

Tree Identification in Interior Alaska (Video Script)

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If you live in interior Alaska, you probably see trees every day, and you make daily use of tree products, but do you know what kind of trees you are looking at? There are only a few trees **indigenous** to interior Alaska so it doesn't take long to learn to identify them.

In order to tell one type of tree from another we usually just look at the tree's **size** and **shape** and maybe consider its **habitat**, where it is growing. If we are still not sure, we look at the **leaves**, the **bark** and the **fruit**.

In this unit, "Trees of Interior Alaska", we are including the five common trees found in the interior of Alaska, and two tree-like shrubs. The trees we will learn to identify are **aspen**, **cottonwood**, **birch**, **spruce** and **tamarack**. The tree-like shrubs also included are **alder** and **willow**.

These trees grow across the interior and are very important to the people and also to the wild creatures living there.

Of our local trees the **birch** and **spruce** are the most common. **Birch** is most easily recognized by its **bark**. Birch bark is often papery, mostly white but sometimes rusty or brown in color. Sometimes the outer layer may hang loosely around the tree.

Birch **leaves** are heart-shaped, but pointed on the upper end and have finely toothed edges. In fall-time they turn bright yellow before falling off. Because it loses its leaves in winter birch is called a **deciduous** tree.

Birch have a straight trunk which divides into a number of main branches and then smaller branches and twigs. The fine birch twigs give the upper branches of the birch a "lacey" appearance.

Birch **fruits** are small and cone-like hanging in small clusters from the twigs, turning from green to brown over the summer, and gradually breaking apart during the winter.

Birch grow on dry ground where there is good drainage and lots of sun. They are often found in open forests along with spruce.

The **spruce** tree has **needles** rather than leaves and is related to the pine and fir, which grow in other parts of the country. These trees are all referred to as **evergreens**, as they do not drop their needles. They are also **coniferous**, which means their seeds grow inside cones.

There are commonly two kinds of spruce in the interior, white spruce and black spruce. The **white spruce** are found on dryer ground and usually grow tall and straight, with layered branches reaching out from around a single trunk.

The **black spruce**, typically found in poorly drained soil, are smaller and sometimes have a stunted or twisted appearance. The needles, cones and bark of these two spruce are similar, but do have some slight differences. Sometimes these two kinds of spruce **hybridize** and may have mixed characteristics.

Another interior tree which has **needles** is the **tamarack**, but in the fall its needles turn yellow and then fall off, so this is definitely not an "evergreen". The needles grow in little bunches, rather than arranged flat along a stem. Tamaracks have **cones**, but they are very small and scattered along the branches. In good dry ground tamaracks grow tall and straight, but sometimes in poorer ground and on open flats they are short and twisted.

The **cottonwood** and **aspen** both belong to the **poplar family** but are quite different in appearance and habitat. **Cottonwood** trees, sometimes called balsam poplar, are distinguished by their **size** and **shape** as they grow very tall, often with large branches reaching upward. Their **habitat** is in moist ground, frequently along rivers and creeks or on large islands.

Cottonwood **buds** are fat and sticky and have a distinctive smell. The **leaves** of the cottonwood are oval, pointed at the upper end, and are often quite large. The leaves turn yellow in the fall and drop off.

The cottonwood seeds grow in catkins surrounded by fluffy white hairs. These bunches of fluff give the tree its name.

The **bark** of the cottonwood is smooth and mottled

gray and green when the tree is young, but as it grows older it turns gray-brown becoming an inch or more thick and developing deep ridges.

Aspen trees grow in sandy soil, often on exposed ridges, and do not get as tall as most cottonwoods.

Their **bark** is grayish green and although it darkens and thickens as the tree gets older, it does not develop the deep ridges of the cottonwood. The aspen **leaves** are almost round with a point on the end. The most distinguishing characteristic of the aspen is the way the leaf is attached to the twig.

Sound bite:

The stem is flat this way where it goes on to this and where it goes on to the leaf, it's flat the other way.

Because of this trait aspen leaves flutter at the slightest breeze and the tree is often referred to as “quaking” aspen.

The leaves, which are pale green all summer, turn yellow or sometimes even bright orange in the fall-time.

The **seeds** are formed in slender hairless catkins.

There are reportedly over 30 types of **willows** in Alaska and they are most commonly considered as shrubs. However, because in the interior they do often grow well over 20 feet in height, willow are included in this tree unit.

The large willows often have a single, twisted trunk although smaller ones may have many small trunks growing in a cluster.

The **bark** of willows is smooth and stringy when young and may be green, brown, yellow or dark red depending on the type of willow. As the tree ages, the bark gets thicker and rough, and turns gray.

Willow **leaves** tend to be long and narrow; their size varies according to the kind of willow. One common variety is the felt-leaf willow, which has a soft fuzzy back much like felt cloth. The leaves of many willows look paler on the back when they turn in the wind.

Willows also produce **seeds** in narrow, hairy catkins which point upward from the stem.

Willows grow where there is lots of moisture, often along the shores of rivers and creeks. They also grow along roadside ditches and places where larger trees have been cleared away.

The **alder**, of which there are several species, is also most commonly considered a shrub, but often gets taller than 20 feet. **Alders** grow on gravelly slopes and on flood planes and other open areas. Around villages it is often found along the roads and cleared areas.

Alder **leaves** are oval, serrated, with a pointed end, much like birch leaves but are a darker green and have very deep veins. The alder produces long hairless catkins and elliptical green buds in the spring. The old brown cone-like **fruit** hang on the tree through the winter and make the alder easy to identify.

Alder **bark** looks a lot like willow – smooth, gray, often with lighter splotches – but if the bark is cut off with a knife, the inner layer quickly turns a rusty red.

So now that you have reviewed the types of trees growing in interior Alaska be sure to take a close look at the trees you see every day – and try to figure out what kind of trees they are.

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