



Backwoods

Tree Identification Part 1

One of the key things about backwoods is seeing the nature around us as active and useful. Knowing trees and their uses is a big part of this.

Why Tree and Plant Identification is Important

When we hike or camp the nature around us is often just a backdrop to our experiences, like a painting we look at from time to time when we get a break during the day.

Understanding the nature around us, its uses and its patterns makes the environment active and exciting. The sterile, inanimate painting falls away and we experience a vibrant and living space that becomes part of our adventure in scouting.

Ash Tree

The Ash tree is one of Ireland's most common trees.

It grows to full tree height usually with a single trunk; its branches tend to be quite scraggly with no clear pattern of growth.

It has an unusual type of leaf; the stem of the leaf has several pairs of 'leaflets' (normal looking leaves) on opposite sides of the stem with a single 'leaflet' at the end.

The only other common trees to have leaves like this are Elder and Rowan.

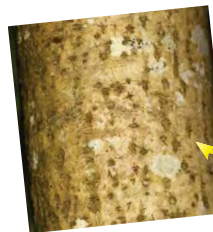


Stages Requirements

Stage 8 in the backwoods adventure skills requires an in depth knowledge of trees and plants. But we should start learning about them in beavers.

Advanced ID

The mature bark of ash is cream coloured, sometimes with a slight redish tinge.



The young bark is smooth while the older bark has deepening fissures in it and looks increasingly like oak bark. Very young trees have a greenish bark.



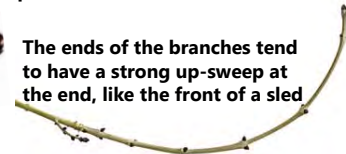
The seeds pods are like little wings (similar to a sycamore pod cut in two).

The branches stay thick to the end unlike Beech and Sycamore.

The buds in winter are black and they come in pairs down the branch, usually each pair of buds is at 90 degrees to the last pair.



The ends of the branches tend to have a strong up-sweep at the end, like the front of a sled



Uses of Ash

Ash is wonderful firewood. It gives great coals for cooking while also giving enough flame to see around the campfire. If we cut it in winter we can even burn it green (without letting it dry out).

Excellent tool handles can be made from ash that is less than 1/2 a foot in diameter (when ash gets bigger it becomes more brittle). Everything from axes to bows can be made from young ash timber. Hurling is called 'the clash of the Ash' because hurleys are made from Ash.



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Alder (Not Elder)

Alder likes wet ground and has little cones and catkins almost year round.

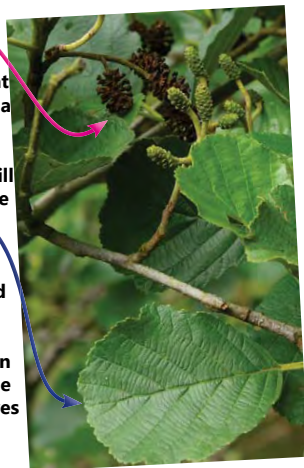


The leaf is broadest at the end and narrows a little at the stalk.

The top of the leaf will usually be flat or have a little dip.

The edge of the leaf bulges in and out and has fine teeth.

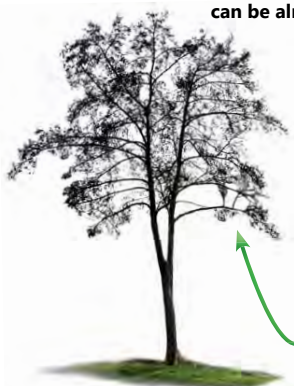
Note; Alder leaves can vary a lot, even on the same tree. Some leaves can be almost round.



Advanced ID

Alder is a river tree and needs wet ground to grow well. It never grows to full tree height. When it is young Alder can be quite bushy in growth but it normally takes a tree shape with a single trunk as it gets bigger.

In winter Alder will often keep its cones and catkins which can make it very distinctive. From a distance it can look like it has small dark blobs for leaves.



Insideout



Younger Alder bark is glossy with horizontal orange marks and it varies in colour from purpleish black to dark grey.



The older bark is deeply fissured and grey.

The buds of Alder in winter are reddish purple (sometimes looking white because of a pale dust that covers them).

The buds often grow on little stalks. Alder buds have a distinctive shape, a little like a gnome's hat.

The twigs have dark, shiny bark with little bright specks dotted along them.

Uses of Alder

As firewood alder is only used for kindling and quick fires for boiling water.

It burns very fast and because Alder grows in such damp places it can be hard to find it dry.

Alder is great for carving though; it is easy to carve when freshly cut and goes rock hard with a reddish brown colour as it ages.



Throughout the year Alder usually has catkins and little cones on it.

This gives the tree a unique appearance but it is important to remember that they aren't always present.



Backwoods

Hazel

Hazels many stems are great for a myriad of scout projects from arrows to scout staves

The leaves of hazel are broad and don't narrow much near the stem. They often have a single big tooth at the end of the leaf.

Along the edge of the leaf there are tooth shapes and within the large teeth there are smaller teeth again.

The young stems and leaves usually have short, fine hairs on them; they feel fluffy to the touch. (Not scratchy, like Elms.)

Note: The leaves of Hazel can be confused with young Wych Elm.



More advanced

The nuts of the hazel appear in late summer and ripen through the autumn. The nuts look like oak acorns but they have a skirt covering where they join the stem instead of the oaks solid cap.

Hazel grows as a mass of fairly straight stems, even when it is mature there will be several trunks and many smaller stems growing up from the same root. The young branches grow so straight that they can help identify the tree.



Insideout



Hazel bark is silver in colour and very smooth and shiny.

It can sometimes be confused with silver birch which is whiter and has flaking bark.

Young bark is very smooth and oval shaped.

Older bark tends to undulate and has a muscle like appearance.



Hazel's buds in winter are green and very blunt in shape. The very young stems will have little red hairs on them and the tree also has fresh catkins on it over the winter.



Uses of Hazel

Hazel is best as a kindling wood or a fire for boiling water. It burns quickly. It's lightness and strength make it wonderful for scout staves and it's flexibility allows us to make withys (see 'Cordage' document) and other camp tools like broilers and 'bow drill' sets.

Hazel is easy to carve when its fresh and is often used for making spoons. And of course the nuts in Autumn are delicious.

Tips

Learning a large number of trees and plants from a book is impossible. However we can do it by finding examples of the trees around where we live, work and scout.

If we can find an example of a tree on our route to school or work we can be reminded of how it's buds, leaves, bark, etc. look every day. Very quickly we can develop a deep understanding of the trees around us.



Backwoods

Insideout

Tree Identification Part 2

Here we continue our look at recognising and using the trees around us.

White

Oak Tree

Oak is the great tree; it's heavy branches stretch out from a thick pillar of a trunk.

Oak's leaves are usually large (hand length) and have deep rounded lobes (if you find an Oak with pointed lobes it is a red Oak).

Advanced ID

The nuts of Oak are called acorns, they are smooth and shiny. They are green when young and brown with age. Acorns have a hard cap where they attach to the stem.

The oak grows to full tree size and have unusually thick and heavy branches that grow out more horizontal than most trees.



Stages Requirements

Stage 8 in the backwoods adventure skills requires an in depth knowledge of trees and plants. But we should start learning about them in beavers.



Young Oak bark is quite silvery and smooth.

It slowly becomes a matt grey and then vertical fissures start to form.

It also becomes paler and more fissured with age and clumps of small twigs will often grow along the trunk.



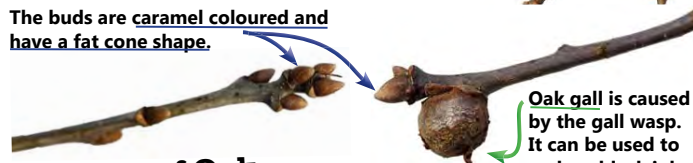
Oak twigs remain thick out to the tip.

We can often see little ramps where the twig grows out to support buds.



Like Beech the dead leaves can sometimes linger on the branches.

The buds are caramel coloured and have a fat cone shape.



Oak gall is caused by the gall wasp. It can be used to make a black ink.

Uses of Oak

Oak is like growing charcoal, it produces great heat and little flame, if we need a good steady heat for frying, stewing or baking it is hard to beat.

Acorns can be eaten but we have to boil them in 4 changes of water and then roast them to get rid of the bitter tannins and give us something really edible.

Oak takes a long time to rot and it is great for long term structures.



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Beech

Beech trees are very common, from hedges to the great dark towers that dominate the horizon

Beech leaves are darker green and glossy when full grown.

The leaves of Beech alternate along the twig.

The edges of the leaves are smooth with no teeth or lobes.

Advanced ID

Beech grows to be a tall tree sometimes with a single trunk.

It has very spindly branches; often trees with trunks a meter across will have thumb thickness branches growing from the trunk.

The branches of Beech become very thin at the ends.

We should not camp under Beech because its branches break without warning and can fall on us or our equipment.



Insideout

Young Beeches have dark grey bark, it looks smooth and has a texture a little like very worn sandpaper.

The older bark is very unusual because it stays smooth, all other tree bark become fissured. The scars around fallen branches are also quite distinctive.



Beech nuts come in hairy shells and are called Beech mast.



Beech buds are pointed cones, sharp to the touch. They are caramel coloured and have a scaly appearance, but are actually very smooth.

Like Oak leaves, dead Beech leaves can stay on the tree over the winter. Beech hedges are very distinctive for this reason.

If you ever see something that looks exactly like a Beech but the leaves are deep purple then you have found a 'Copper Beech'.



Uses of Beech

Beech is a lovely all round firewood, it gives steady heat with enough flame to have character.

The very young leaves can be eaten and the nuts are very tasty but remove the skins by roasting if you are eating much of them.



Backwoods

Birch

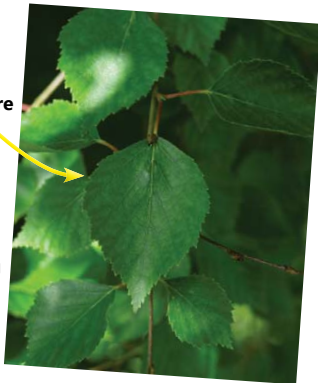
Birches cover our wetlands and housing estates. They are very useful trees for the scout.

Birch leaves are a vibrant green and are shaped like a broad flint arrow head.

The edges of the birch leaf have little teeth within larger teeth.

The leaves alternate along the twig and on large trees the thin twigs hang down like little vines.

The bark of birch is so well known that it is probably easier to identify it using the bark than the leaves.



Young bark can be either whitish or dark purple depending on the type of birch & the ground it grows in. Older Birch is always whitish.

Birch will always be shiny but as it ages the bark will get flaky and then dark fissures will start to form near the base. The fissures have a crumbly texture.



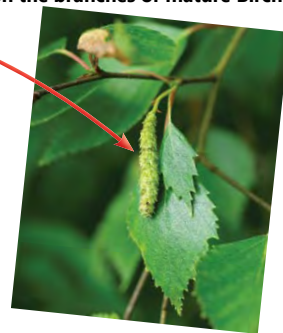
Insideout

More advanced

Birch trees can grow to about full tree height but are more commonly seen as small tree. Normally Birch trees will have a single trunk when they are young but in older trees the trunk often breaks into several equal trunks near the ground.

Birch's buds are short, pointed and brown.

The Birch has scaly catkins that are dark brown in winter, and green ones in spring. You can often see balls of tiny twigs that look like birds nests growing on the branches of mature Birch.



Uses of Birch

Birch is a great tree for starting fires. The flaking bark and the dead twigs on the ends of branches are some of the best fire starters going. However, we can **never cut the bark off a living birch tree, it will kill the tree.**

Spoons and bowls are often carved from birch and it is a lovely wood to carve when it's green (fresh).

The bark can be cut from **fallen trees** to make containers.

We can also make a passable 'withy' (Cordage) out of birch branches.



Backwoods

Tree Identification Part 3

Here we continue our look at recognising and using the trees around us.

Hawthorn or Whitethorn

Hawthorn is also called: May-flower, Whitethorn, and Fairy Tree.

The leaves of Hawthorn are deeply lobed and where the lobe juts into the leaf it narrows to a 'V'.
The edge of the leaf is also toothed.



Sometimes scouts confuse the leaves with Oak, but Oak leaves have smooth edges and Oak trees have no thorns.



Hawthorns grow to about half normal tree height. They will often grow more like large bushes.

In Spring they produce a wonderful covering of little white flowers that almost look like snow covering the branches.



Stages Requirements

Stage 8 in the backwoods adventure skills requires an in depth knowledge of trees and plants. But we should start learning about them in beavers.

Insideout



Young Hawthorn bark is smooth with a rich brown colour. It is often a little shiny.

As hawthorn ages the bark becomes fissured and flaky.



Hawthorn doesn't grow with a round trunk, the trunk undulates and has a slight muscle like appearance.

In late summer through to late winter the Hawthorn will be covered in red berries called 'haws'.

The buds of Hawthorn are quite small, reddish brown and bulb shaped. They are mostly visible in spring.



The Hawthorn is covered in two types of thorn, thorns that grow out from the end of little twigs and short thorns along the branches.



Uses of Hawthorn

Hawthorn is the best charcoal like timber we can usually find. It gives amazingly good and steady heat for a long time. It is the wood you want if you are baking on camp. The short thorns from Hawthorn make good fish hooks.

The very young leaves and the flowers can be eaten and the flesh of the haws can be used to make jam, but the seeds must be removed. Hawthorn is traditionally believed to be a home for the fairy people.



Backwoods

Elder

The Elder tree is a chaotic looking small tree that is found all over the country.



Elder leaves are large. They generally only have two or three pairs of leaflets (sub-leaves that make up a larger leaf) and then one leaflet at the end. The leaves are soft and matt green, and have a pungent smell when crushed.

Ash and Rowan (Mountain Ash) have similar leaves to Elder but the leaflets are smaller and there are more pairs of leaflets running down the leaf.

Advanced ID



The Elder tree is much more of a bush than a tree and rarely grows more than twice as tall as a person.

Elder often grows like the main trunks are hunched over while the younger stems growing off the trunks in straight rods.

The centre of Elder has a thick foamy pith.

The straight stems that grow up toward the sky often die and when the bark rots off the stems look almost bone white.

Insideout



The younger stems of Elder are smooth with dark specks here and there. They are normally a pale sandy colour.

As the bark ages it becomes spongy and fissured, almost cork-like.

Young Elder is very soft wood but mature Elder is hard and brittle.



Elder buds are purple and come in pairs along the twig.

In mid summer little white flowers come in large clusters that spray out from the stem. The berries come in late summer and start out green and hard, when ripe and safe to eat they are reddish black and very soft.



Uses of Elder

The straight dead stems of Elder can be very good for starting a fire.

The pith from Elder stems can be burned out and the tube used to make whistles or blowing pipes.

The flowers and the fully ripe fruit of the Elder can be eaten in small amounts or turned into delicious juice or wine.

The ripened berries are black, the green ones are poisonous.



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Rowan

Also called Mountain Ash, often seen in housing estates.

Rowan grows wild in hilly places but it is most often seen planted in housing estates.

The leaves of Rowan are like Ash, there are pairs of 'leaflets' (sub-leaves that make up a larger leaf) running down the leaf with a single leaflet at the end.

The leaflets of Rowan are usually narrower than Ash but the easiest difference is that Ash bark is matt cream coloured and Rowan is grey/silver and a little shiny.

More advanced



Rowan grows in a tree like shape but only gets to half normal tree height.

In early summer Rowan flower, many small white flowers grow in clumps. The flowers are slightly larger than Elder flowers but they have a similar shape.



Insideout



Rowan's young bark is usually silvery, smooth and a little shiny. It has little horizontal brown strips here and there.

The older bark tends to be darker grey or grey/brown and can have vertical ripples in it.

There is a variety that has pinkish bark.



The buds of Rowan are hairy until late winter when they turn dark red.

The twigs stay thick to the end and are quite straight, often going slightly gnarled at the end.

In late summer we get clumps of orange or red berries



Uses of Rowan

Rowan is bad firewood, it is generally not worth collecting it.

The ripe berries must be cooked to make them edible and sugar must be added to make the berries palatable.