

What is the **LARGEST** Living Organism on the Planet?

If someone asked you what the largest living organism on earth is what would your answer be?

Maybe a whale? Or a giant sequoia tree?

Would you be surprised to know that, arguably, it is a quaking aspen grove? A stand of quaking aspen, *populus tremuloides*, is really only one huge organism. Aspens have large systems of roots that remain hidden underground until there is enough sunlight for the roots to sprout through asexual reproduction.

Only after severe fire and under ideal climatic conditions will aspen reproduce

sexually as a flowering plant. The colony of root suckers is one single genetic individual, named a clonal colony. The clonal colony can cover hundreds of acres and weigh thousands of tons.

Another aspect of aspens that makes them unique is that beneath the thin white outer bark is a green photosynthetic layer that allows the plant to synthesize sugars and keep growing even during the winter when all other deciduous trees go into dormancy. This green layer of the bark makes it survival food for deer and elk during hard winter.

Aspen clones can live to be thousands of years old. The oldest known clone in existence is called "Pando" and is located in the Fishlake National Forest north of Bryce Canyon National Park in central Utah. It has been aged at 80,000 years!

Right now there are two contenders for the largest aspen grove, the above mentioned Pando grove in Utah and the Kebler Pass Grove near Crested Butte Colorado.

News flash: new data says the largest living organism may actually be a parasitic and highly destructive honey fungus, *armillaria solidipes*, in the Malheur National Forest of eastern Oregon, U.S. Spanning 2,200 acres of area, this organism is estimated to be 2400 years old. Then again, I heard that there may be an even larger honey mushroom fungus colony in Russia.

