

Cottonwoods in Distress



Black cottonwood
(Populus trichocarpa)

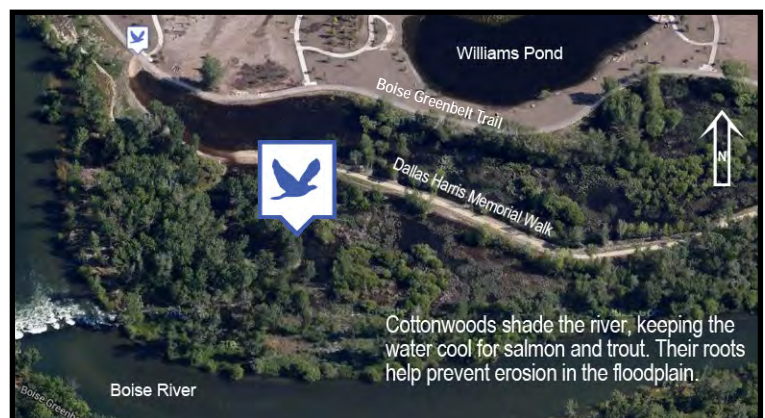
Large cottonwood trees are important roosting and nesting sites for eagles, osprey, and herons.

Photos: Jane Rohling

Black cottonwood trees are an important part of the Boise River ecosystem. They hold the banks of the Boise River together and shade its waters. But we are in danger of losing these majestic trees. Dams have reduced the natural flooding required to scour the river banks and create seed beds where cottonwood seeds germinate. Most of our young trees today grow from root suckers and are not as strong and healthy as those grown from seeds. Also, trees grown from suckers have created a genetically similar forest—every tree is a clone of the one next to it—making the trees less resistant to drought, insects, and climate change.

If the black cottonwoods die off, they may be replaced by smaller tree species that cast less shade, warming the water and causing fish populations to change. Cottonwoods also provide large, woody debris fish need and snags for cavity-nesting birds like falcons, woodpeckers and bluebirds.

The trees could be saved if the river is allowed to run higher, but that would mean less water is available for irrigation. Scientists, hydrologists, engineers, and many other people are working to find a solution that maintains the river habitat while meeting the needs of people in the Boise Valley.



Cottonwoods shade the river, keeping the water cool for salmon and trout. Their roots help prevent erosion in the floodplain.