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Natural History Notes



MIKE DOMBECK grew up in the Moose Lake area and graduated from Hayward High School and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. He has a B.S. degree in Biology and an M.S. degree in Aquatic Biology. He has taught Zoology at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and is now a fisheries biologist with the U.S. Forest Service, living in Munising, Michigan. Mike has also been an area fishing guide since his high school days.

The northern white cedar, also called arbor-vitae, is a common tree here in northern Wisconsin. A member of the pine family, it is easily recognized by several characteristics. The leaves are flattened with overlapping scales, producing a graceful spray of foliage. When crushed they emit a strong distinctive odor. The shape of the cedar is perfectly conical, reaching a height of up to 70 feet. The trunk is rarely one straight section, but often forks into several secondary stems. The main trunk, which may be up to five feet thick, often grows in a twisted, almost spiral fashion. The bark is thin and shaggy, growing in vertical strips which may be easily pulled off. It is not uncommon for the cedar to live up to 300 years if undisturbed by man, hence its Latin name, arbor-vitae; meaning "tree of life."

The northern white cedar is often confused with the eastern red cedar, the range of which is more southerly than the white cedar. Although the red cedar is also a member of the pine family, it is actually a juniper. It has a beautifully grained reddish wood that is used for the linings of chests and closets. The wood is aromatic and probably responsible for making cedar a common household word. The red cedar bears a purplish berry and its needles are sharp, especially on young shoots. The white cedar's leaves or needles are smooth.

The white cedar prefers cool moist areas and can be commonly found along rivers and the edges of tamarack swamps. They form an almost impenetrable border around these swamps which provide excellent winter feeding and cover for the whitetail deer. The browse line is a common feature of most cedar swamps. It is the maximum height that the deer can reach as they stretch to graze on cedar leaves during the critical winter feeding period. The next time you go by a cedar swamp, look for this very distinct horizontal line, the lower limit of the cedar leaves. As sure as new shoots sprout during



ARBOR-VITAE

summer, they will be trimmed by hungry deer the following winter.

The wood of this species is brittle, soft and light; yet at the same time it is very durable. It is rot-resistant and easily split — therefore a perfect choice for shingles. Because of its lightness and durability, it has always been a favorite for the planking of boats and framework of canoes. Cedar also makes excellent kindling wood. It is easy to light and burns very fast, releasing much heat in a short time as compared to other woods. The exclusive use of cedar for firewood would quickly warp the grates of a stove because of the intense heat. The early United States explorers learned from the Indians that a tea made from the bark and leaves of the cedar is very healthful. The sap of this tree is rich in Vitamin C and was used as a cure for scurvy.

The cedar was the first tree from the United States which was cultivated in Europe. Because of its characteristic shape the cedar is a good choice for windbreaks and hedgerows. Today over 50 varieties have been developed for ornamental purposes. Chances are that the shrub or tree outside your front door is a variety of that grand old tree, the white cedar.

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