

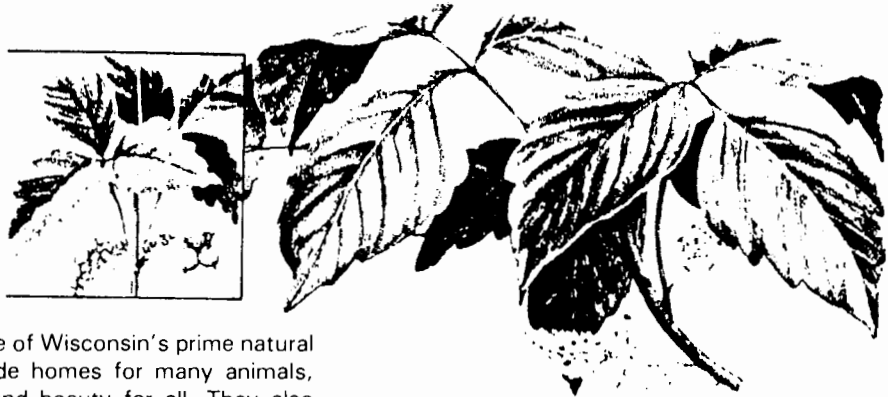
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Natural History Notes

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.

POISON IVY



The forests are one of Wisconsin's prime natural resources. They provide homes for many animals, firewood for people, and beauty for all. They also contain some annoying and poisonous plants. One of these is the poison ivy.

At one time or another most people have developed an extremely itchy skin condition after having come in contact, one way or other, with this plant. It's not pleasant or funny; it's very uncomfortable.

The poison ivy may be a low straggling shrub or a thick woody vine. It has three oval-shaped leaflets on a single stem. The edges of the leaves are jagged and may or may not be lobed. The tips of the leaves are usually pointed. In the autumn, poison ivy turns a brilliant red. This plant ranges from Nova Scotia to British Columbia and south to Mexico and Florida. Poison Ivy, whose scientific name is *Rhus radicans*, belongs to the same genus as poison oak and poison sumac. The latter two are not as widespread as poison ivy but will produce the same skin irritation.

An oil, called urushiol, is responsible for the irritation. It's found in the leaves, flowers, fruit, bark and roots of the poison ivy plant. It is not found in the pollen, plant hairs or nectar of the flowers. You can "catch" poison ivy directly or indirectly. In the first case your bare skin comes in direct contact with a part of the plant that contains the irritant. Indirectly, you can contract poison ivy from clothing, tools, pets or whatever has come in contact with it. You can even get poison ivy from the smoke of a burning plant. Generally, you don't get poison ivy on the palms of your hands or soles of your feet or places protected by hair.

The irritant in poison ivy quickly dries and becomes insoluble to soap and water, so it is important to wash immediately if you suspect you've come into contact with it.

If washing hasn't done the job, you may expect symptoms to appear in twenty-four hours to two weeks, depending on how sensitive you are to the poison. Some people develop a high fever and swelling of the affected area. On the other hand, there are a few lucky people who are immune to poison ivy. The symptoms include reddening and irritation of the skin and even blisters. The irritation may appear in stripes, showing exactly where the plant touched your skin. Generally, this all disappears in a week or so and the affected skin peels off. In the meantime you can get some relief from the infernal itching by applying calamine lotion or the beaten flesh of a crawfish to the affected area. Use whichever is handier.

The poison ivy plant spreads rapidly and is extremely hard to eradicate. You can dig it out or use herbicides. Burning it out, since the irritant, urushiol, can be carried on the smoke, is not recommended even during the winter when the plant appears to be dead.

Just remember to look for and avoid poison ivy, as you may save yourself a lot of itching — not to mention a crawfish's life!