

Conservation Corner

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Land of the silver birch
Home of the beaver
Where still the mighty moose
Wanders at will

Blue lake and rocky shore
I will return once more
Boomdidi yada – boomdidi yada
Boomdidi yada deeeee



Like many of you, I'm sure, last weekend found us picking up sticks yet again. It was fun to have help as our grandson Paul was running the wheelbarrow and singing this Canadian folk song. My Scandinavian grandparents also loved their birch trees, this week's encounter in nature's grove.

Birches are a large and diverse group of trees found in northern temperate climates across Asia, Europe, and North America. Their bark comes in a variety of colors, not just white or silver, and their leaves are also varied. What makes a birch a birch is their tiny flowers and fruit.

Each birch tree bears both male and female flowers called catkins, named for their arrangement in clusters that resembles a cat's tail. The male catkins take a year to develop and are visible on the twigs all winter. Each spring they open and elongate, release their pollen, and fall to the ground. The shorter female catkins also emerge from over-wintering buds. Following pollination, they turn from green to brown before disintegrating and releasing their samaras – tiny winged, single-seeded fruits.

Several species are native to Iowa, including the silver birch of Paul's song. Also known as the paper or white birch, its range extends into the northeastern corner of Iowa where it thrives in the cool, moist climate and thin, well-drained soils. However, paper birches are susceptible to bronze birch borers and as a result are usually short-lived in cultivation.

Another Iowa species is the yellow birch, also found scattered in the forests of a few northern counties. The tree's inner bark contains oil of wintergreen, and one can easily identify the tree by chewing a twig. Studies of pollen grains buried in peat bogs reveal that several pioneer species of birch and pine trees covered much of Iowa at the end of the last ice age. Today remnants of those postglacial forests still grow in cool and moist environments along the Iowa River in Hardin County.

The most widely planted birch in Iowa is the river birch, which can tolerate disturbed soils and our hot, dry summers. Its species name, *nigra*, means black and refers to the bark of the mature tree, which looks more like a black cherry than a birch.

Birch trees also supply us with a wide and diverse product line. Native Americans valued the strength, light weight, and water repellency of birch bark for bowls, canoes, wigwams, and campfire tinder. Our farm kitchen features birch cupboards that could hold birch extracts and oils as well as birch saps and syrups. Did you know you can soak birch bark in water for an emergency cast? Last but not least, birches are an important larval food and nectar plant for many butterflies and moths.

Birch tree along the shore, I will return once more.