# Seeing the Sourlands
# Sycamore Trees
### By Jim Amon

Sycamore trees are massive; with their huge trunks (often hollow) and a complex branching system that crowds away other trees, they have a real presence.
They also have peeling, splotchy bark that is unique among trees in the Sourlands. The bark and their size are the two things that I immediately think of when I think of sycamores. Unlike the other tree bark, sycamore bark does not have the ability to stretch as the tree grows so it breaks up and is sloughed off, revealing the lighter interior. The pattern of sycamore bark, with its patches of cream, green and brown, is often compared to camouflage clothing worn by soldiers and hunters. In thinking about this comparison I have to wonder if the designers of camouflage clothing thought that soldiers would be fighting wars in the middle of sycamore forests. (In fact, there are no such things as sycamore forests. Three or four sycamores may grow in a line along a stream or even back a little within the floodplain but they do not grow in groves, much less forests.)

In 1770, twenty-two years before he would become our first President, George Washington recorded a sycamore tree whose diameter at five feet off the ground was 44' 10''. We all know that George Washington could not tell lie, but even for a species that has the largest girth of any species native to North America a forty-four foot diameter is incredible. There are several reports of hollow trunked sycamores being

used to shelter livestock and there are even a few reports of people taking up residence inside a hollow sycamore. In 1744 a Shenandoah Valley man and his two sons reportedly lived for a year in a sycamore, and the brothers Sam and John Pringle are said to have lived inside a Virginia sycamore for two years in the 1750"s. After two years of living in the tree Sam married and brought his bride to live in there. (John, accommodatingly, moved out.) Sycamores, or any tree, can live a long life with a hollow center since the wood in the center is useful for strengthening the tree but has no role in the transfer of sugars from the leaves to the roots or of nutrients from the roots to the crown. That activity takes place in the Cambrian layer, which is a thin band just below the bark.

Some scientists have proposed that a reason for the great size of sycamores is that its very thin bark increases transpiration, thus allowing more than the usual amount of nutrient-bearing water to enter the tree.

It is difficult to tell the difference between a sycamore and a London Plane tree, a tree that was introduced to North America in the late 18$^{th}$ century and has been used extensively as a street tree. There are subtle differences in the shape of their leaves and in their fruits but the most reliable distinction is that the London plane's underbark is yellowish and the sycamore's is white. Further, the mottling on London plane trees occurs on the entire tree while on a sycamore it does not occur at lower levels.