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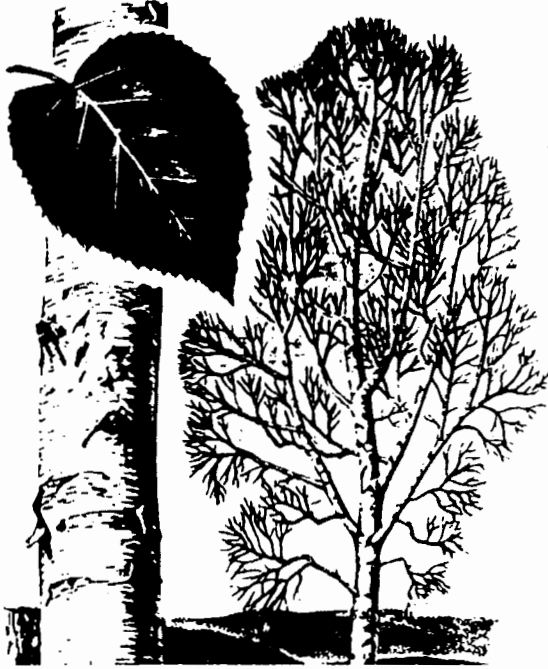


Natural History Notes



MIKE DOMBECK grew up in the Moose Lake area, graduated from Hayward High School, and attended the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and the University of Minnesota. He has a B.S. degree in Biology and an M.S. degree in Aquatic Biology and Zoology. Mike has taught Zoology at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and is now a fisheries biologist with the U.S. Forest Service, living in Park Falls, Wisconsin.

WHITE BIRCH



Betula papyrifera is the scientific name for the paper birch, or white birch as it is often called. It's a fairly common tree in this area, occurring most often as scattered trees along streams or around lakes. The white birch are frequently associated with spruces or balsam fir and will be one of the first trees to appear in burned areas. In this case they will appear in nearly pure stands.

The white birch is a relatively fast-growing tree, reaching heights of up to 130 feet, though generally around 60 feet tall, with a rounded to pyramid-shaped crown. The trees will mature and produce seeds in about fifteen years. The white birch rarely lives longer than 80 years, the record tree being 140 years old. The leaves are two to five inches long, one to two inches wide, with an irregular toothed margin. They are dark green on the top side and a paler yellowish-green below. The most distinctive feature of the white birch, of course, is its chalky white bark. The outermost layer of bark is in a constant state of replacement, peeling off in long thin ribbons.

Members of the birch family are the hardiest of all the broadleaves. The white birch ranges from coast to coast in the northern part of the United States and in Canada up to the Arctic Circle. It prefers a cool climate and well-drained sandy soil. The white birch has the widest natural range of all the birches. There are some members of this species found as far south as North Carolina, but these are on the top of a mountain and were probably left there when the glaciers retreated. These trees are able to survive only because the climate is similar to that of an area farther north.

The wood of the white birch is close-grained, hard, and pale brown with reddish tinges. It is used mainly for pulpwood but to some extent used in making spools, flooring, trim and veneer for paneling.

Birch bark is extremely hardy, waterproof and resinous. It is one of the most reliable tinders in the woods, burning even when everything else is soaked. Indians sewed large pieces of birch bark onto a spruce or cedar frame to make canoes. The seams were sealed with pitch. They also followed the same process to cover their homes with birch bark and to make food containers and even coffins. They also used the bark as writing paper. The bark, it has been said, can be rolled up into a horn and used to call moose. There is probably a trick to that, but try it at your own risk!

The sap of the white birch can be boiled down to make syrup or a beverage. The twigs are used as browse by moose and deer, the beaver will eat the inner bark and birds and rodents will eat the seeds. All in all, the white birch is an important link in the food chain.

One important characteristic of the white birch hasn't yet been mentioned and that is its beauty. It has been said that "one picture is worth a thousand words" so the next time you see a white birch, just stop and take a good long look.