

8/15/80

Natural History Notes



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THE YELLOW BIRCH

The yellow birch is one of three species of birches native to Wisconsin. Of its two closest relatives, the white or paper birch is by far the most common, while the river birch is found only in the southwestern part of the state. The birch family includes not only several species of birches but also the alders, hornbeams, ironwoods or hophornbeams, hazels and filberts. Over 100 species of trees and shrubs comprise the birch family and most are found in the cooler parts of the Northern Hemisphere. Members of the birch family are characterized by alternate deciduous leaves with male and female parts on different flowers, but on the same tree.

Betula alleghaniensis or the yellow birch is the most valuable native birch here in northern Wisconsin. Its range extends from Minnesota to Newfoundland, being most abundant in cool hardwood forests. However, it does extend southward in the Appalachian Mountains to northern Georgia. But Wisconsin, along with Michigan, are traditionally lead states in the production of yellow birch timber. Yellow birch grows best in moist cool upland, and north facing slopes of mountains. It is a shade tolerant species associated with the northeastern climax hardwood forest and commonly associated with sugar maple, white pine, hemlock and balsam fir.

The yellow birch is one of our largest hardwood trees and may exceed 100 feet in height and four feet in diameter and may attain more than 300 years of age. More common yellow birches seen today may be two or three feet in diameter and 60 to 80 feet high. A tree of this size would be about 130 years old. The root system of the yellow birch is shallow and widespread; thus it does well in poorly drained soil. The crown is rounded and made up of somewhat drooping slender branches.

As its name indicates, the yellow birch has a beautiful yellowish bark with a satin-like golden shine and very smooth when young. As the trunk grows larger the bark breaks and curls back like a ribbon. This curly bark is high in oil content and is excellent for starting campfires even on rainy days. As the tree continues to grow, the bark becomes

rough, forming irregular scaly plates that are light gray in color. The small twigs are smooth, bronze in color and contain oil of wintergreen. Crush or chew a small twig and you will notice a slight aroma of wintergreen.

The yellow birch flowers in April before the leaves appear. No doubt you have noticed the two to three-inch yellowish male catkins drooping from the branches producing pollen. The female flower or catkin stands erect and is about one inch long, resembling a small pine cone. The seeds mature in the fall in the small cone-like fruits. (Technically, fruit is a seed-bearing structure or mature ovary on any plant like a ripe tomato or a pine cone.) The seeds are single-winged and it takes 400,000 to 500,000 yellow birch seeds per pound. Young seedlings sprout by the hundreds, but few survive to become the mighty yellow birch.

The wood of the yellow birch is very valuable. In a good hardwood stand a long trunk is developed with few imperfections, making it a valuable lumber tree. The wood has special properties that add to its value. It is strong, hard, heavy and very shock resistant. It has a high nail-holding capacity, is close grained and is difficult to work with hand tools. The larger high quality logs are used for veneer while the lower-grade lumber makes strong boxes, crates and pallets. Yellow birch wood also has a compact and uniform texture that takes on a beautiful polish. It makes fine cabinets, doors, paneling and furniture. The heartwood (inner portion of the log) is light brown to reddish and is more commonly used to high quality furniture, while the whitish sapwood (outer portion just beneath the bark) is more commonly used for woodenware such as spoons or spatulas. Old agricultural implements as well as tool handles, spools, bobbins and musical instruments were made of yellow birch. Even the toothpicks you use every day are probably made from yellow birch.

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