

SUBALPINE FIR – *Abies lasiocarpa*

If you like cool summers, cold winters, and lots of snow, you should get to know the subalpine fir. It grows best in this climate of high elevations. A slow-growing tree, it is adapted to the poor, rocky soils of mountains. In protected places, this fir is straight and narrow with a pointed top. But at treeline, you will see it growing stunted and contorted, pruned by sharp, windswept snow into a dense evergreen mat.

In the Northwest Territories, you'll find the subalpine fir only in a small area of the southwestern Mackenzie Mountains. It is much more common in the Yukon, where it is the official Territorial Tree.

HUMAN USES

Traditional

- Baskets made from sheets of bark
- Boughs for bedding
- Wood for roofing shingles
- Needle tea a cold remedy
- Sap from bark blisters for lung ailments

Commercial

- Not important in the NWT
- Pulp, veneer, crates, boxes, and timber

WILDLIFE USES

- Red squirrels eat seeds
- Spruce and ruffed grouse eat needles and buds
- Mountain caribou eat lichens off branches

FIELD NOTES

- Grows in mountains from 600 to 2,250 metres
- The NWT's only true fir

FROM A DISTANCE

- Medium evergreen usually 20 to 35 metres
- Narrow, tapering at the top into spire
- Short sweeping branches easily shed snow
- Often has branches nearly to the ground

UP CLOSE

Needles

- Flat, blunt-ended, often notched at tip
- Blue-green, single white band on top, two below
- Most turn upwards

Cones

- Cone scales fan-shaped with irregular teeth; drop in autumn leaving a bare central spike
- Seed (female) cones deep purple growing upright
- Pollen (male) cones smaller, bluish

Bark

- Smooth, grey
- Covered with resin blisters when young, later becoming scaly

