

River Birch or Water Birch

Water birch is a common large shrub or small tree found along stream sides, in mountain valleys and canyons, from 5000 to 9500 feet (1500 to 2900 m) elevation. It is usually associated with alder, cottonwoods, and willows. Water birch is well-rooted and can withstand repeated floods.

Water birch usually grows as several stems in a clump to 25 feet (8 m) high; individual trunk diameter is usually 6 inches (15 cm) or less, but rarely may reach 12 inches (30 cm). This birch has distinctive glossy reddish-brown bark with white horizontal marks. Flowers appear in May and June.

At first glance this waterside shrub appears similar to the mountain alder, but the leaves are smaller, half the size of alder leaves, and this tree lacks the alder's miniature hard pine-cone-like fruit. The birch's fruiting bodies are cylindrical, friable, much longer than wide, and rapidly disintegrate.

Indians made bows and arrows of birch wood. Pioneers used the wood for fence posts and fuel. The leaves and twigs are browsed moderately by mule deer and elk, chiefly in winter for lack of other food, numerous birds eat the buds and seeds, and hummingbirds eat sap from holes in the bark left by sapsuckers. Beaver lodges and dams include birch stems. The scientific name is “*Betula fontinalis* Sargent.”



Identification:

Leaves: 1 to 2 inches (2.5 to 5 cm) long, usually less than 1.5 inches (3.7 cm); 3/4 inch to 1 inch (18 to 25 mm) wide; finely toothed, sometimes doubly toothed. Leaf stalk 1/5 to 3/4 inch (5 to 18 mm) long. Leaf shape is similar to mountain alder leaves – they are both part of the birch family – but leaves are only half as large as alder leaves. Stems and twigs slightly rough.

Bark: smooth, dull dark dusty gray, or reddish-brown, sometimes bright or glossy, or with a hint of purple. The pronounced long horizontal chalky-white streaks are lenticels, breathing pores.