

Botanist William H. Baker (1911-1985): Captivated by Isolated Floras

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(Adapted from an essay that will appear in *Plant Hunters of the Pacific Northwest*, edited by A. R. Kruckeberg and R. M. Love)

“William Hudson Baker was captivated by the floras of isolated mountain ranges in western Oregon” (Arthur Kruckeberg, pers. comm.). In his graduate work under the direction of Dr. Helen Gilkey at Oregon State University, Baker catalogued the floras of two remote and rugged western Oregon peaks, Fairview Mountain in Lane County and Iron Mountain in Curry County. As a result of this work, Iron Mountain was later designated a Botanical Area in the Siskiyou National Forest. Even after accepting a teaching position at the University of Idaho, Baker continued to be drawn to his birth state, spending several summers as a Park Ranger at Crater Lake as well as three seasons collecting in the Wallowa Mountains. At the University of Idaho, Baker rose from botany instructor and herbarium curator to science administrator before illness forced him to take early retirement. He then chose to live his last years in western Oregon, where he first discovered his love of botany.

Some botanists are known for a major contribution in a particular field, while for others the simple daily routine of teaching, mentoring, collecting, identifying and cataloging, creates, over time, a substantial botanical legacy. William Baker falls in the latter category. Although Baker discovered his botanical calling late (after an initial career in education and wartime military service), and was forced to retire early, he made impressive contributions during the mid-twentieth century to our knowledge of the floras of Oregon and Idaho. Baker left no personal papers or notebooks; therefore this essay pieces together the details of his life from Oregon Flora Project data, academic transcripts, newspaper notices, wartime files, and his published works.

A Boy from The Dalles

William Hudson Baker was born in Portland on December 14, 1911. He grew up in The Dalles, son of Helen Thornbury (Hudson) Baker of The Dalles, and William Thomas Baker, a railroad contractor. Helen was a member of a prominent Wasco County pioneer family, the T. A. Hudsons. She and Baker were married in her hometown on November 28, 1910, after which the newlyweds set up housekeeping in Portland where Bill was born

a year later (*The Dalles Chronicle* 1910, 1911). When he was about four years old, a second son, Robert, was born. Some time after the birth of the younger boy, Helen Baker returned to The Dalles and subsequently raised her boys alone. The circumstances of her move are not known; in 1948 she described herself as a widow (*The Dalles City Directory*, 1948.) Money was tight; Helen took in boarders and son Bill, during his high school years, worked as a church janitor.

The future botanist attended The Dalles High School, where he earned the customary credits in English, history, geography, algebra, geometry, chemistry, and biology. Records indicate no particular early interest or aptitude for science; however, in his senior year he joined the glee club and appeared in an operetta (*The Dalles High School Steelhead*, 1931). During the two years after high school he attended Los Angeles Junior College, where he took no science classes and received only mediocre grades. He then apparently decided to prepare himself for a teaching career. Baker was 21 when he enrolled at Oregon Normal School in Monmouth where, in four quarters, he significantly improved his academic record (Oregon State University Archives and Special Collections).

More importantly, while in Monmouth Bill met the young woman who would later become his wife. Molly Ann Cochran, two years

younger than Bill, grew up on a farm north of Eugene, graduated from Coburg High School in 1930, and joined a sorority at Oregon State College, later transferring to the Normal School and the University of Oregon. Molly's stepfather, Wilfred A. Cochran, was a businessman as well as a farmer. Her mother, Kate, was a member of the pioneer Vanduyn family of Lane County. The Cochrans also owned vacation property with a summer house on the Rogue River near Agness and Iron Mountain, which would later influence Baker's choice of botanical study areas. Molly had an excellent educational background for a botanist's companion, having studied Latin, biology, botany, geology, and geography in college.

During the next two years Baker, who was probably now contemplating marriage, became serious about his education. This was a period of deep economic depression in the United States, and he no doubt realized he would soon need to support himself



Bill Baker, as a 19-year-old senior at The Dalles High School. Photo in the school's 1931 yearbook, the *Steelhead*.

and a wife. He took classes at Oregon State College in Corvallis, returning to Monmouth Normal to do his practice teaching. He and Molly were married on November 17, 1934; he was 23 and she was 21. The following year he completed his degree in education at Oregon State and accepted a teaching position with the public schools in Burns (Harney County) where he was promoted to Principal in 1939 (*Oregon Education Journal* 1939). (Interestingly, during Baker's years in Oregon, he is not known to have collected a single plant specimen in Harney County.) This chronology brings the young couple into the early years of World War II. We know little of the Bakers' lives at this time except that he described himself as a "Public School Administrator in Oregon," and in 1938 supplemented his income with summer employment at The Dalles Cooperative Fruit Growers. During this period he also began taking summer classes, which precipitated another turning point in his life.



Molly Cochran as a student at Oregon State College, c. 1930. Image of student academic record card, courtesy of Oregon State University Archives and Special Collections.

His Life's Calling

From transcripts and OSU Herbarium records, I surmise that this was when Baker's interest in botany developed. In the summer of 1937, he studied general and systematic botany at Oregon State, apparently with Dr. Helen Gilkey, who must have awakened his interest in plants. As if recognizing his true purpose in life, Baker now began energetically collecting and identifying plant specimens from throughout Oregon. The OSU Herbarium holds his collections dated between 1937 and 1942 from both east and west of the Cascades (Wasco, Sherman, Wheeler, Gilliam, Jefferson, Klamath, Lane, Lincoln, Douglas, Curry, Benton, and Linn counties). He began collecting ferns at Fairview Mountain in Lane County in 1937 (Baker 1948). In 1939, he took three summer botany courses at the University of Idaho, including advanced taxonomy, and in 1940, he collected at Diamond Lake (Douglas County) with 21-year-old Arthur Cronquist who was then completing his doctorate at the University of Minnesota. From 1936 to 1941 Baker earned graduate credits in science during summer sessions at three northwest schools: the University of Oregon, the University of Idaho, and University of Washington, for a total of six colleges he is known to have attended.

In 1942, Baker resigned from his administrative position in Burns, and returned to Corvallis to work on a Master's degree in education with a minor in biology; his thesis was entitled, "Key to the Flora of Fairview Mountain for Use in Teaching" (Baker 1942). In it Baker combined instructions for student fieldwork in botany with a catalogue of the Fairview flora. His thesis director was R. J. Clinton of the Department of Education. Later, Baker rewrote the botanical material for *American Midland Naturalist* (1951), omitting the teaching aspects. After successfully defending this thesis on May 9, 1942, Bill was awarded his Masters Degree.

Becoming a Botanist After the War

In the forward to his Masters thesis, Baker thanked his wife Molly for her "...painstaking assistance in checking and proof-reading the manuscript, also, for her companionship on the many field trips which were made to gather materials" (Baker 1942). However, world events now dictated that the two would be apart for several years. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor of December 7, 1941, the United States declared war on Japan and the Axis powers, and in August 1942 (at the age of 31), Baker enlisted in the US Navy and reported for duty in Portland. He received military training at Camp Perry, Virginia, and at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and subsequently served with the Seventh Fleet in the South Pacific in New Guinea, Manila, and Leyte in the Philippines. He was a member of a naval construction battalion whose primary role was carving

Allied airfields out of tropical jungles (National Personnel Records Center). His naval records do not specify when he left the military, however we do know that he was stationed in Melbourne Australia in the fall of 1945, a few months after the Japanese surrender. Baker's whereabouts were mentioned in *The Dalles Chronicle* on October 11, 1945 in an announcement that William and Molly had adopted a newborn baby boy, naming him James William Baker. He was to be their only child.

Baker's military service qualified him for the GI Bill, which helped finance his subsequent work for a PhD in botany at Oregon State University starting in 1946. At this time he was clearly preparing himself for a botanical career, choosing Helen Gilkey as his major professor. OSC Herbarium records indicate that from 1946 through 1948 he botanized heavily at Fairview Mountain in southern Lane County, and at Iron Mountain in Curry County. In his short paper, "Plant Records from Curry County, Oregon" (Baker 1950a), he described a new road that had recently been constructed over the Coquille-Rogue River divide from Powers to Agness that gave him automobile access to an area that had previously been approachable only by boat from Gold Beach over thirty miles away. During



Dr. Helen M. Gilkey (1886-1972), OSC Botany Professor and Herbarium Curator from 1918 to 1951. Photo courtesy of Oregon State University Archives and Special Collections.



Iron Mountain (Curry County) lookout in 1944. Photo courtesy US Forest Service (ROR-SIS SO in Medford, page or photo 75 in Album 11), scanned by Lee Webb. The lookout was constructed 1925 and demolished in 1958.

the 1946-47 academic year, the 35-year-old veteran and new father had a strenuous schedule, researching and writing his PhD thesis, traveling to and from his research sites in southern Lane County and southwest Oregon, and taking courses in advanced systematic botany, plant anatomy, invertebrate zoology, microtechnique, ecology and parasitology. At this time he also published “Ferns of Fairview Mountain, Calapooya Range, Oregon” (Baker 1948). In addition, he was a graduate teaching assistant in botany.

On to Idaho: “Ten Thousand Odd Plants”

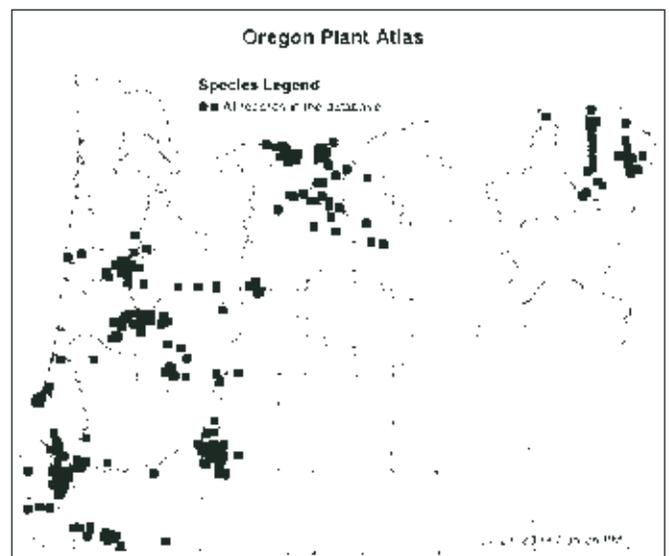
By 1948, Baker was sufficiently well along with his PhD to apply for college teaching positions. Fortunately, the Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Idaho was looking for a botanist with his qualifications and hired him as an Assistant Professor, beginning in the spring of 1949. Baker (now 38), Molly, and Jimmy transferred to Moscow where the family moved into a home at 517 North Garfield Street. In April Baker returned to Corvallis to defend his PhD thesis entitled, “A Taxonomic and Ecologic Comparison of the Floras of Iron and Fairview Mountains in Oregon” (Baker 1949a). In May his family, including his mother and Molly’s family attended his graduation ceremony in Corvallis.

Although now living and working in Idaho, Baker remained eager to botanize in his home state; consequently, during the summers of 1949 and 1950 he worked as a Ranger-Naturalist at Crater Lake National Park, taking his family to live with him in the Park. While at Crater Lake he published an account of 16 species either not previously listed for the Park or that warranted discussion in the Park’s “Nature Notes” (Baker 1950b). He also sent a number of Crater Lake specimens to the OSC Herbarium.

Back in Moscow in October 1949 he wrote to Helen, “We are all well here... I have 50 students enrolled in grasses, which is more than last year, ... this with one section of General Forest Botany and the responsibility for the weekly seminar programs round out the teaching load. Then there is the Herbarium and the ten thousand odd plants I collected this past season ...” (Baker’s correspondence with Dr. Gilkey is archived in the Helen Gilkey files at the OSU Valley Library).

During his doctoral research in 1947 Baker had discovered an unknown species of knotweed at Fairview Mountain. He published it in *Madroño* as *Polygonum cascadense* with a photo and a line drawing of the new species by his mentor, Helen Gilkey (Baker 1949a). In 1951, Baker published “Plants of Fairview Mountain, Calapooya Range, Oregon,” and five years later, “Plants of Iron Mountain, Rogue

River Range, Oregon,” both in *American Midland Naturalist* and both illustrated with the author’s photographs (Baker 1951, 1956).



William Baker’s collection sites (ca. 2,000 records) in Oregon, 1937 to 1954. Baker concentrated his Oregon collecting in southwestern Oregon, and in Wasco, Sherman, and Wallowa counties. (Map courtesy of the Oregon Flora Project.)

In “Plant Records from Curry County, Oregon,” Baker (1950b) provides further details of his botanizing in that county, and the paper on Iron Mountain includes a catalogue of the area’s unusual flora, documenting species said to be at the northern or southern extremes of their ranges, for example, *Picea breweri* from the south and *Erythronium oregonum* from the north. Because of Baker’s work, Iron Mountain was finally designated a Botanical Area in 1989 (Lee Webb, pers. comm.).

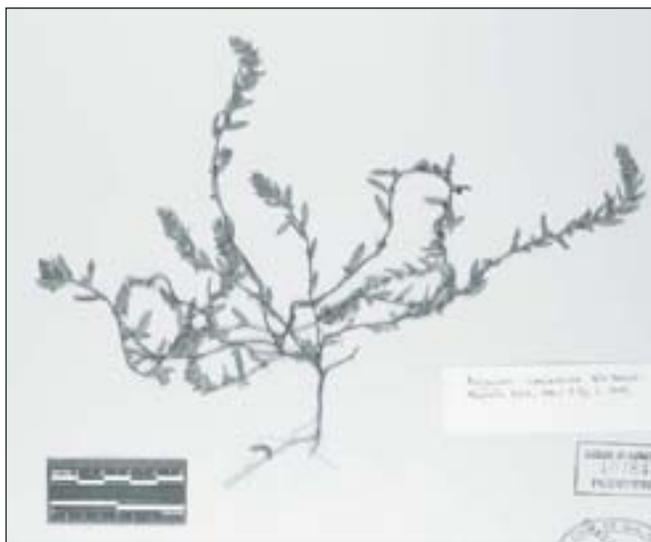
During the summers of 1952, 1953, and 1955 Baker studied the flora of the Wallowa Mountains in Oregon and sent duplicate specimens to OSC. It would have been logical for Baker to work on an Idaho Flora, however Ray J. Davis of Idaho State College in Pocatello published his *Flora of Idaho* in 1952. In June of that year, Baker reviewed the new book favorably in the journal *Northwest Science*: “The writer is to be congratulated on the completion of a very excellent account of the flora” (Baker 1952).

In July 1959 Baker described his life in Moscow to Helen Gilkey: “I am teaching this summer and only get into the field on weekends. I have a class of 23 school teachers in Systematic Botany. You can believe me when I say that they keep me very busy... I am planning on continuing my work this summer in the office of Naval Research in San Francisco where I will spend better than two weeks. Jim [now 14 years old] is in Oregon with his [Cochran] grandparents fishing on the Rogue.” (The Bakers had use of the Cochran vacation house and 127 acres on the Rogue River near Illahe, about six miles southeast of Iron Mountain. Baker no doubt used it as a base camp when he did field work for his PhD. The dwelling was washed away in the winter floods of 1964.)



Crater Lake Ranger Staff, 1949. William Baker is in the back row, far left. Courtesy of NPS Crater Lake National Park Museum and Archives. Coll. 8885-4500.

Barbara Rupers, one of his former students in forest botany wrote: “I was the only female enrolled in forestry at the U of I, and systematic botany was a required class. In those dark ages field trips were virtually non-existent. Dr. Baker was my instructor in the spring of 1955. It was one of my favorite classes – I always did like identification – woods, trees, minerals, rocks. His labs were well organized and I really enjoyed them (though it did seem odd that someone in forestry was required to take a class that concentrated on monocots – grasses in particular). The knowledge I gained from



Type specimen of *Polygonum cascadense* collected by William Baker at Fairview Mountain, Lane County, south slope, 5500 ft., September 28, 1947, no. 5129. Courtesy Oregon State University Herbarium.

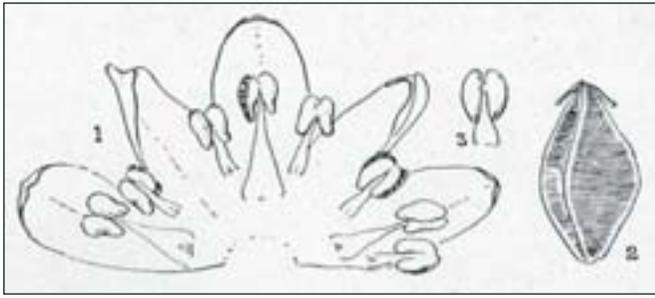
Dr. Baker is helping in the identification of native plants on my property located on Mill and Gooseneck Creeks in Polk County Oregon” (B. Rupers, pers. comm. 2006).

Academic Life and Advancement

Baker’s career at the University of Idaho spanned 24 years. In 1958 he became a full professor and founded the Idaho Academy of Science, serving as its first president. Later he became Chairman of Botany, and in 1972, Head of the Department of Biological Sciences. In 1960 he was profiled in Volume 1 Number 1 of *The Journal of the Idaho Academy of Sciences* with a photo. Baker’s organizations and affiliations included Phi Sigma, Sigma Xi, Alpha Tau Omega, Moscow Kiwanis Club, Northwest Scientific Association, Botanical Society of America, American Society of Plant Taxonomists, American Fern Society, and International Association of Plant Taxonomists (*American Men and Women of Science* 1960). He was especially active in the Northwest Scientific Association between 1950 and 1972, and is listed in their journal, *Northwest Science*, as an Honorary Life Member of that organization in 1973. His specialties included floristics, plant distributions, flowering plants of Northwest America, weeds, range and wildlife, and food plants of Idaho. He was the lead author of the 1961 book *Wildlife of the Northern Rocky Mountains* (Baker *et al.* 1961). In 1964 he was elected a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (U of I *Argonaut*, 9/25/64). Later he became Chairman of Botany, and in 1972, Head of the Department of Biological Sciences. As far as I know, Baker published no articles on the flora of Idaho; however, he is credited with increasing the University of Idaho Herbarium from approximately 8,000 sheets to more than 50,000 specimens (Moscow *Idahonian*, Dec. 20, 1985).

Going Home: “His Favorite Spot”

Baker’s mother, 84-year-old Helen Baker, died in her hometown, The Dalles, in December 1968. Sadly, four years later, in 1972 at



Polygonum cascadense: 1, opened bud with pistil removed; 2, fruit; 3, stamen, dorsal view. Drawings prepared by Baker's mentor, Helen M. Gilkey, for publication of the new species in *Madroño* (Baker 1949a).

the age of 61, Baker began to exhibit symptoms of Parkinson's disease. Due to the physical manifestations of this ailment, he retired early from the University of Idaho and the Bakers returned to Eugene, Oregon, to be closer to Molly's family as well as Bill's younger brother Robert, an Oregon State patrol officer. Bill and Molly bought a house at 2034 Cal Young Road, near the base of Gillespie Butte, north of the Willamette River. To the best of his ability, Baker continued his botanical pursuits, including offering his talents as a botanical consultant. He joined the Native Plant Society of Oregon and attended several of their meetings. As Baker gradually became more handicapped, he employed an attendant who helped him move about in a wheelchair. In the mid-1980s he corresponded with Lee Webb of the Siskiyou National Forest about the unusual flora of Iron Mountain. Webb recalls that at this time, "...his handwriting was very shaky."



William Hudson Baker, Professor of Botany, University of Idaho. Courtesy Philip Anderson, *Idaho Academy of Science Journal*, Number 1, January 1960.

On April 18, 1978, Molly Ann Baker died at the age of 65; she was buried at Gillespie Butte pioneer cemetery in Eugene, amid the graves of her Vanduyn ancestors. Bill and Molly had been married 44 years. In June 1982, with the help of his male nurse-attendant, Bill made a final visit to the site of their former cabin on the Rogue River. He succumbed to the effects of Parkinson's disease on November 22, 1985, just short of his 74th birthday, and was buried next to his wife. The obituary in the Moscow newspaper on December 20 quoted University of Idaho botanist Douglass Henderson: "His [Baker's] collections represented much of Idaho and quite a bit of western Oregon, apparently his favorite spot" (*Idahonian* Dec. 20, 1985). Son James did not live with his parents in Eugene, but inherited their house and lived in it for several years before selling it. His whereabouts today are unknown.

In 1986 the Idaho Academy of Science established the William Baker Memorial Award for student presentations at annual meetings; it has been presented annually since 1987. In 2008, their 50th anniversary year, the Academy issued a special publication to honor its founder, W. H. Baker.

William Hudson Baker was a devotee of Oregon plants for over 50 years. In the quarter century that he spent at the University of Idaho, he increased the size of its herbarium by over six-fold, while carrying a full academic load and advancing into administration. His contemporary, Arthur Kruckeberg, noted his strengths: "Baker was captivated by the floras of isolated mountain ranges in southwestern Oregon; his Masters and PhD theses both reflect this interest. His botanical output over his life was substantial. His thousands of collected specimens are to be found in a number of herbaria in the Pacific Northwest. Baker's move back to Oregon upon retirement brought him full circle to his beginnings." Clearly, Oregon was Baker's "favorite spot."

Acknowledgements

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Rhoda M. Love, a long time member of NPSO, became an NPSO Fellow in 2001. She has served as a member of the *Kalmiopsis* editorial board since its inception in 1991, has published biographical articles on Northwest botanists Ken Chambers, Louis Henderson, W.N. Suksdorf, A.R. Sweetser, Lilla Leach, and Lincoln Constance. This is her sixth article in *Kalmiopsis*; she also edited the late Robert Ornduff's article on Thomas Jefferson Howell and contributed sidebars to several articles. She is currently working on a book with Art Kruckeberg, *Plant Hunters of the Pacific Northwest*.

Book Reviews

Field Guide to the Sedges of the Pacific Northwest

Wilson, B.L., R.E. Brainerd, D. Lytjen, B. Newhouse, and N. Otting. 2008. Corvallis (OR): Oregon State University Press. 431 p. ISBN 978-0-87071-197-8 \$35.00

Few plant groups strike greater fear into the hearts of amateur (or even professional) botanists than graminoids, especially sedges. (Admittedly, willows and some composites run a close second.) Help with Oregon sedges arrived last summer and as a bonus, the book includes Washington as well. The five botanists who created the *Field Guide to Sedges of the Pacific Northwest* are known formally as the *Carex* Working Group and informally as the "Sedgeheads." Their collective wit and wisdom about the genus *Carex* has resulted in an excellent book that takes much of the pain, misery and uncertainty out of sedge identification (except, perhaps, among the "dreaded ovals").

The Guide begins with a general discussion of *Carex* ecology, ethnobotany, morphology, nomenclature and classification. Morphology is clarified in the section, "Sedge Parts," using Jean Janish's pen and ink illustrations of "sedge anatomy" (reprinted from Volume 1 of *Vascular Plants of the Pacific Northwest*). Preceding the key to 153 species is a "how to use it" section with pointers for negotiating a long, complicated dichotomous key.

The species accounts are conveniently arranged in alphabetical order by scientific name. There are two pages for each species, one page of text with a distribution map and a facing page of remarkable color photographs and line drawings that illustrate various characteristics, either of the plant or its habitat.

The text page begins with scientific and common name,

section within the genus, and which keys you might have used for identification. Next is a list of key features, a complete description, habitat and distribution, identification tips, and comments. Tips for identification discuss look-a-like species and comments include ethnobotanical notes, impacts of grazing, ecological importance.

Facing the text are close-up color photographs: perigynia with a millimeter scale, the scale-like structures that subtend the perigynia; the inflorescence, a habit drawing or photograph (rarely an herbarium specimen) and a habitat photograph.

Discussions of Excluded, Extirpated, and Not (Yet?) Discovered Species, Sedges with Distinctive Traits and Habitats, Collecting Sedges, and Ethnobotanical Uses prove that this tome emanated from years of passionate immersion in the world of sedges. The 26 lists of sedges with distinctive traits or habitats are a wonderful gift to incorrigible folks who always try to circumvent methodically working their way through dichotomous keys. There are lists for plants with hairy leaves, "gigantic" or hairy perigynia, and any number of unusual traits. Plus, there are lists for sedges from specific habitats, such as serpentine fens. And, when you get to the end, there is a comprehensive index, for that time you forgot the scientific name of Wonder Woman Sedge and want to look it up!

This 6- by 9-inch book will fit in any backpack, but might be a bit heavy for some as a field manual. Go to www.carexworkinggroup.com/index.html for updates, corrections, or to add your own suggestions observation or corrections.

The book compares favorably with the *Field Guide to Intermountain Sedges* (EG Hurd, NL Shaw, J Mastrogiuseppe, LC Smithman and S Goodrich 1998, USDA Forest Service Gen Tech Report RMRS-GTR-10). The formats are somewhat similar and