

Paper Birch

Paper birch is perhaps the most uncommon tree in Colorado – only one native tree, perhaps. I know of one cool shaded canyon with numerous trees and clumps of what appears to be paper birch. These may be remnants of widespread woodlands in Colorado during the latest ice age, thousands of years ago, when the climate was cooler and wetter. Paper birch is now common in the north woods, New England, and Canada. The ice age forests of Colorado may have been something like today's north woods, and had paper birch. The idea is that as the climate became warmer and drier during the past 6000 years, paper birch largely died out in Colorado.

William Weber says “only one [Colorado] tree comes really close to being pure *B. papyrifera*,” suggesting others are hybrids of river birch and paper birch. In any case the trees I saw are closer in appearance to paper birch than river birch. The bark has all the papery characteristics of paper birch, naturally and readily peeling off in thin sheets. The bark color does have a steel gray color in most cases, or a bright copper in young stems, not the chalky-white more typical of paper birch. The main trunks grow to the size of paper birch, much larger than river birch, but do generally form clumps more typical of river birch.

Whatever it's ancestry, this is an unusual tree.

The scientific name is “*Betula papyrifera* H. Marshall.”

Identification:

Leaves:

Bark as described.

Trunks up to 4 to 6 inches (10 to 15 cm) diameter; in clumps or as single stems.

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