

# PAPER BIRCH – *Betula papyrifera*

Birchbark is amazing stuff – light, flexible, strong, waterproof, easily peeled. For early peoples of the boreal forest, it was a main building block of their culture. They ate off birchbark plates, stored supplies in birchbark baskets, rolled it into tubes and called moose to their death. They travelled the north's many waterways in birchbark canoes.

Ramble through a birch stand any time of year and enjoy its many personalities. In springtime, birches add a glistening, lime-green thatch to the forest. In summer their leaves offer shade and an inviting bed to sleep on. In fall, they erupt into rivers of gold. And in winter, their supple, creamy columns help dispel the season's harshness.



## HUMAN USES

### *Traditional*

- Bark for baskets, storage containers, mats, baby carriers, moose and bird calls, torches, household utensils and of course, canoes
- Strong and flexible wood for spears, bows, arrows, snowshoes, sled runners
- Sap made into syrup and medicinal tonics
- Inuit traded with Dene for birch bark as tinder to start fires

### *Commercial*

- Veneer, plywood, pulpwood
- Firewood
- Furniture, cabinetry
- Popular landscaping tree

## WILDLIFE USES

- Twigs and saplings browsed by moose, snowshoe hare
- Porcupine and beaver eat bark
- Many small mammals and birds eat seeds, buds, catkins
- Seeds especially important for redpolls and chickadees
- Cavity-nesting birds like woodpeckers, chickadees, swallows, boreal owls
- Yellow-bellied sapsuckers drill rows of holes to feed on birch sap and inner bark

## FIELD NOTES

- Re-seeds aggressively after wildfire
- Lasts only one generation – about as long as a human life span – before being replaced by shade-tolerant conifers
- Hybridizes with many birch varieties, even shrubs

## FROM A DISTANCE

- Medium-sized deciduous tree
- Often multi-stemmed
- Slender trunk with narrow crown in forests; wider spreading crowns in openings

## UP CLOSE

### *Leaves*

- Alternate, ovate, glossy, double-toothed margins, strong veins, short stems

### *Catkins*

- Spiky catkins appear before leaves
- Change from green to brown by fall, releasing tiny oval seeds encased in bird-shaped wings

### *Bark*

- Saplings and twigs reddish-brown
- Mature trees creamy white, smooth, with horizontal papery strips often curled at ends
- Easily peeled in sheets

