper roots for cutting. Instead, I set up the winch puller. (See the Jimmy Littleton article for more information on how this cut is made.)

The anchor rope uses slipknots to vary the distance between the anchor tree and the targeted tree. Note the left over knot in the line from a previous anchor point. This pops out quickly when the line is made taught.

Several things became apparent after pulling that first tree from the swamp.

First, I tie very good sqaure knots and I’m glad I always keep a knife handy when working with rope.

Second, use the winch puller before making the first cut, not afterwards.
Third, this tool is a dream. I’ll never go into the swamps without a winch puller ever again.

Cutting the tree's roots is exactly the same every year. The water is 8 to 10-inches deep and I quickly loose track of the cut as the muck roils in the water. The trees roots bind up on the saw and I have to make extra cuts just to open a deeper gap. Initial cuts do not allow the tree to move very far when attempting to rock it back and forth. All these problems are solved by the winch puller.

The targeted giant. This is a 35-foot tree. The small root flare seen in the second photo hides a much wider flare below the surface.

My double slipknot method of anchoring the winch. How you tie the knots is important. The tension should tighten the knot, not the loop. If the loop tightens with higher tension, the knot will be difficult to reuse.

By the third tree, I had fine-tuned my new extration method. The winch was installed before the first cut would be made. I used slipknots (aka "simple noose" knots) in the winch's anchor line. One knot at the end of the line, the other further back depending on the distance of the two trees. A slipknot can be tied and removed from a line with relative ease. The anchor rope is simply wrapped around a nearby tree with both slipknots placed over the anchor hook of the winch puller. The yellow strap I used around the target tree was a fixed length strap that came with a tie-down kit I bought at a hardware store.

The cable is attached using a fixed-length tie-down strap. Rope could be used here instead.

Once in place, the winch was cranked as tight as I felt was safe. I then began my beveled cuts through the roots of the targeted tree on the side opposite the winch puller. The difference in the winch versus non-winch method was phenominal. Once a root was cut, the tension on the line would pull the cut open. As more roots were cut, the groove through the muck became more pronounced and easier to find under the cloudy water. One cut was all that was needed for each placement of the winch line. The old method required multiple sawing attempts through troublesome roots.

I extracted a tree with a 32-inch base in just 15-minutes (see photo below). I used just three anchor trees in the process. The time span was mostly used to move the anchor line from tree to tree. This is a significant savings in time and energy in a place where cold water is an aggravating factor.

The same savings in time do not apply to smaller trees. Smaller bald cypress with bases in the range of 10 to 12-inches take the same amound of time whether the winch is used or not. The key difference is that without the winch, much of the time is spend kneeling, sawing, and resawing in the water and muck.

Two views of the trimmed rootball and the short carpenter's saw used. Note the significant flare which was hidden beneath the waterline.

Once extracted, the tree needs to be field dressed. The height of the tree needs to be cut to no longer than 3 to 5-feet in height. The root ball needs to be trimmed to a depth of about 4 to 6-inches. Any brances on the trunk need to be removed. I estimated the weight of the tree to be well in excess of 100-pounds after removing excess roots and trunk.

Now that the tree is dug, it's time to leave the swamp. I like to play a mental game in the swamp and try to figure out where the exit is before consulting my GPS receiver. I don't delude myself with thinking I have any sort of wood sense. I know I'm lost out there. It's just that it never ceases

to amaze me how few clues there are to help me find my bearings. Moss grows on all sides of the trees. The winter sky is gray. Sounds from the highway, if you can hear them, echo about until they lose their sense of origin. When I finally look at my receiver, I find that my guess is never right. If I didn't have my GPS receiver or a good compass, fear of getting lost would keep me away from the best trees hidden deep in the swamps.

Once I got my bearings, I loaded the tree into my equipment barge. I had to use care when towing the barge out the swamp. The tree constantly threatens to sink the small tub. This is a very minor complaint. I've hauled heavy trees out of the swamp before using only my shoulders. The added weight quickly sinks me down into the muck past my knees. The barge is necessary and a welcome relief from bruised shoulders.

When I selected the largest tree of the day, I knew I was selecting a tree I would never have tackled with just a saw. The winch puller allows for the selection of giants. These giants can be removed more easily and in less time. "Larger, Faster, Easier" are three qualities which make the winch puller a must when hunting giants in the swamps.

Two shots of the giant. That tub is 36-inches across. The tree is potted deep to protect the roots. Excess soil will be removed once the tree has shown vigor.