KNOWING TREES

"Walking in the forest and knowing the trees by name is akin to strolling down the main street of a small town full of friends." E.B. Philips

The visitor or new resident to our corner of the Boreal forest is always impressed by the trees. Yes, we have trees but compared with other biomes, we have only a few species of trees here. We'll begin with a few of the most common. First of all, the area is deluged with an aspen species that some people call poplars. These trees are cloaked in teardrop-shaped leaves with flat stems that allow the leaves to tremble and quake in the slightest breeze. These trees cause much of the yard noise on a breezy summer day and, not surprisingly, they are officially named 'quaking aspens' or 'trembling aspens'. The tree's scientific name is 'Populus tremuloides'. Hold a leaf of a trembling aspen by the stem and blow on it. Do the same with a leaf with a round stem; notice the difference. In fall aspens generally turn yellow, blanketing our hillsides in hues of sunlight for a brief few days before the leaves tumble to the ground.

Another common tree is also an aspen but it has larger leaves and they are rough-edged like saw teeth. This tree is appropriately named the saw-tooth aspen or large-tooth aspen. Each leaf has a flat but heavier stem so it doesn't flutter in the wind as easily as its cousin does. Aspen leaves and buds are favoured by ruffed grouse and serve as their most important yearlong food resource. Young aspens of both species are an important resource during the winter for moose and are heavily browsed by whitetail deer. Beaver readily consume the bark, leaves, twigs, and branches of aspens.

(P. Burke)

Aspens are sometimes confused with the paper birch, so named because of the way the bark peels from the trunk in paper-like pieces. This tree is also known as canoe birch, silver birch and white birch. This is the tree from which birch bark canoes were made but in earlier days, there were much larger trees in the forest. At maturity these trees can reach 25-30 cm (10 to 12 inches) in diameter but some have known to grow to a diameter of 75 cm (30 inches.)

A black poplar or balsam poplar is common in our area and is identified by the large sticky leaf buds in the spring and by the shiny, dark green

leaves it sports throughout the season. Because of the highly resinous buds and leaves, the tree is also known as the Balm-of-Gilead, and a balm is made from the aromatic resin.

The evergreen trees we have in Kenora are hearty individuals that provide us with a little green colour—albeit dark—in the cold winter months. There are three pines; red pines also known as Norway pines have two long needles per cluster. It is one of those handsome trees that most people think of when they picture the boreal forest. Another majestic beauty is the white pine that has shorter softer needles in clusters of five. You can remember this because the word 'white' has five letters. That leaves the workhorse of the pines, the jack pine. This tree is twisted, gnarly and scraggly in comparison with the other two pines and sports gangly boughs and tough, fat comma-shaped cones hugging the branches. Jack pine can grow on very dry sandy or gravelly soils where other species can scarcely survive, but it grows best on well-drained loamy sands. This tree is the first pine to sprout after a forest fire. The jack pine is favoured by the pulp and lumber industry.

(Balsam fir – P. Burke)

This leaves the spruces of which there are two common varieties to be found in the boreal forest. One is the black spruce and this is the tree you see in swampy, wet, bog areas as you travel along the highways. It has very short needles that encircle the twigs and the top of the tree sometimes develops a club shape. Like all spruces, the needles are rounded so that if you pluck one, you can roll it between your thumb and forefinger, a sure sign of a spruce.

The other spruce is a much prettier tree, one of the favoured prizes of Christmas tree hunters. Its needles are longer than the black spruce, and it is a much more symmetrically-shaped tree. Favoured by the pulp and construction lumber industry, it is a valuable resource. Anyone hiking into the bush for a tree to plant on his or her lawn returns with a white spruce rather than a black spruce.

Then there is the balsam fir. It can be differentiated from the spruces because its needles are flat—you can't roll them between your thumb and forefinger—and they grow on the sides of the twigs rather than encircling the twigs like spruce needles. Given the space to grow, the fir is a beautifully balanced tree, and the only tree with cones that grow up rather than down.

And this brings us to the end of the tree lesson. The evergreens are also called conifers because, not surprisingly, they produce their seeds in cones. The needles of conifers are an adaptation to the cold and the waxy covering or cuticle prevents evaporation during the intensely dry conditions of winter. Cedars are also conifers but, of course, they have scale-like leaves rather than needle-shaped leaves.