DWARF BIRCH − *Betula glandulosa*

If you compare this birch to its relative, the more stately Paper Birch, you'll see where it gets the name "dwarf". This birch is a bushy shrub, not a tree, and rarely reaches two metres in height. It is most often only ankle-high to shoulder-high in the low arctic tundra and boreal peat bogs where you'll usually find it. In these places, nutrients and summer warmth are in short supply. The Dwarf Birch has adapted to these conditions by putting all its annual growth into the essentials for life: leaves and roots. Producing the wood that would allow it to grow tall is a luxury it can't afford.

HUMAN USES

Traditional

- Used by the Inuit for firewood on the tundra
- Just-unfolded dwarf birch leaves are sticky on the underside, and Inuit children have been known to stick them on their ears to make "earrings"

Commercial

- No commercial uses

WILDLIFE USES

- Ptarmigan eat buds and catkins
- Small songbirds feed on insects attracted to the catkins

FIELD NOTES

- Found across most of the NWT in low-arctic tundra and boreal forest
- A plant of spruce bogs and acidic rocks
- Typical plant of the spruce forest floor
- Often found growing with willow and other shrubs
- In exposed areas, forms dense thickets pruned and molded by wind-driven snow

FROM A DISTANCE

- Bushy shrub with many woody branches, densely covered with leaves
- Low-growing, often ground-hugging, especially on exposed sites where it may form dense thickets

UP CLOSE

Leaves

- Dark green above, somewhat paler below
- Firm and leathery, with a shiny surface
- Small (1-4 cm long), round, with rounded teeth on margins
- Alternate
- Bright red and orange in autumn

Catkins

- Female catkins short (12-25 mm long) and plump, soft-textured, slightly hairy, erect on branch
- Seeds are small, winged, nearly flat nutlets
- Male catkins hang from branch, and fall quickly after shedding pollen

Bark

- New twigs have fine hairs
- Older woody stems dark grey to reddish-brown, "warty", without hairs